

REVIEWS & RESPONSES

Review: Cornelis P. Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017). 978-1-62-995251-2. Reviewed by Gabriel N.E. Fluhrer, Ph.D., Associate Minister of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, South Carolina.¹

Introduction

A doctrine as important as God's covenantal dealings with mankind, and controversies as complex as any other in recent memory, require a certain kind of scholar to treat both well. Combining exegetical proficiency with an impressive command of the Reformed tradition, Cornelis Venema distinguishes himself as that scholar in his latest work, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants*. Before proceeding, it should be noted that, while Professor Venema's aim is to exposit, articulate, and defend a Reformed, Confessional doctrine of the covenant, this book is not a mere exercise in polemics. Rather, it is by turns polemical and pastoral, where the voice of the writer is also the voice of a shepherd who cares deeply for God's flock. Because of this feature alone, it is to be commended.

All who come to this volume will find something from which they can learn. Those interested in the issues of recent disagreement regarding covenant theology will find a carefully researched treatment of all sides. Those new to these discussions will find terms clearly explained and backgrounds set with precision. Straw men are absent. Overstatement is avoided with care. Those with whom Professor Venema disagrees are given a fair hearing, even if he decides against them. In sum, not just the *substance* (which is very good, as will be detailed below), but the *style* of this book makes it a

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1. I am grateful to Dr. Carlton Wynne and Rev. Brian Habig for their helpful suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this review. All errors are my own!

model for those who must engage in the unfortunate work of controversy.

In what follows, I will summarize what I take to be the main points of the three sections into which the book is divided, while making some comments along the way. The page numbers from the book are in parenthesis after the citation. The bulk of the review will focus on the first section of the book, since it deals at length with the issue at the forefront of the discussion surrounding covenant theology at the present time.

Part One: "The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace"

The first part of this book, "The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace," consists of three chapters, respectively addressing "The Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith," "The Covenant of Works and the Mosaic Economy (1): The Case for 'Republication,'" and "The Covenant of Works and the Mosaic Economy (2): Assessing the Case for 'Republication.'" For readers of this journal, I am going to assume a cordial assent to the Westminster Confession of Faith and, more particularly, the Biblical warrant for affirming a pre-fall covenant of works and a post-fall administration of God's one plan (the covenant of grace). With that in mind, Venema's first chapter guides the reader through recent objections to the doctrine of the covenant of works in the Confession. He begins with the criticisms leveled by Karl Barth. Venema highlights two features of Barth's critique; namely, his rejection of the historicity of the prelapsarian account and his aversion to a transition from wrath to grace in the life of a sinner. "Not only does Barth regard the Biblical account of creation and fall to be nonhistorical *saga*, but he also resists any suggestion of a *transition in history from wrath to grace subsequent to the fall into sin*" (7; emphasis original). Venema also observes (correctly, in my judgment), "Many of the objections to the WCF's understanding of the covenant of works stem from the influence of...Barth's theology" (8).

Next, Venema considers the work of Holmes Rolston III, University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Colorado State University (and former student of T.F. Torrance). Rolston's chief complaint is that the Confession's doctrine unduly elevates the merit and ability of man over the grace of God (10–11). Hence, according to Rolston, the Confession deviates markedly from Calvin at this crucial point. Venema answers similar criticisms soundly elsewhere in the book, so we will set Rolston's critique aside for the moment. From Rolston, Venema then turns to the work of James B. Torrance. While Torrance's theology is heavily indebted to Barth, his criticisms of the traditional understanding of the covenant of works differ from Barth in interesting ways, not the least of which is Torrance's abhorrence of limited atonement, which he

sees (correctly) as a natural consequence of the Westminster assembly's bicovenantalism (12–13). Venema then considers the work of S.G. De Graaf and G.C. Berkouwer. Summarizing their collective objections, Venema notes, “[T]hey do not wish to acknowledge that man’s covenant fellowship with God is ever founded upon something other than the love and goodness of God in granting it as his gift” (17).

Finally, Venema turns the reader’s attention to John Murray’s disapproval of the covenant of works. Since he is known as one of the stalwarts of twentieth century Reformed orthodoxy, his rejection of the covenant of works poses unique challenges for those who find affinity with Murray’s theology elsewhere. Venema summarizes Murray’s discomfort with the covenant of works this way: “In Murray’s estimation, the language, ‘covenant of works,’ fails to do justice to the elements of grace entering into the administration” (21). Accordingly, Murray shares the same uneasiness with the language and concept of the covenant of works as the other critics Venema analyzes.

It is interesting to observe that one of the cardinal disappointments that all of these objectors voice with respect to the doctrine of the covenant of works is how the Confession classifies the relationship between works and grace in the divine economy. How one understands this relationship is significant because the kinds of objections raised by these various authors do not limit themselves merely to the protological, prelapsarian Edenic context. Because of the inseparable link between protology, soteriology, and eschatology, a misunderstanding of the pre-fall covenantal situation will have sweeping ramifications for one’s conception of all subsequent theologizing.

Briefly, Venema closes chapter one with a defense of the Westminster Confession’s doctrine of the covenant of works. I suspect that most readers of this periodical will be more interested in the subjects which occupy chapters two and three, so I will simply highlight Venema’s treatment of the knotty question of the place (if any) of merit in the prelapsarian covenant. He writes, “It should be evident from the foregoing that there is one obvious sense in which the language of ‘merit’ has no place in a biblical theology of the covenant: *at no point in God’s dealings with man as covenant creature may we say that God, in the strict sense of justice, owes the creature anything*” (32; emphasis original). Nevertheless, as Venema goes on to explain, the fact that God bound himself by covenant to reward Adam’s perfect obedience (had it been rendered) does not contradict the thoroughly biblical concept that everything the creature enjoys at God’s hand is unmerited and freely bestowed. Thus, the objections to a traditional understanding of the covenant of works which Venema surveys represent something of a false dichotomy wherein one is forced to choose between either a species of legalism or a particular view of unmerited favor in the prelapsarian economy. Venema does

an admirable job of showing the reader how the Confession studiously avoids this dichotomy. As a result, he demonstrates that the doctrine of the covenant of works, as outlined in the Confession, is biblical.

Chapter two, “The Covenant of Works and the Mosaic Economy (1): The Case for Republication,” guides the reader through the most recent debate surrounding covenant theology the so-called “Republication Controversy.” The question is stated simply: is the Mosaic administration of the covenant of grace a republication of the covenant of works; and, if so, in what sense? Venema observes that this question arises for the Reformed interpreter because of his insistence of the unity of the covenant of grace through Scripture. Such unity proscribes the place of law within the covenant of grace. In other words, the very fact that one admits to a unity between the covenants raises the issue at hand; namely, the fact that the Mosaic covenant *appears* to endorse law keeping as the way for a sinner to earn God’s favor. Accordingly, the question of republication, which may seem minor at first blush, is of central importance. Hence the controversy.

In this chapter, Venema works his way carefully through probably the best modern defense of the republication thesis, *The Law is Not of Faith*, edited by Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko, and David Van Druen.² Before turning to the historical arguments of the volume, Venema summarizes the editors’ introduction this way: “The purpose of the editor’s [*sic*] introduction, therefore, is to impress upon the reader that the doctrine of republication under the Mosaic administration belongs to the historic view of Reformed orthodoxy and that it constitutes an important, if not essential, feature of a sound biblical-theological interpretation of the covenant” (43).

Venema proceeds to walk the reader through the different sections of the book, which is divided into three categories: historical, biblical, and theological (69). The historical claims of *TLNF* are summarized succinctly: “The idea that the Mosaic covenant in some sense republished the covenant of works was a commonplace, even the predominant view” in the Reformed tradition (69). Specifically, *TLNF* tries to convince the reader that when Paul cites passages like Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1–14, “he interprets the Mosaic covenant as including the ‘works principle’ that was an essential component of the prelapsarian covenant of works” (70). Moreover, the authors want to argue that “the ‘works principle’ that is an inherent feature of the Mosaic covenant functions typologically to teach Israel that its inheritance of and tenure as a corporate people in the Land of Promise was based upon her obedience to all the demands of the law” (70). Theologically, at

2. *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko, and David Van Druen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009); hereafter *TLNF*.

least one aim of some of the authors of *TLNF* is to argue that “since believers in the new covenant are no longer under the law of Moses as a covenant of works, at least with respect to their conduct as members of Christ’s spiritual kingdom, their conduct within the church is not governed by the law of Moses” (70–71). Chapter three, “The Covenant of Works and the Mosaic Economy (2): Assessing the Case for Republication,” offers the reader Venema’s analysis of the case for republication as presented in *TLNF*. Venema’s opening criticism in this chapter is one that dawned upon me as I read through the many arguments for and against republication. “Though it is a rather general criticism, it could be argued that the most problematic feature of the republication thesis is the vagueness of its principal claim. The repeated use of the phrase ‘in some sense’ to modify the republication begs the obvious question, ‘in what sense?’” (77) Venema then assesses the case for republication using the taxonomy of *TLNF*; namely, historical, biblical, and theological arguments.

He begins with Calvin. Like many of the early Reformation thinkers, Calvin’s theology is underdeveloped with respect to the role of works in the Mosaic economy because it was not asked with the same urgency during his time. Nevertheless, in reply to John Fesko’s reading of Calvin, Venema demonstrates that the Genevan Reformer’s understanding of the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace was closer to the non-republication viewpoint, understanding the Mosaic covenant as a whole as “an administration of the covenant of grace” (85).

Venema then considers Turretin’s views on the subject, noting that “Turretin addresses explicitly the debates among Reformed theologians regarding whether the Mosaic administration was an administration of the covenant of grace, whether it was also an administration in some manner of the covenant of works, or whether it was a distinct covenant altogether, neither a covenant of works nor a covenant of grace” (89). Based on his reading of Turretin, Venema concludes, “Though the Mosaic administration may include a *formal* republication of the law’s obligations, together with the consequences that follow in the instance of obedience or disobedience to its requirements, it does not thereby reinstitute at some level the prefall covenant of works” (94; emphasis original).

Venema’s comment that Turretin considered that the Mosaic administration of the covenant of grace included a “formal” republication of the law’s obligations is important. A formal republication means, roughly, that the “law reiterates the demands of the covenant of works and shows why the promise of life and blessing cannot be obtained through the law” (94). However, the law is not an *actual* republication of the covenant of works because, in Turretin’s view, “To view the law as though it were given covenantally as a means for obtaining the blessing of life and justification would be to ‘abstract’

the law from the promises of grace that are an integral part of the Mosaic economy” (94). It would seem that if we ignore the distinction between a *formal* republication versus an *actual* republication of the covenant of works, we are bound to the ambiguity Venema noted at the opening of this chapter, for what constitutes an *actual* republication of the covenant of works has not quite been spelled out to anyone’s satisfaction.

Venema outlines the views of Herman Witsius briefly, before focusing his attention on the Confession’s teaching on this matter. He writes, “The best source for determining the historic Reformed consensus on the doctrine of the covenant is undoubtedly the WCF” (100). Commenting on Confession of Faith 19.6, Venema observes, “[T]he Confession expressly denies that the law was given through Moses ‘as a covenant of works’” (104), even though the same law was given to Adam in the covenant of works (WCF 19.1–2). While there was certainly disagreement about the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace among early Reformed theologians, the consensus view enshrined in the Confession evidences a decidedly non-republication character, according to Venema. Accordingly, one of the principal claims of *TLNF*, namely that republication represents possibly an essential feature of sound biblical theology, is found wanting.

Next, Venema addresses the exegetical case for republication offered in the second section of *TLNF*. Venema’s evaluation of these arguments begins with Paul’s use of Leviticus 18:5. “In the writings of Calvin, Turretin, and Witsius, Paul’s appeal to Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10 and Galatians 3 is interpreted quite differently than in the chapters by Estelle and Gordon” (110). These older Reformed theologians understood “Paul’s use of Leviticus 18:5 in terms of what may be called a ‘narrow’ or ‘abstract’ view of the law of Moses” (110). That is, “When Paul adduces Leviticus 18:5 against his opponents, he is not offering a complete account of the law within the framework of the Mosaic covenant” (113). Space forbids a detailed examination of Venema’s arguments here, but this writer was persuaded by Venema’s case for the traditional Reformed conception of the place of Leviticus 18:5 in Paul’s writings.

A highlight of Venema’s book is his engagement with T. David Gordon’s chapter in *TLNF* on Galatians 3:6–14, which he considers “the most provocative exposition of the republication thesis” in the volume. In this chapter, Gordon argues that “the contrast between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in Galatians 3:6–14 ... are ‘characteristically’ different. Whereas the Abrahamic covenant was unconditional and gracious, the Mosaic covenant was conditional and legal” (116). Gordon views the Abrahamic covenant as one of promised life and blessing through Christ, while the Mosaic covenant “enunciated a ‘works principle’ that could only condemn and curse the people of God” (116). Thus, on Gordon’s reading, “Paul’s appeal to this contrast was not skewed by a legalistic misuse of

the law of Moses by his opponents. Rather, Paul was appealing to the radical contrast between two principles of inheritance that characterize the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants," all in service defense of the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone (116). While Gordon nobly champions the historic doctrine of justification, the question remains whether his reading of the Mosaic covenant coincides with the apostle's argument. Venema argues that Gordon's exegesis does not stand up to careful scrutiny and enlists the help of Herman Ridderbos to make his case.

Venema summarizes Ridderbos's case against Gordon's reading of Paul along two lines. First, "the point of the text [Lev. 18:5], as is true of the giving of the law of Moses in general, is to summon Israel to grateful obedience" (123). Second, "when Paul appeals to Leviticus 18:5 against those who seek to establish their own righteousness before God based upon obedience to the law, he properly reminds opponents 'that he who strives after the righteousness that is by the law is then bound to the word of Moses, that is, to do what the law demands'" (123). Therefore, according to Ridderbos, "[w]hen Paul appeals to Leviticus 18:5, he is not offering a complete account of the nature of the Mosaic administration. Rather, Paul is showing his opponents the futility of any attempt to make the law an instrument of justification before God" (124). Hence, for Gordon's argument to work, his distinction between the character of the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants must be *absolute*, whereas, according to Venema's summary of Ridderbos (which, Venema notes, represents a fairly mainstream view in the Reformed tradition), the distinction proves to be *qualified*.

Next up is a discussion of the function of typology in the Mosaic administration. Venema observes that the distinctive views of Meredith Kline relative to typology represent a genesis for the arguments in *TLNF*. Gordon's radical disparity between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants seems to echo Kline's insistence that two very different inheritance principles are at work in the Mosaic economy. But Venema detects a flaw in this view of typology. Citing O. Palmer Robertson's disagreements with Kline, Venema concludes, "Robertson's point is the same one I wish to make. Consistent with the pattern of biblical typology, the promises and demands of the Mosaic economy are 'typical' of the promises and demands of the new covenant economy" (129). Consequently, the rigid distinction between inheritance principles is relative and not absolute.

I confess that these discussions are outside my area of expertise, but, based on my reading of Kline and the recently published report by the study committee on republication presented to the eighty-third General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (2016), I believe that Kline's view of merit is more complicated than Robertson's reading might allow. For Kline, as the OPC report indicates, only federal

heads can perform meritorious works. Since Adam failed in this performance, only Christ's works are meritorious in the strict sense of the term. All good works after the fall performed by sinful creatures, including those works God demanded of Israel under Moses, must be Spirit-wrought through faith. Though they are not "meritorious" in the strict sense of the term, they were necessary for Israel's continued tenure in Canaan. This view of works under the Mosaic covenant seems to harmonize well with what the Westminster Standards seek to protect concerning merit and good works. Furthermore, this view of merit and good works is also consonant with a high view of the third use of the law. It is noteworthy that the OPC committee's report makes this very point regarding Kline's view of republication: "Further, Israel's likeness to Adam is largely seen in their exile and failure, rather in their positive accomplishments. Israel's sin is not a breaking of a covenant of works directly republished from Eden, but their failure to respond to the typical indicative of the covenant of grace, spurning the Lord through their apostasy. *It is not so much pre-fall Adam that is recapitulated in Israel, but post-fall Adam*" (emphasis mine).³ Admittedly, while Kline's theology is nuanced, his language is sometimes unhelpful, if not overstated—particularly with regard to merit. Venema's discussion here highlights the equally nuanced treatment this thorny question received in the tradition. Moreover, combining what Venema has uncovered in Gordon's work with the findings of the study committee's findings renders Gordon's reading of the data more and more implausible.

Much more needs to be said and the reader is referred to the study committee's report for a full discussion, but enough has been mentioned to draw a provisional conclusion. The views expressed in large parts of *TLNF*, and in Gordon's essay in particular, appear not so much to be outside the pale of orthodoxy, as being unhelpfully vague at significant points, with the result of muddying rather than clarifying the debate of the place of the Mosaic covenant. In addition, *TLNF*'s reading of Kline seems one-sided.

Returning to Venema's general assessment, he concludes his review of *TLNF* by identifying some theological ambiguities. (130) His first concern is the way that the republication thesis blurs the classic distinction in Reformed covenant theology that the covenant of grace is one in substance and diverse in its administration. "The theological problem posed by the republication thesis can be stated rather simply. If what belongs to the substance of the covenant of works does not belong to the substance of the covenant of grace *in any of its administrations*, it is semantically and theologically problematic to denominate

3. Report, Committee to Study Republication, *Minutes of the Eighty-Third General Assembly Meeting at the Sandy Cove Conference Center, North East, Maryland, June 8-14, 2016* (Published by The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, [2016]), 432.

the Mosaic administration as *in any sense* a covenant of works” (131; emphasis original). A second difficulty Venema highlights is the claim in *TLNF* that this view of the Mosaic covenant represents a consensus, historic viewpoint among Reformed theologians. Venema disputes this claim vigorously, as we have seen. Third, Venema notes that “the traditional and consensus view of Reformed theologians is that the covenant of works was a voluntary condescension on God’s part that could never be ‘merited’ in the proper and strict sense of the term” (136). As will be seen below, this observation will prove critical when discussing current deviations from traditional expressions of covenant theology. Finally, and importantly, Venema notes that “it is strange that little is said in *TLNF* about the positive role of the law of God, whether in the Mosaic covenant or new covenant economies, as a norm for the sincere, albeit imperfect, obedience of God’s covenant people” (137). There seems to be a pronounced aversion to the third use of the law in some circles today, so Venema’s caution is judicious.

The bulk of our review so far has been occupied in scrutinizing this portion of Venema’s book simply because, as I mentioned at the outset, the vexing question of republication seems to be troubling the Reformed community at the moment. However, the remaining two sections of his book treat issues that continue to interest the Reformed tradition. We will work through both in a much briefer scope than our treatment of the first section. As a personal aside, I would like to register my sincere appreciation for much of the work produced by the authors of *TLNF*, while retaining my disagreements with the formulations presented in *TLNF*.

Part Two: “Covenant and Election”

The second section of the book is entitled, “Covenant and Election.” Here Venema examines in depth the theology of election and covenant in the thought of Herman Bavinck. After analyzing Bavinck’s views, Venema deals with the difficult question regarding the status of children of believers who die in infancy, particularly as this question is taken up in Article 1.17 of the Canons of Dordt. Finally, this section concludes with a chapter on covenant theology and infant baptism.

Venema’s analysis of Bavinck will be of interest not only to those who want to study his theology in more detail, but also for those who want to gain “an understanding of the history of the period in which he played an influential role” (149). The chapter provides a welcome entry point for those who want to gain their footing in the landscape of Reformed teaching regarding covenant and election. The following chapter on Bavinck, which explores the relationship between election and covenant in Bavinck’s theology, is likewise useful. Here, Venema discusses the question as to whether one should view “covenant from the standpoint of election,” or view “covenant strictly in terms of its historical administration” (195). Roughly

speaking, the question can be stated this way: “Is covenant broader than election?” How one answers this question will prove decisive, especially when we consider the Federal Vision movement shortly. Venema admirably summarizes Bavinck’s careful thought on this question, noting the “close yet distinct” (198) relationship of covenant and election in Bavinck’s (and the tradition’s) theology. The “distinct” aspect of the previous statement is all-important to covenant theology. Finally, Venema notes Bavinck’s affirmation that it is both right and proper to a) call to covenant members to self-examination and b) call covenant members to conversion (202). Venema’s discussion here sets the reader up nicely for his treatment of the Federal Vision and New Perspective in later chapters.

As I stated in the introduction, this book is polemical and pastoral by turns. Nowhere is the pastoral element more pronounced than in Venema’s discussion of children of believers who die in infancy. Since this year marks the four hundredth anniversary of Dordt, the historical discussion of the chapters is of special interest. But it is the pastoral facet which is so valuable. Venema concludes this section of his book with a fine chapter which defends paedobaptism. He rehearses the standard data here, but his arguments are compelling.

Part Three: “Covenant Theology in Recent Discussion”

The final section of this book, “Covenant Theology in Recent Discussion,” surveys recent deviations from traditional Reformed covenant theology. Chapter nine outlines the major doctrinal emphases of the Federal Vision movement. For those just entering into this debate, Venema’s sketch is lucid and fair, recognizing that this movement is not a monolithic creature. Chapter ten critiques the Federal Vision’s understanding of covenant and election. As pointed out above, Venema’s treatment of Bavinck prepares the reader for his critique in this chapter. Chapter eleven presents the reader with Venema’s arguments against the Federal Vision’s understanding of covenant and justification. As with the rest of this volume, Venema’s criticisms are measured, careful, and accurate. My only complaint would be that I would have liked to have seen Venema explore the relationship between union with Christ and justification and sanctification, as these three relate to the departures from Reformed orthodoxy represented by the Federal Vision.

In this reviewer’s opinion, one of the fundamental and basic errors of the Federal Vision is that it exchanges a Biblical and Reformed pneumatology for a non-Reformed ecclesiology. Venema’s overall discussion of the movement is valuable and advances a strong case against its understanding of covenant and election, without falling into overstatement.

In the book’s final chapter, Venema scrutinizes the views of N.T. Wright, particularly as they relate to covenant and justification in Romans 5:12–21. Since Wright is, to put it mildly,

a polarizing figure in Reformed and evangelical circles, responses to his work seem to have become something of a cottage industry. Venema's contribution to this ongoing appraisal of Wright is beneficial because of his specific focus on Wright's exegesis. He notes the false dichotomy Wright erects between the *ordo salutis* and the *historia salutis*, along with drawing attention to Wright's ambiguity regarding the historicity of Adam, the latter of which is a significant, if not fatal, weakness in Wright's exegesis of Romans 5:12–21.

One aspect of Wright's thought which I have not seen critiqued at length is his epistemology relative to the use of background materials in exegesis. I would have liked to have seen Venema drill down on this feature of Wright's theology. His privileging of certain Second Temple documents exemplifies the problem of the appropriate use of background materials in New Testament circles, while the current trend of finding Ancient Near Eastern parallels in the text of the Old Testament embodies the trend in OT studies. The root of both, however, is the same; namely, a denial *in practice* of *sola Scriptura*. Ironically, as Venema notes, Wright claims his reading is *more* faithful to *sola Scriptura* than the Reformed tradition (386); indeed, Wright insists that exegesis, not tradition, drives his reading of Paul. Hence, in Wright's view, he is the heir to the Reformation and not his opponents. However, as long as he accords interpretive and hermeneutical authority to the Second Temple documents, then, it seems to me, he has (unwittingly, perhaps) denied both the principle and the practice of *sola Scriptura*.

In the writings of the Federal Vision and Wright, we see a failure to appropriate a Reformed pneumatology. As the Federal Vision downplays the role of the Spirit with respect to soteriology, Wright downplays, if unintentionally discards, the activity of the Spirit with respect to epistemology. In my judgment, a full-orbed, careful, and Biblical pneumatology is one of the pressing needs today. All that to say, I found Venema's criticisms of Wright to be timely and useful. As I mentioned above, Wright's body of work, and that of his critics, is growing like kudzu in the South. Venema's contribution ranks among one of the better offerings in that sprawling enterprise.

Conclusion

The controversies detailed in this book show no signs of abating any time soon. Therefore, Venema's work will be needed in the coming years. The doctrines of election and covenant present themselves on virtually every page of the Bible and a thorough study of both is invaluable. Venema's contribution will assist the reader greatly in that endeavor. Viewed from the perspective of doctrine, *Christ and Covenant Theology* is the work of a mature scholar. Viewed from the perspective of pastoral theology, it is the work of a churchman who sees that these disputes never stay in the ivory tower, but always

make their way to the pastures where Christ's flock grazes. Combining both of these elements in this book leaves the reader in the author's debt.

Review: Jeffrey S. McDonald, *John Gerstner and the Renewal of Presbyterian Evangelicalism in Modern America* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017). 978-1-49-829633-5. x + 263 pp. Also available in paperback and Kindle versions. Reviewed by Benjamin Shaw, Academic Dean and Professor of Hebrew & Old Testament, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, both liberal theology and a historical-critical approach to the study of the Bible had made significant inroads into American Protestantism. By 1910 a conservative reaction had begun to build against those developments and in that same year, the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) adopted resolutions emphasizing five articles that have become known as the fundamentals. These articles are: the inerrancy of the Scriptures, Christ's virgin birth, his vicarious atonement, his bodily resurrection, and the reality of his miracles. The denomination reaffirmed these items in 1916 and 1923. Also in 1910, the series of pamphlets known as *The Fundamentals* began to be published. These pamphlets contained essays by conservative scholars, including B. B. Warfield, from a variety of Protestant denominations defending various traditional Christian doctrines or dealing with certain critical attacks on the Bible. Early fundamentalism was an ecumenical endeavor. Only in the 1920s and 1930s did fundamentalism begin to develop the doctrine of separation that became characteristic of the movement, and which remains a defining characteristic of fundamentalism today. In 1947 Carl F. H. Henry published *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. This publication is generally credited with marking the beginning of the rise of modern evangelicalism. In some sense, as early fundamentalism was an ecumenical move against liberalism, so early evangelicalism was an ecumenical move against fundamentalism.

It is probably providential that John Gerstner was born during the period of the beginnings of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, but Gerstner's life reflects something of the same range of controversy. John Gerstner, born in 1914, was raised without any specific religious instruction. I remember him quipping in class that he was raised Lutheran, if by that you meant that it was a Lutheran church his father didn't go to. It was not until he was nearing college age that he was converted. He attended Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania and was radically influenced by John Orr, one of the religion professors at the college. McDonald

divides his presentation of Gerstner's life into seven periods, devoting a chapter to each period. The first period takes Gerstner from his birth to the end of the 1940s. The focus of the chapter is on the influence of Orr on Gerstner's theology and on his move to graduate studies at Harvard.

In the second period, covering the decade of the 1950s, McDonald focuses on Gerstner's involvement in the debates about the merger of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). He also deals with Gerstner's publications during the period. For the decade of the 1960s, the issues that Gerstner dealt with were the merger of Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary (UPCNA) with Western Theological Seminary (PCUSA) and the adoption by the UPCUSA of the Confession of 1967. In the 1970s, Gerstner was involved in the Kenyon case (Wynn Kenyon was refused ordination in the UPCUSA for unwillingness to ordain women to church office) and in the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. In the 1980s, he became involved in the Kaseman case (Mansfield Kaseman would not affirm that Jesus is God, the virgin birth or that Christ rose bodily from the grave). He also co-wrote, with R. C. Sproul and Arthur Lindsley, the book *Classical Apologetics*. In the 1990s he left the UPCUSA for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), and published the three-volume work *The Rational Biblical theology of Jonathan Edwards*. McDonald gives a fair presentation and analysis of each of these items. As an intellectual biography, it is a competent presentation of the man and his thought.

However, I wish to put Gerstner in a larger context and look at his biography from a different angle. What lessons are there for confessional Presbyterians a generation after the death of John Gerstner? First, Gerstner was primarily a churchman. I do not mean this in the sense that he was a regular attendee at meetings of presbytery, or synod, or general assembly. The Synods and General Assemblies of the UPCUSA were delegated, and it is unlikely that Gerstner would ever have been popular enough to have been elected as a representative to those meetings. Furthermore, I do not mean that he was a man who took his place in the committees of the courts of the church. He may have, but McDonald does not give us this information. Instead, I mean that Gerstner understood himself to have a responsibility to labor for the good of the church as a whole. We see this in several ways. He labored hard for positions that, in his understanding, were necessary for the long-term health of the church. He worked against the merger that would unify the UPCNA and the PCUSA, seeing that the evangelicalism of the UPCNA would eventually be lost in the liberal commitments of the PCUSA. The larger denomination had already gotten rid of its most vociferous conservatives in the days of Machen. He also worked against the unification of the two seminaries. While

admitting that the faculty at Western was more scholarly, he was aware of the more liberal theological commitments among its faculty and was concerned that the evangelical commitments among the Pittsburgh-Xenia faculty would also be lost. He labored almost alone among UPCUSA academics against the adoption of the Confession of 1967, knowing that its vague language and vague affirmations would serve only to give excuse for a further loosening of the denomination's already weak confessional commitments. The same motivation drove his defense of Wynn Kenyon on the issue of women's ordination. That Kenyon would lose was a foregone conclusion, since the denomination had been ordaining women as pastors for almost two decades. But the decision in the Kenyon case was the penultimate step in making it impossible for men opposed to the ordination of women ever to be ordained in the UPCUSA. The final step was the adoption of changes to the denomination's Book of Order that gave the status of church law to the decision in the Kenyon case. Gerstner was motivated by similar concerns in the Kaseman case, knowing that the victory of Mansfield Kaseman would make it almost impossible to hold any minister in the UPCUSA accountable for heterodox doctrinal commitments. Though Gerstner argued that a statement from the following General Assembly affirming the full deity of Christ was a step in the right direction, it was merely an *in thesi* declaration (not judicially binding) and would have no real power over future decisions by presbyteries as to whom they could admit to ordination. This last also shows Gerstner's commitment to the denomination, whatever its weaknesses. It was not until near the end of his life that he finally gave up on the idea that the PC(USA) was still a real church of Christ. He saw the church as his mother, and would not leave her, even if she was deathly ill. Perhaps especially because she was deathly ill.

His commitment as a churchman is also shown in his almost indefatigable commitment to teaching throughout the church. He did not limit his lecturing to the seminary classroom or to the academic convocation, as many seminary professors do. Instead he spoke wherever he was invited using the same incisive wit to reach laymen as he did with his students in the classroom. In addition to his teaching at Pittsburgh, he also taught occasionally at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, and at Westminster Theological Seminary. His involvement with the Ligonier Valley Study Center has certainly proved to be a benefit for the church. The audio and video recordings of his teaching are still available for later generations of students, primarily laymen, who are interested in Jonathan Edwards, in the teaching of Old Princeton, and in those committed to orthodox Reformed theology.

In addition, his commitment to being a churchman was demonstrated in his broader evangelical commitments. He

contributed several essays to books edited by Carl F. H. Henry in the 1950s and 1960s. He served on the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. In his public lecturing, he did not limit himself to Presbyterian groups, but reached out to the larger evangelical world.

Second, Gerstner was a teacher. McDonald does not do much with that, and perhaps it is impossible for a biographer to handle the issue in any helpful fashion. He does quote a few students about Gerstner's teaching, but not in any way sufficient to give the reader a real sense of what it was like to be in a class with Gerstner. As a lecturer, his presentation was never merely academic. It was advocacy for what was being taught. He wanted the students to have the same commitment to the material that he had. In that way, it came very close to being preaching. But his most stimulating teaching was in his seminar classes. He conducted these in Socratic fashion. The students were expected to have read, and to some extent mastered, the material before class. By means of careful questioning, Gerstner would then tease out of the students the implications of what the material covered. These classes made the students think hard and articulate carefully their understanding. It is no wonder that some of the students didn't care for these classes. As A. E. Housman said, "Three minutes thought would suffice to find this out; but thought is irksome and three minutes is a long time." Those classes were hard mental work, but for those interested, worth every minute.

Third, Gerstner was not much of an academic. He was eventually dismissed from the editorial committee of the Yale University Jonathan Edwards project because he could not maintain the objective distance toward his subject that is expected in today's academy (see pp. 127-128). The bulk of what Gerstner published was aimed at the public, not the academy. As such, it probably has had a much wider reach and a more significant impact than it otherwise would have had. Some of what he wrote has been kept in print by *Soli Deo Gloria* publications and by Ligonier. His three most significant works—*Classical Apologetics*, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, and *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*—all have their problems. All could have used more thorough editing, and no doubt some things could have been better and more accurately said. But they remain accessible. Gerstner on Edwards is most probably a more helpful and reliable guide than the material produced by John Piper.

In sum, it can fairly be said that Gerstner labored for the good of the church, in his denominational involvements, in his teaching, and in his publications. This is an example from which we can all benefit. McDonald's biography is a good place start our journey in Gerstner.

Review: Paul C. H. Lim, *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 978-0-19-533946-8. Hardback. 488 + xvi pp. \$87.00. Reviewed by Harrison Perkins (PCA). Mr. Perkins is assistant minister at London City Presbyterian Church (Free Church of Scotland).

The Holy Trinity has always been a crucial doctrine in Christian theology and there has never been a lack of discussion about how to explain it. There have always been the vigorous defenders of ecumenical Trinitarianism and there have always been detractors that needed to be addressed. Paul C.H. Lim's work *Mystery Unveiled: The Crisis of the Trinity in Early Modern England* explores both sides of the Trinitarian debates that occurred in England during the seventeenth century. That time was a fascinating period for the development of Reformed theology as defenders of rigorous Protestantism sought to implement further reform in the national churches, but also in regards to how many radical sects emerged even just within the boundaries of London. Many of these sects moved away from classical Trinitarianism. Some explicitly rejected the doctrine and tried to rewrite the doctrine of God completely by claiming to be using the Protestant criteria of *sola scriptura*. Other groups moved away from traditional Christianity implicitly by muting or simply neglecting the crucial doctrines that had so long defined the faith.

Lim masterfully guides readers through the minefield of all the groups involved in debating the Trinity in early modern England and provides a helpful guide to those who want to understand the nuanced debates about the Christian commitment to the doctrine of God. The first chapter argues against previous historiographical claims that Socinianism foreshadows intellectual developments like the Enlightenment. Instead Lim contends that the anti-Trinitarianism of John Biddle and Paul Best grew out of commitment to *sola scriptura* in the most radical form. They thought that the Reformation had never finished and tried to extend that into revising the ecumenical doctrine of the Trinity. Lim makes excellent use of difficult and perhaps thus far misunderstood sources to open up the actual positions of the anti-Trinitarian authors. Chapter two looked at the Familists and the Ranters. Both undermined the Trinity by confusing the Creator-creature distinction. Their mystically leaning piety mitigated Nicene orthodoxy. This examination of untrinitarian fringe groups shows how it is inadequate to overly distinguish radical religious groups. They have to be considered together as part of a general sense of societal meltdown amidst political upheaval. Chapter three examines the reactions to John Biddle. This examination includes Catholic and various Protestant responses. Lim sheds new light on Trinitarian hermeneutics and reveals how complex the attacks on Socinian exegesis actually were.

The notion of mystery was highly important to Trinitarian arguments, whereas anti-Trinitarians had a rationalist bent against defaulting to God's incomprehensibility. Chapter four looks at two leading Trinitarians: Francis Cheynell and John Owen. Lim situated Cheynell, a Westminster divine who wrote an important book on the Trinity, within the political climate of the English civil war and the Interregnum. He gives particular attention to the situation in Oxford. He also looked at Owen's writings on the Trinity with an eye to understanding his exegetical strategies and his purpose to foster deeper communion with God. Chapter five shows that both the use of the Bible and the church fathers were at stake in responses to anti-Trinitarian arguments. Early modern theologians were aware that they needed to fit within the biblical and patristic historical texts. Lim examines Richard Baxter, Thomas Hobbes, and Andrew Marvell as examples of historians that accounted various aspects of conciliar history. Their anti-conciliar and anti-episcopal approach may not have "singlehandedly ushered in the Deist and Enlightenment critique of the Trinity and its conciliar history" but it certainly did not curtail it either (269). The last chapter looks at how interpretive trajectories for the Gospel of John played out in the polemical context about the Trinity. Specific texts in this Gospel obviously became key points of debate.

This work is valuable on multiple fronts. Lim has brought attention to understudied manuscript sources that need further examination. He also breaks new ground on understanding how anti-Trinitarianism developed and the directions it took. Although historiography has largely considered anti-Trinitarianism separately from antinomianism, Lim showed that early modern polemicists clearly linked these issues. The focus of this book is on the 1640s and 1650s, which will make it of particular interest to those who want to understand the historical setting of the Westminster Assembly. Although there is not a massive amount of attention on the Assembly itself, its members do feature as key figures and the work as a whole sheds great light on the cultural and theological context that quite literally surrounded the meeting of divines. The book is not for the faint of heart, even as Peter Lake noted in the forward. It is large, dense, and complex. It will prove profitable though for those who labor through it carefully and digest its content.

Especially in today's context where the doctrine of the Trinity is somehow even up for debate within so-called evangelical circles, this volume is highly relevant. Although history is never determinately prescriptive, it helps us understand far better the issues that are at stake as we go about exegesis. Lim shows that a commitment to doing exegesis of Scripture does not necessarily mean someone is an orthodox Christian. As confessional Presbyterians think through arguments by theologians who trumpet *sola scriptura*, this book reminds us

that rationalists who want to sit over God have always loved an overly radical use of scriptural exegesis. *Sola Scriptura* can become a backdoor for rejecting what the universal church has always agreed that the Bible itself teaches. Exegesis can be abused and turned into a way to rewrite confessional or even creedal doctrine in favor of our own preferences. Lim's book is a reminder for readers of this journal that true, confessional Protestants read the supremely authoritative Bible responsibly alongside the history of the church. Where the church has holistically agreed about what the Bible teaches, we ought to be humble about our exegetical strategies and listen to the wisdom of our forebears. This work is also a reminder about the importance of the doctrine of God. Reformed Protestants have never compromised on theology proper in favor of emphasizing a bare soteriology. Reformed theologians have recognized that the gospel is inherently tied to who God is. We can be grateful that Paul Lim has guided us deeper into the Protestant and generally Christian commitment to uphold a proper and biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

Review: Garnet Howard Milne, *Has the Bible Been Kept Pure? The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Providential Preservation of Scripture* (Author published, 2017). 978-1-52-203915-0. Paperback. 322 pages. Kindle version available. Reviewed by Benjamin Shaw, Academic Dean and Professor of Hebrew & Old Testament, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

What does the Westminster Confession of Faith teach about the preservation of Scripture through the ages? It is stated briefly in 1.8, which says, "The Old Testament in Hebrew... and the New Testament in Greek... being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic." Milne's concern in this book is with the meaning of the word "pure."

His introduction to the book presents the issue as one of religious epistemology. What is the source of true religious knowledge? Is it in the tradition and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, or is it in the Scriptures? This was, at the time of the Reformation, the issue. The Roman Catholic view was that the Scriptures had become corrupt over the centuries, while God had preserved the church as both pure and authentic. The response of the reformers was that God had preserved the Scriptures as pure and authentic, while it was the church that had become corrupt. Milne's concern is that modern evangelicals have abandoned the position of the reformers: "Today it is generally accepted by most conservative Evangelical, Reformed and Presbyterian churches that while the original Scriptures or autographs were fully inspired by God and without error, the apographs or copies of those original

texts, both individually and collectively, even when collated, still contain errors” (24). He traces this abandonment of the original Protestant position to the influence of B. B. Warfield and other nineteenth-century scholars.

The book is organized as follows: the introduction sets out the position of Warfield, citing statements from a number of his writings. In the first chapter, the book moves to a presentation of Calvin’s view on the text of Scripture, which is that we have “the complete authoritative Word of God” (67). The second chapter surveys the discussion of the issue in the period from Calvin to the turn of the seventeenth century. The views considered are those of Thomas Cartwright (1535-1607), William Whitaker (1548-1595), and John Jewel (1522-1571). The third chapter is the heart of the book. In this chapter, Milne seeks to show what the Confession means when it says that the Scripture has been “kept pure.” In his discussion, Milne contrasts the views of John Lightfoot, Richard Vines, Anthony Tuckney, and James Ussher with what he considers to be nineteenth-century misrepresentations of their views. The fourth chapter deals with the Westminster divines’ understanding of the role of providence in the preservation of the text. The fifth chapter deals with the views of John Goodwin, a contemporary of the Westminster divines. Goodwin’s position was eccentric, and the responses of the divines to Goodwin’s views gives Milne further opportunity to confirm his understanding of the views of the divines. Chapter six presents the perspective of James Ussher in some detail. The seventh chapter is an affirmation of reformed religious epistemology. It is followed by a very brief conclusion. I found chapters five onward to be largely redundant, covering much the same material that had already been presented. The remainder of this review will focus on the third chapter, which is the key chapter of the entire book.

Before evaluating Milne’s work, a few comments are necessary. First, everyone agrees that there are variations among manuscripts. No two manuscripts, either of the Hebrew Old Testament or of the Greek New Testament, agree in every detail. Some of these variations are more problematic than others. For example, in 1 John 1:4 some manuscripts have the Greek pronoun *hemon*, while others have the Greek pronoun *humon*. The difference in English is between *our* and *your*. That strikes me as a pretty small difference, and most translations will translate it one way in the text and the other way in the margin. Other differences are more significant. Some manuscripts include the so-called “longer ending” of Mark (16:9-20), while others end at Mark 16:8. That is a significant difference, and the question is then raised as to which manuscripts should be followed.

Second, even at the time of the Westminster Assembly, scholars were aware of these sorts of manuscript variations. The Greek New Testament edited by Erasmus in the early

sixteenth century had gone through several editions, with additional manuscript evidence added by the time of the Westminster Assembly.

Given that there are variations among manuscripts and that the Westminster divines were aware of these variations, what then does the WCF mean when it affirms that the biblical text has been “kept pure in all ages”? Milne seeks to answer that question.

In a certain sense, the views of Calvin and others prior to the Westminster Assembly are only significant to the extent that they informed the thinking of the Westminster divines. But it is important to Milne’s treatment that he show the influence that these earlier scholars had on the thinking of the Westminster divines. But, the key issue is what the WCF means by the word “pure”? Milne’s third chapter deals with this question. He states, “In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms*, the words pure, purity, purest or purely occur in total ten times” (104). Investigating the use of those terms in the Westminster standards, Milne concludes that there are three types of purity referred to. First, there is a relative purity, characteristic of the church, since no church is ever entirely pure. Second, there is the absolute purity of God himself. Third, there is the preserved purity of the text of Scripture. Those are accurate and helpful distinctions. But the further question is, “What is meant by ‘preserved purity’”? Milne notes that the only Scripture proof offered by the divines for that statement is Matt 5:18 and concludes, “The purity implied, therefore, is a purity of the text in words, matter and doctrine” (107). This purity is preserved by the special providence of God, but this special providence “does not imply that the autographic originals were to be reproduced perfectly in every copy” (107). But Milne goes on to say, “If God intended to restrict the way of salvation to truths found in the Scriptures, then surely he would ensure that those Scriptures could be trusted, and the only way they could be trusted would be if they were perfectly preserved in their original texts” (109). This statement appears to me to be problematic. Would not perfect preservation imply the absence of variants? Just a bit later, he essentially repeats himself: “If God has provided a standard of purity for theological purposes, it would seem inconceivable that such a standard would be untrustworthy, and therefore anything less than perfect or pure in both form and substance” (109). Here, Milne appears to equate purity with perfection. Again, this raises a difficulty. According to Milne, the existence of variants seems to point to imperfection, or only a relative perfection in the existing texts. But a relative perfection is no perfection at all.

Milne concludes this key chapter with the following statement: “When the Westminster divines wrote that God had kept the Scriptures pure in all ages (WCF 1:8), they specifically stated that these were the original texts that had been

immediately inspired by God. This means that the very same text God had dictated to the penmen of Scripture had been kept intact and as a consequence, it was deemed “authentic”, containing their own intrinsic authority, and this text was therefore to be appealed to by the Church “in all controversies of religion” (149). This again appears to be a problematic statement. It is at best unclear, and certainly confusing.

I think that what Milne ultimately intends to communicate is the following: first, the Westminster divines believed in the preservation of the biblical text by a special providence of God. Second, this special providence did not extend to the perfection of each manuscript copy. Instead, by a careful collation of the copies available, the pure Scripture was attainable. Third, this Scripture, preserved among many copies, was available to the church in any age, and would continue to be so available, due to the special providence of God.

If that is indeed what Milne intends, I have to agree with him. However, I found the book less than helpful. There were too many instances, like those cited above, where Milne was unclear, or his language was insufficiently precise. I agree with his assessment of the modern situation, in that it often appears that New Testament text critics have little confidence that the Word they have is the final Word of God. I do not, however, think that Warfield and a few others are those primarily responsible for the present situation. Instead, that responsibility goes to Westcott and Hort, and the many who adopted the Westcott-Hort approach to textual criticism in the late nineteenth century. In some sense, textual criticism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been a long footnote to the work of Westcott and Hort.

As an interesting aside, I found in the course of researching for this review that the New Testament text held as standard by both the Roman Catholic Church (the Vulgate) and the Eastern Orthodox Church are both much closer to the Textus Receptus than to the modern eclectic text. Both the Vulgate and the Eastern Orthodox Greek text contain the long ending of Mark, the *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11) and 1 John 5:7, the so-called Johannine Comma.

Ultimately, I think this book is useful for the work Milne has done in digging through the Reformation and post-Reformation material. It is also useful for laying out the issues. I wish, however, that the book had been more carefully written and more thoroughly edited.

1. To eliminate any confusion, we mention here that Knell uses a spelling of John Scottus Erigena that is not as common as most readers are used to seeing. The more common spelling in historical and philosophical writings is Scotus with the one “t”

2. *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, first series*, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1886–1890). *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Company, 1890–1900).

Review: Matthew Knell, *Sin, Grace and Free Will: A Historical Survey of Christian Thought, Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers to Augustine* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2017). ISBN 978-0-227-17654-2. Pb, 260 pp. £20.00. Reviewed by Mark A. Herzer PhD, pastor of Christ Covenant Presbyterian Church in Warminster, PA.

As the title indicates, the book offers a historical survey of sin, grace and free will among the Church Fathers up to and through St. Augustine. The author gave about one-quarter of the book to Augustine’s own writings. Knell begins with the Early Church Fathers (Justin Martyr, Clement, *et al*), Apologists like Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, the Greek Fathers (e.g., Cappadocian Fathers, Cyril of Jerusalem, Athanasius, *et al*), and then turns his attention to Augustine. An epilogue covers the Council of Orange (AD 529) and John Scottus Erigena.¹ The book deals with the various ways in which these church fathers reflected on the specific theological topics mentioned in the beginning.

Before interacting with some of the actual content of the book, the reader will have to understand what Knell intended to accomplish. This is the first of three volumes in which the author presents a “reader on sin, grace and free will” (3). Knell loads the book with very large extracts from leading theologians from the second century to the ninth century. He took most (not all) of these quotations from Schaff’s ubiquitous 38 volume *Ante-Nicene Fathers* and *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.² He does this specifically to encourage students to read the original sources for themselves. Since everyone can access these volumes on the internet, he felt this was the best way to make his sources available to interested students.

Because this book is comprised of large extracts from various church fathers, Knell’s own analysis is minimal. In addition, near the end of the book, he states, “It is not the purpose of this work to draw conclusions for the reader, but to encourage readers to engage with the range of sources that have been influential in the history of the church in the areas of sin, grace and free will” (239). He declares that he deliberately did not “synthesize” the readings. Knell introduces the reader to the topics of sin, grace, and free will with a few lines or a short paragraph and then fills the pages with a slew of large and at times enormous extracts. After each section, one recognizes the topic being covered (since he organized it quite well) but is left with no guidance as to what the reader should have been looking for in the ponderous quotation. One cannot help but wonder if these quotations were not strung together simply because they included the word “grace,” “free will,” etc. Without some analysis from the author (often given with little or no context for these extracts), the quotations will seem arbitrary and stilted to the reader.

Herein lies the most frustrating part of the book and it

made the whole exercise of reading the first volume tedious and arduous. Too often, an extensive quotation covers the entire page (e.g., 125, 215). On most of these occasions, the author strings together several block quotations punctuated with a sentence or two from himself. Where he does offer some analysis (albeit very little), it is helpful and at times penetrating. The very point these extracts were to show could have been easily gleaned from books on the history of doctrines, or good church history volumes engaged in theological development. For example, one can find a very good analysis of these topics from J. N. D. Kelly's popular *Early Christian Doctrines* (see Ch. 13, "Fallen Man and God's Grace").³

With these words of critique offered, allow me to synthesize some of the main points of the book not always explicitly pointed out by the author. From the early fathers up to St. Augustine, it becomes crystal clear that the doctrine of free will was foundational to the Greek Fathers. Almost all of them established this doctrine from man being created in the image of God. Since God is absolutely free and man was created in his image, it follows that an essential element of man's being is his free will. Irenaeus (AD 130–202) declared, "...man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created" (35). To get an idea how fundamental the doctrine of free will was to these men, read the words of John of Damascus (AD 675–749) from his *Exposition of the Christian Faith*: "For we have been created with free will by our Creator and are masters over our own actions" (161). Furthermore, these Greek Fathers argued that no one could be virtuous or vicious without this doctrine of free will. Personally, this is probably the most alarming thing to relearn from Knell's book. I almost forgot how rabid they were over this doctrine and you see it very clearly in all these Greek Fathers. Knell simply indicated these Greek Fathers maintained this view up to the eighth century (John of Damascus).

When dealing with the doctrine of sin, the Greek Fathers of course did not deny its pervasive influence and presence but they did not develop it in such a way as to impinge on man's free will. Fundamental to their view is that man was always responsible for their sin and God can never be faulted for it. The role of Adam's sin did not dominate their thinking (unlike Augustine).

In the section on "grace," Knell repeatedly sneaks in synthesized sentences in which he offers the reader very helpful observations, namely, that the Greek Fathers did not have a highly developed doctrine of grace. Regarding the early church fathers, he says, "It is difficult to pick up themes of grace in these works" (25). He says that Irenaeus "does not devote extensive sections of his work to the concept of grace" (43). Regarding Tertullian, Knell says that he "follows the general pattern of the earliest church writings in not having

a developed doctrine of grace" (63). Perhaps not all that astonishing, the author declares that Origen "does not develop any theology of grace" (90). The rest of the Greek Fathers, he avers, did not develop "a strong doctrine" of grace (129). The author also shows how the doctrine of grace was not as established and dominant in Augustine's earlier writings (though his later writings clearly developed a doctrine of grace that greatly affected the Western Church).

Of course, Augustine's mature view differed considerably from the Greek Fathers and readers of this journal well understand that difference. Augustine's breathtaking reflections on sin, grace, and free will show why he has had such an impact on Christianity.

At this point, I want to point out a few specific matters in Knell's book. I found Chapter Six, "The Greek Fathers on Grace," to be very unhelpful. The quotations are arranged according to the way the word "grace" is used. The reader can easily read the word "grace" used by various Greek Fathers but having so many extracts arranged topically (Grace and Nature, Means of Grace, Grace and Salvation, Baptism and Grace, Grace and Sanctification, Grace and Charismata, Amount of Grace) does not help him. Dumping these quotations onto these pages has the appearance of being both lazy and superficial. It is one thing to read the author's analysis and see if the quotations actually prove his point or observation, but it is quite another thing to read them without any interaction or guidance.

Let me offer an example of the superficial arrangement just mentioned. In the section under "Grace and Salvation," he suggests that Cyril of Jerusalem believed in "some kind of space between becoming a Christian and receiving grace" (142). Yet the quotations that are lifted from Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures* must be understood in their context. The catechumens were being instructed in how they were to prepare for their baptism. The "grace" Cyril was speaking of was the grace that came to the believer at baptism. Their unique view of baptismal grace (beyond the purview of this review) explains this "space." Knell suggested that this was quite unique ("a very interesting line") when in fact it was very common among the Fathers. Again, this suggests a slavish compilation of quotations with a simplistic and misleading arrangement.

In Knell's seventh chapter, he offers another simplistic analysis of human will. Comparing man's will to that of angels, he only posits that the angels held an intermediary position between God and man when it came to the will (it is not clear why such a distinction is important). But Knell overlooks something much more significant between men and angels. Quoting John of Damascus, he does not notice that angels are not encumbered by man's physical body in regard to their free

3. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, fifth revised edition (London; New York: Continuum, 2006).

will: “having neither antipathy on the part of the body to overcome nor any assailant” (160). That is, angels do not struggle with human bodies and are not tempted from without. The reader had been led to believe that the free will of God, angels, and men is merely constitutional to their state and very little differences existed between angels and men regarding to their free will. John of Damascus, like many Greek thinkers, did not have the most positive view of the body. This should have been noted and highlighted as it sheds light upon some of the thinking among Greek Fathers.

The delightful Epilogue remains by far his best chapter. Though limiting himself to the Council of Orange and John Scottus Erigena, Matthew Knell synthesized their thinking quite well. Sadly, he refers to Gottschalk only in passing and as the backdrop for Erigena. I fear the second volume will not include Gottschalk at all. Though Semi-Pelagianism was condemned by the Council, it prevailed after the council in men like Erigena (and subsequently in most of Eastern and Western theology). It would have been helpful if the author recognized the continuing tension between Augustinianism and Semi-Pelagianism in theological history but his descriptive overview tends to overlook it. It remains to be seen if it will be noticed in the second volume.

This book turned out to be very different from what I expected. The intriguing title piqued my interest because these themes of *sin, grace, and free will* have always been a central concern for all Reformed thinkers. Yet, the book frustrated me more often than not. Only a few times did it ever offer interesting insights. Overall, this book has limited value and it will only benefit a very specific kind of student.

Would I recommend this book? Only for those who are interested in a “reader.” But the themes of *sin, grace, and free will* require greater attention than merely a survey of quotations. A thorough analysis and synthesized judgments would have made this book invaluable because these theological themes always have contemporary relevance. Very few people will avail themselves of this book because it is only a reader. One will have to go somewhere else to get a good competent theological analysis. Nevertheless, reading this book could be helpful for those who have not really studied the early fathers. This book will certainly expose them to a plethora of original sources and in this manner, Knell’s book can be considered a success.

Review: Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge* (Phillipsburg, NJ. Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2017). Paperback, xxx, 387 pages. 978-162995285, \$59.00, Kindle/ePub, \$35.99. Reviewed by Jeffrey A. Stivason, Grace Reformed Presbyterian Church, Gibsonia, Pennsylvania.

Alan D. Strange is professor of church history and theological librarian of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, IN and in this book, full of solid history and rich documentation, Professor Strange acquits himself of those tasks quite well. The aim of this work is to describe and exfoliate Charles Hodge’s understanding of the spirituality of the church, which, according to Strange, can be summarized in the following way. First, the church, like the state and family, is a divine institution. Each of these institutions has the same general aim but each achieves this end by different means. Second, the duties and means of these institutions cannot be “learned *a priori* from their design, but must be determined from the word of God” (p. 47). This means that the qualifications for church officers and the inclusion and exclusion of the membership are based upon God’s word. Third, the state being a distinct institution is not to assume the prerogatives of the church. In other words, the duties of preserving and promoting the church belong to the church and not to the state. And finally, the church is independent of the state and the state promotes the interests of the church best by letting her alone. According to Strange, “This is Hodge’s doctrine of the spirituality of the church in theory, particularly as that theory came to expression in America” (p. 48).

However, Strange is not interested in an abstract development of the doctrine of the church’s spirituality nor can he be because Hodge primarily worked this doctrine out in the *sitz im leben* of America’s battle over the issue of slavery. Thus, for Strange, this means that “Hodge’s view of the spirituality of the church had the dual effect of ensuring that the church would remain faithful to its calling, not confusing itself or its operations with those of the state, while, at the same time, not rendering the church mute in its carrying out the task of the Great Commission, including the duty of comprehensive discipleship” (p. vii).

Strange’s book does not function like a sharpened arrow seeking its target. Rather, it’s more like a tank rolling through the country before setting up within range of its target. The reader should not misunderstand the illustration. The journey across the countryside is a delightful one. And you are looking for a delightful book on all things Hodge then look no further. However, the spirituality of the church is often tucked away in the background of the book or at least for much of the beginning. For example, though a handy summary of Hodge’s life,

the biographical chapter must stretch a bit in order to include the doctrine of the church's spirituality.

However, let us jump aboard the tank as it makes its way along. In chapter one, Strange is concerned to develop Hodge's view of the church's history with regard to spirituality. By necessity the church's spirituality includes the concrete and the battle which brought this aspect of the church to the fore came in the nineteenth century. Up to that time the spirituality of the church was not mentioned. However, Strange is keen to demonstrate that this aspect was present even in Biblical times. For instance, he argues that the spirituality of the church was not absent during the theocracy but at the heart of the old covenant was true spirituality highlighted in worship and devotion to Yahweh.

And Strange also points up Hodge's criticism of the Constantinian model wherein the church as a spiritual institution was brought together and ruled by an agent of civil society. For Hodge, this was a fundamental violation of the church's spirituality. Strange continues to trace the church's relationship to the state throughout the middle ages, the reformation and even to different nations culminating in the church state relationship in the American context. It was this American context and its exceptions or scruples to certain articles found in chapters twenty and twenty three of the Westminster Confession of Faith that pointed up both America's independence and the place where the church of Christ as a spiritual society could be entirely distinct from the civil government. This was the context in which Hodge lived and wrote.

If chapter one functioned as the path of this tank then chapter two might function as a hiatus along the way. As Strange says, "Any fair survey of his temporal life and times must take into account matters both temporal and spiritual, as he was committed to both, and the doctrine of the spirituality of the church resides in some measure at the nexus of one's doctrine of church and state" (p. 50). The difficulty is that besides a note on the spirituality of the church regarding the upcoming discussion of slavery in the American context this chapter does not really push the argument forward. However, having said as much let me also say that the chapter is a delightful summary. Anyone interested in the Old Princetonians not only loves their doctrine but cherishes their example. These were lives well lived.

If chapter two was a siesta then the third and fourth chapters function as coordinates for a concluding target. In other words, in these chapters Strange is plugging in some crucial theological material that will be necessary for us to understand before blowing the target to bits. Chapter three deals with the theological convictions "that gave root to and underlay his (Hodge's) doctrine of the spirituality of the church" (p. 90). These sections are divided along the lines of the theological loci of traditional theological rubric. Here Hodge deals

with reason and revelation, the doctrine of God, man, and Christology. However, there is an interesting discussion of Hodge's view of revelation, reason and the influence of Scottish Common Sense Realism in this chapter. Strange lands squarely on the side of the new paradigm pressed by Helseth and Hoffecker before him which states that the Princetonians were more Calvinist theologians than Common Sense philosophers as Ahlstrom contends.

However, after speaking about Hodge and his view of the innate knowledge of God Strange raises an interesting discussion at the end of that section. There Hodge speaks of axioms and Strange comments that this is not an argument based on Scottish Common Sense Realism but "presuppositional argument from the impossibility of the contrary" (p. 111). This would take Strange's work further afield but since he raises the point it might have been interesting had he dealt with Henry L. Mansel's, *The Limits of Religious Thought*.¹ Hodge mentions Mansel nearly sixty times in his Systematic Theology and for good reason. Mansel argued in the 1858 Bampton Lectures that humans, being finite, could attain no knowledge of God apart from Scripture. Mansel's epistemology drove one to the Bible. Though Mansel was no modern Presuppositionalist, he might have been a close parallel for the time!

The third chapter raises another interesting issue regarding the reign of Christ that has some bearing on the spirituality of the church. For Hodge there are two separate aspects of Christ's reign. There is first his providential rule. Strange summarizes, "In fine, 'under the present dispensation, therefore, Christ is the God of providence. It is in and through and by Him that the universe is governed. This dominion or kingdom is to last until its object is accomplished, i.e., until all his enemies, all forms of evil, and even death itself is subdued. Then this kingdom, this mediatorial government of the universe, is to be given up (I Cor. xv.24)'" (p. 122). However, there is also a spiritual kingdom which "includes the relation in which he stands to his true people individually and collectively (the invisible church); and the relation he sustains to the visible Church, or the body of his professing people" (p. 123). The reign of his providence is "for the benefit of the church" (p. 122).

The fourth chapter raises another interesting point with regard to Hodge's theology. It appears that for Hodge the church is not an essentially visible society but an invisible one. Certainly the reader wonders how such a rigid view of the church as invisible can be consistently maintained. Hodge argues, "[the] Church, as such, is not a visible society. All visible union, all external organization may cease, and yet, so long as there are saints who have communion, the Church

1. Henry Longueville Mansel, *The Limits of Religious Thought Examined in Eight Lectures*, fifth edition (London: John Murray, 1867)

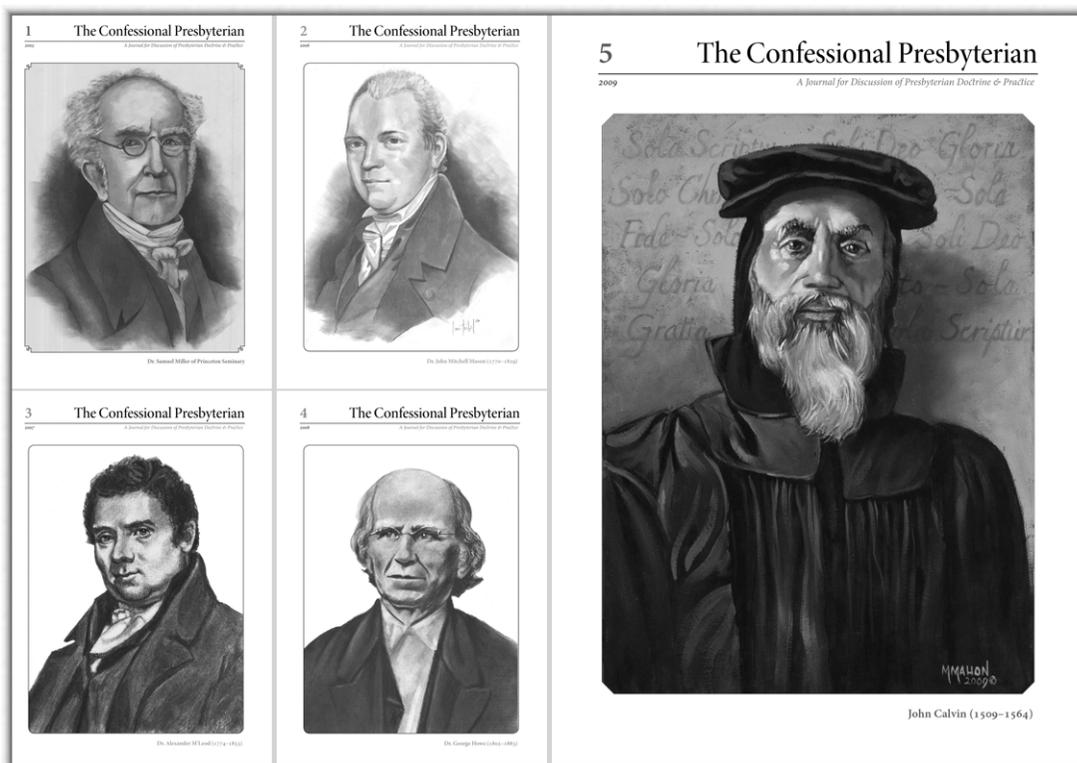
exists, if the Church is the communion of the saints” (p. 164). One might ask Hodge if a person could willingly abstain from the organization of the church and yet be without sin. Strange seems to indicate that Hodge would answer in the affirmative when he summarizes the spirituality of the church by saying, “The Holy Spirit constitutes the true church—that invisible body of believers gathered across the ages and found in a variety of particular visible churches” (p. 173). Such phrasing seems to indicate that the invisible church is the true church whereas the visible church is not. What is more, one cannot help but wonder if Hodge is striving for two goals: first, the exclusion of the Roman ecclesiology and second the inclusion of non-reformed or evangelical churches.

Chapters five through eight trace the doctrine of the spirituality of the church through a series of General Assemblies but also through a series of Hodge’s opponents, not the least of which is James Henley Thornwell. The story itself is worth reading these chapters. However, it is here in the debate over slavery that the doctrine of the church’s spirituality comes to the forefront. And throughout one asks whether they agree or

disagree with Hodge. Strange obviously admires Hodge but he is a good guide through the issues and does not leave us with hagiography but a well researched discussion regarding the visible church’s struggle on how to speak to the issue of slavery.

The final two chapters bring us in touch with the south and the reunion of the northern church as well as Strange’s concluding chapter. Here Strange sums up and ties up the loose ends and concludes as he started, giving us a faithful account of Hodge’s life and ministry, especially as it touched upon the spirituality of the church.

This is a fine book, particularly if you love the Old Princeton theologians. It has a variety of excellent topics including a chapter on Hodge’s life, battles within the church courts, and the slavery issue in America at its most volatile. However, as I have already said, this is not a sharpened arrow soaring through the air hungrily seeking the target. This is a tank rolling through the fields, and though it takes a tank longer to reach its destination it is a pleasant trip because you have a better opportunity to look at the sites as you pass them by. ■



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