

## “So Great a Love”—James Durham on Christ and His Church in the Song of Solomon

By Donald John MacLean

*It is as John Baptist among the prophets, other [Old Testament] scriptures speak of Christ as coming and afar off; this speaks of him, and to him, as near at hand.*

St. Athanasius

James Durham, echoing something of the spirit of Athanasius, exclaimed regarding the Song of Solomon approximately three hundred and fifty years ago, “Few can read this song but they must fall in love with it.”<sup>1</sup> And for two hundred years after he penned these words few Reformed believers would have disagreed with him. To take one example the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterian Robert Murray M’Cheyne stated: “There is no book of the Bible which affords a better test of the depth of a man’s Christianity than the Song of Solomon.”<sup>2</sup> So important was the Song to Reformed spirituality for generations that if it was loved as an expression of Christ’s relationship to the Church, all was probably well; if it was not loved, much was definitely ill.

However, the views of Durham and M’Cheyne, would have few advocates today. The Song has largely lost its lustre, and its use as a litmus test of spirituality would be looked at with amazement.<sup>3</sup> Accompanying the decline of the popularity of the Song has been a transformation of understanding regarding its meaning. The whole idea that the Song speaks primarily of Christ and his Church (or individual believers), has been largely disregarded and the clear majority scholarly evangelical<sup>4</sup> view now is that the Song speaks primarily (even exclusively) about human marriage, and even more particularly about the physical intimacy of marriage. C.J. Mahaney serves as a popularising example of this change when he says of the Song of Solomon: “It’s about sex ... [it] is nothing less than an explicit and unblushing celebration of sex within marriage.... It’s an eight-chapter feast of unbridled, uninhibited, joyous immersion in verbal and physical expressions of passion between a man and

a woman.”<sup>5</sup> Reflecting this view, Tom Gledhill argues that the Song “bombards our hearts and minds, stimulates our imaginations and desires, and often leaves us gasping for breath, longing wistfully for the fulfilment of our private [sexual] dreams.”<sup>6</sup> As a specific example of the sexual reading consider Song 2:4, “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love,” which would be read as describing “a night of sexual bliss, following an orgy of heavy drinking.”<sup>7</sup>

In view of this, regardless of whether the modern understanding of the Song or the traditional Reformed understanding espoused by Durham is favoured, it is clear that a ‘megashift’ has occurred in interpretation

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1. James Durham, *An Exposition of the Song of Solomon* (1668; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) 24. [Hereafter, Song].

2. Andrew Bonar (ed.), *Memoir and Remains of R. M. M’Cheyne* (1862; repr. London: Banner of Truth, 1966) 480. To be clear—the point of this quotation is not to denigrate the spirituality of those who disagree with M’Cheyne’s understanding of the Song but simply to record his views.

3. It is perhaps anecdotal evidence of the Song’s decline in popularity, but compare the frequency of allusion to the Song in Rutherford’s letters to the frequency of allusion to the song in preaching and Christian literature today! The same point is made by Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 59.

4. Whether that term now has any real meaning is debatable given the diversity of viewpoints (not least regarding Scripture), that fit within the broad framework of “evangelicalism.”

5. C.J. Mahaney, *Sex Romance and the Glory of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) 9–10. For another recent evangelical interpretation of the Song along similar lines see Mark Driscoll’s exposition at <http://peasantprincess.com/>.

6. Tom D. Gledhill, “Song of Songs” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. T.D. Alexander and B.S. Rosner; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 215.

7. Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past and Present* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 159.

of the Song. Indeed Tremper Longman argues that “no other biblical book witnesses ... such a definite and universally recognised shift in genre identification” (Longman, 36). But why? Several reasons are usually given for the move from a spiritual to a sexual reading of the Song. The primary reason usually offered is the alleged (recent) liberation of the Church from a false “Greek inspired” philosophy which viewed the physical as unimportant (at best) and the spiritual realm as higher and more substantial.<sup>8</sup> For Gledhill this liberation means the Song can now be read through the lens of the “doctrine of creation” without falsely having to superimpose the “doctrine of salvation” on the Song (Gledhill, 216). Whilst not totally without foundation, this fails to fully account for the 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed interpretation of the Song of Solomon given their handling of texts such as Prov. 5:19.<sup>9</sup> A second important reason offered is the rediscovery of the literature of the Ancient Near East (Longman, 37–38). This showed that other cultures’ love poetry used similar imagery to the Song<sup>10</sup> and has been taken to indicate that the Song must be read in a similar manner to the literature of the surrounding cultures. Whilst these advances are not unimportant, and of course were unknown in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the force of this objection fades somewhat in view of the Reformed commitment to Scripture as the best interpreter of Scripture. A third objection is that an allegorical interpretation is inherently subjective,

without explicit Scriptural warrant, and varies wildly from commentator to commentator.<sup>11</sup> Whilst it is an undoubted historical fact that allegorical interpretations of the Song have on occasion produced somewhat luxuriant interpretations this objection is not new and Durham’s response will be considered below.

Whilst pervasive, this new reading of the Song has not been without occasional challenges. Iain D. Campbell and Hugh Blair, for instance, have both published scholarly articles defending a largely Christological understanding of the Song of Solomon.<sup>12</sup> Blair approaches the Song from the perspective of preaching and argues that “the literal interpretation alone gives us very little to preach” (Blair, 54). In place of a purely literal reading Blair proposes a “much deeper typological significance” as the key to preaching the Song (Blair, 54). This typological approach, as advocated by Blair, seeks to apply the Song “to the relationship of love between a man and a woman, and will go on from that to see that love as an analogy of the love of Christ for His people and theirs for Him” (Blair, 55). Gerald Bray noted that the literal interpretation of the Song “has failed to demonstrate [yet] that it is spiritually adequate” (Bray, 164) and this seems to be the driving force behind Blair’s article. Campbell also adopts a typological approach but is driven by more biblical theological concerns. He reads the Song in the light of the Davidic covenant and gives a prominent role to Solomon arguing that “Solomon himself, rather than the marriage theme, is the key to the interpretation of the Song” (Campbell, 26). It is Solomon as “the immediate consequence of God’s covenantal promise to David” and as “a type of the covenant’s ultimate focus: the Lord Jesus Christ” who “alone justifies raising the interpretation of the Song above a literalistic and exemplaristic demonstration of human, physical love” (Campbell, 26).

Whether the reasons for the rejection of the spiritual understanding of the Song are viewed as adequate or not, or whether the few defences of a more traditional reading are to be regarded as sufficient answers is largely beside the point of this essay. The thrust of this article, rather than seeking to determine the correct understanding of the Song, is simply to present the traditional view of the Song of Solomon to enable readers to understand why older Reformed theologians and commentators read the Song the way they did. This will be done by means of an examination of perhaps the most famous of the older commentaries on the Song—that of James Durham. Tangentially to this task, some of these objections to the traditional reading, as they bear on the views of Durham, will be examined.

8. On this see Longman, *Song of Songs*, 36.

9. “As a loving deer and a graceful doe, Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; And always be enraptured with her love.” [NKJV]. See Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 43–48.

10. Hector Patmore argues *pace* much modern scholarship that the common themes identified “are so generic as to be meaningless. They do not demonstrate that existence of any relationship between the Egyptian songs and Canticles.... This is a peril of the figurative expression: certain sets of themes and images lend themselves to the diverse and enigmatic experiences of love” (Hector Patmore, “‘The Plain and Literal Sense’: On Contemporary Assumptions about the Song of Songs” *Vetus Testamentum* 56.2 [2006] 245). In particular Patmore argues that “Wishes; Praise of the Beloved; Description of Love; and Love in the Garden” as features of love poetry are present in almost every age and location and so no indicator of literary dependency (Patmore, 243).

11. Longman, *Song of Songs*, 36–37 and Gledhill, ‘Song of Songs’, 215. This is all well and good but the variety of ‘literal’ interpretations hardly gives confidence that it leads to much more in the way of uniformity.

12. Iain D. Campbell, “The Song of David’s Son: Interpreting the Song of Solomon in the Light of the Davidic Covenant,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 62:1 (Spring 2000) 17–32. Hugh Blair, “Preaching from the Song of Solomon,” *Reformed Theological Journal* 9 (November 1987) 47–58.

JAMES DURHAM—A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

The obvious question is—why examine Durham’s work as representative of the traditional Reformed view? What is particularly significant about him and his work on the Song?

In reference to James Durham himself, he was an important figure in mid 17<sup>th</sup> century British theology. His life (1622–1658) spanned some of the most tumultuous years for the Scottish Church—from the high point of the ratification of the Westminster Standards to the low point of the divisions in the Scottish Church over the protestor/resolutioner controversy.<sup>13</sup> Noted historical theologians examining this period have recognised Durham’s significance, with James Walker declaring that “no Scotchman of that age was more profoundly venerated,”<sup>14</sup> and John Macleod stating that “... among the mighties of his day ... [Durham] was among the mightiest of them all.”<sup>15</sup> Durham’s contemporaries also recognised his importance with the Westminster Divine Robert Baillie stating that Durham’s opinions were held to be “of exceeding great weight deservedly,” and that Durham was a man “of the greatest authority and parts among us.”<sup>16</sup> Durham’s contemporaries in England were of a similar opinion. John Flavel (1628–1691) regarded him as a “judicious expositor”<sup>17</sup> and John Owen (1616–1683) referred to the great “reputation, which the known piety and abilities of [Durham], have in the Church of God,” adding “and this he hath deservedly.”<sup>18</sup> In Owen’s opinion Durham was “one of good learning, sound judgement, and every way a workman that needeth not to be ashamed” (Owen, 19).

As far as Durham’s work on the Song goes, it has been rightly noted that his “exposition of the Song of Solomon, a book long influential in Scotland, gives insight into the allegorical method of Scriptural interpretation prevalent at the time.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed John MacLeod went so far as to say “Durham on *The Song of Solomon* has long been looked upon as the standard Scottish work on the subject. It is rich in its statements of experimental godliness...”<sup>20</sup> John Owen provided an introduction to Durham’s work and as well as stating his own convictions regarding the Song (namely that it was “sublime, spiritual, and mystical; and the manner of its handling universally allegorical”), was fulsome in his praise of Durham’s exposition (Owen, 19). He averred that “it will be hard for any to discover, either defect in judgement, or untruth in affection, or the omission or neglect of any rule, means, or advantages that might, or ought to be used in enquiry after the mind of God” (Owen, 22). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Durham’s work was

highly commended by C.H. Spurgeon who stated that “Durham is always good, and he is at his best upon the Canticles. He gives us the essence of the good matter. For practical use this work is perhaps more valuable than any other Key to the Song.”<sup>21</sup>

As well as being generally commended, Durham’s introduction to his commentary (his “key” to the Song) has been identified as a major step forward in the history of Scottish exegesis. Marc Clausen credits Durham’s introduction with being “the first time a Scottish commentator or preacher has included a full introduction in which various preliminary contextual issues are discussed. In fact, we may rightly think of the introduction as, in a sense, a kind of hermeneutical manual.”<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Clausen believes that it would be wrong to dismiss Durham on the grounds that his reading of the Song is “unsophisticated.” He argues that, given Durham’s self conscious deliberation over whether the text is literal or allegorical (this will be discussed below), it is a mistake to ignore what he has to say, noting, “while Durham’s reasons may not be compelling, neither can they be dismissed out of hand” (Clausen, 129).

13. For accounts of Durham’s life see George Christie, “James Durham as a Courtier and Preacher,” *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* iv (1930) 66–80, and Nathan D. Holsteen, “The Popularization of federal theology: conscience and covenant in the theology of David Dickson (1583–1663) and James Durham (1622–1658)” (Ph.D. diss., Aberdeen University, 1996). On the protestor/resolutioner controversy see Kyle D. Holfelder “Factionalism in the Kirk during the Cromwellian invasion and occupation of Scotland, 1650–60: the protestor-resolutioner controversy” (Ph.D. diss., Edinburgh University, 1999).

14. James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560–1750* (Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1982) 17.

15. John MacLeod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History Since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974) 94.

16. Robert Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie, A.M. Principal of the University of Glasgow M.DC.XXXVII.–M.DC.LXII*, ed. David Laing, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: The Bannatyne Club, 1841–1842) 3:222; 3:179–180.

17. John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* (1820; repr. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968) 4:19.

18. John Owen, To the Christian Reader, *The Song of Solomon*, by James Durham (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982) 19.

19. D.J.M Corbett, *The Moral Aspect of the Atonement from David Dickson to James Denny and H. R. Mackintosh* (Ph.D diss., University of Edinburgh, 1965) 74. As will be considered shortly Durham would dispute that his method of interpretation was allegorical, except in the sense that he was interpreting an already allegorical book of Scripture.

20. John MacLeod, *Some Favourite Books* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1988) 30.

21. Charles Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (London: Passmore and Alabaister, 1893) 112–113.

22. Marc Clausen, *A Study of Scottish Hermeneutical Method from John Knox to the Early Twentieth Century from Christian to Secular* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004) 125.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SONG  
PRIOR TO DURHAM

Of course, Durham did not develop his understanding of the Song in isolation from the past and the credit given to him for his work on the Song must, in part, be shared with the Reformed tradition in general. Durham himself inherited an exegetical tradition within which he worked, and it is worth examining this before proceeding to his views. Recognising that British and continental Reformed theology were related and not isolated developments, consideration will be given to both continental and British thinkers.

Of continental interpretations of the Song Theodore Beza's is one of the most well known. Beza understood the Song in strictly spiritual terms. For instance he states at the outset of his sermons on the Song that it is "to be taken and altogether to be understood in a spiritual sense."<sup>23</sup> It cannot be speaking simply of the marriage of Solomon to Pharaoh's daughter as that marriage is condemned in scripture (1 Kings 11). So under the "formes and phrases of speech" of a human marriage there is set forth "the most strait and spirituall bonde and alliaunce which is between Jesus Christ and his Church" (Beza, n.p.). For Beza there is nothing mysterious about using a marriage relationship to provide a picture of the relationship between Christ and the Church—indeed it is a common metaphor in the Prophets and also "the Apostle hath likewise used the same, namely, Rom. 7.2 & 2. Cor. 11. and Ephs. 5" (Beza, n.p.). Beza states that he understands the Song as "altogether allegoricall and enigmatical, that is to say, deliuereth to our understanding thinges heauenly and spirituall, by a similitude and

figure of things naturall and corporall" (Beza, 2). Beza acknowledges that there have been some who have read the Song "as being a writing altogether profane, and compiled by Solomon in the midst of his wanton and licentious dissolutions" (Beza, 2). Beza's response is forceful and he states this opinion is "no more to be harkened unto or regarded than those, who desperately and arrogantly address and oppose themselves against the Spirit of God" (Beza, 3). Besides this Beza refers as proof of the allegorical use of the marriage metaphor in Scripture to Ps. 45; Isa. 62:1,6; Jer. 3; Ezek. 16, 23; Hos. 1:2; Matt. 25; John 3:29; Rom 7:1; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph 5; and Rev. 17.

Another later continental work, the Dutch Annotations, takes a similar approach. The annotations in their introduction to the Song argue that it is "a dialogue between Christ, as the Bridegroom, and his Church, as his Spouse or Bride."<sup>24</sup>

Away from the continent in Durham's own more immediate milieu the same tradition of interpreting the Song is evident. In England the commentaries of Ainsworth, the English Annotations and Matthew Poole all follow the allegorical approach. It is evident that Ainsworth belongs to the same tradition as Beza from the very title page of his work (*Solomon's Song of Songs In English Metre*) where Ephesians 5 is referenced (as well as Psalm 45).<sup>25</sup> It is therefore no surprise that Ainsworth takes the Song to treat "of mans reconciliation unto God, and peace by Jesus Christ with joy in the Holy Ghost" (Ainsworth, *Comm in loco 1:1*). Indeed the Song is the most excellent song in Scripture, surpassing even the Psalms of David, "for this [the Song] celebrateth the mysteries of Christ and his Church, and the communion betweene them, more amply and excellently than any other" (Ainsworth, *Comm in loco 1:1*). Key to this interpretation, besides the expectation raised by the title *Song of Songs* that this will be about the greatest of possible themes, is the figure of Solomon. Solomon is regarded as a picture of Christ in the character of his Kingdom, his wisdom and his glory.<sup>26</sup> Additionally Solomon's name means 'peace' which should alert the reader to the likelihood of the presence of 'the Prince of peace' (Isa. 9:6). Again further, the biblical typology in Psalm 72 is also seen as evidence that there is warrant to see Solomon as none other than Christ. Although there are no specific comments in his introduction, it is evident that Ainsworth stands in the allegorical school of understanding the Song.

Another English commentary on the Song is that found in the *English [or Westminster] Annotations*.<sup>27</sup> For the author of the annotations on the Song of Solomon (attributed to a Mr. Smallwood<sup>28</sup>) it is "agreed

23. Theodore Beza, *Master Beza's Sermons Upon the Three First Chapters of the Canticle of Canticles*, trans. John Harmer (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1587) n.p.

24. *The Dutch Annotations on the Whole Bible*, trans. Theodore Haak (London: Henry Hills for John Rothwell, Joshua Kirton, and Richard Tomlins, 1657), Introduction to the High Song of Salomon.

25. Henry Ainsworth, *Solomon's Song of Songs In English Metre: With Annotations and References to other Scriptures, for the easier understanding of it* (n.p., 1623).

26. Ainsworth, *Comm in loco 1:1*. An interesting aside is that Ainsworth refers here to "the Chaldee paraphrase".

27. *Annotations upon all the Books of the Old and New Testament: This Third, above the First and Second, Edition so enlarged, As they make an entire Commentary on the Sacred Scripture: the like never before published in English. Wherein the Text is Explained, Doubts Resolved, Scriptures Paralleled, and Various Readings Observed*, by the Joint Labour of certain Learned Divines (London: Evan Tyler, 1657). Hereafter Annotations.

28. William Barker, *Puritan Profiles* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1999) 242.

on all hands, that the Book is an entire Allegory, full of profound mysteries.”<sup>29</sup> There have been times when some had adventured to see the Song as “an hot carnal pamphlet,” but this “blasphemy” has long since “perished with the fathers of it,” and the reasoning of the “luxuriant wits” who proposed it has been subdued.<sup>30</sup> Despite the universally acknowledged allegorical nature of the Song, it had to be confessed that many attempts at allegorical interpretation were unsuccessful and had produced exegesis that could be regarded as simply fanciful. The path to a true understanding of the allegory lay in allowing that “allegories are not to be strained too much” that “similitudes answer not in all lines” and in observing the rule that ministers are “to open doubtful and intricate Scriptures with modesty ... according to the Analogy of Faith.”<sup>31</sup> Additionally, like Ainsworth the annotations see the title of “Song of Songs” as pointing to the excellence of the matter in the Song and providing an *a priori* expectation that the song will speak of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

But what is the allegory here? Well, “under the figures of Solomon and his Love, is shadowed the true Prince of peace, and his rich affections to his Church and people.”<sup>33</sup> The author notes another possible allegorical interpretation, namely that the Song is a prophecy of the future course of the Church “since the first breath of that distressed Virgin, to the very last.”<sup>34</sup> Whilst not dismissing this *a priori*, it is rejected as a suitable for the exposition of the Song as it is likely to lead to the “quick sand” of historical identification and it is preferable to stay away from this in safer spiritual grounds. The author also dismissed the “grosser vanities of the Jesuites, and Roman Parasites” who attempt to see the Virgin Mary in the Song.<sup>35</sup>

Before moving on from the annotations it is important to note that they do not allegorise Prov. 5:19. Indeed they see this verse as “requiring abundance of affection from the husband to the wife.”<sup>36</sup> They note that the direction “let her breasts satisfy you at all times” implies they are to give the husband “abundance of content[ment].”<sup>37</sup> All this goes to show that there was no *a priori* reason (e.g. a faulty “Greek inspired” philosophy) driving 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed commentators to allegorise anything remotely sexual in Scripture. Their exegesis of the Song can stand or fall on its merits but can hardly be rejected due to an aversion to the sexual.

Dovetailing with the Annotations the Westminster Standards, via their proof texts, evidently presuppose a Christological understanding of the Song of Solomon. The Song is cited 3 times in the proof texts of the Westminster Confession: Song 1:4 is cited in reference

to effectual calling;<sup>38</sup> Song 5:2–4,6 is cited in reference to believers being deprived of the comfort and graces of their calling;<sup>39</sup> Song 5:2–3, 6 is cited again in reference to believers having their assurance shaken.<sup>40</sup> Obviously these references are nonsensical on anything other than an allegorical reading of the Song.

Another leading English commentator was Matthew Poole. In his introduction to the Song Poole admits that “the design of the book in general is to describe the passionate loves and happy marriage of two persons, and their mutual satisfaction therein.”<sup>41</sup> However, the book is not to be understood “carnally, concerning Solomon and Pharaoh’s daughter ... but spiritually, concerning God, or Christ, and his church and people” (Poole, 2:208). For Poole, therefore, the book is to be understood allegorically (Poole, 2:208). Poole advances several reasons for his allegorical reading of this book. First, many other passages in scripture are allegorical. Although he gives no examples it is easy enough to do so by referring to Christ’s parables. Second, Christ was known to Old Testament believers. This is made clear by the Psalms and many other passages. Third, the image of God as a bridegroom and the Church as a bride is common in Scripture (e.g. Is. 54:5; Hos. 2:16,19,20; Matt. 9:15, 22:2; John 3:29; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23; Rev. 19:7, 21:2, 22:17). Fourthly, there is the even greater evidence of Psalm 45 which is “a kind of abridgement of this book” (Poole, 208). Poole whilst warning against “excessive use of the marriage bed” sees no need to allegorise Prov. 5:19. The reasons he offers for his reading of the Song of Solomon, like that of the English Annotations, should be taken at face value and provides further

29. *Annotations*, Introduction to the Annotations on the Song of Solomon, n.p.

30. *Annotations*, Introduction to the Annotations on the Song of Solomon, n.p.

31. *Annotations*, Introduction to the Annotations on the Song of Solomon, n.p.

32. *Annotations*, Comment *in loco* Song 1:1.

33. *Annotations*, Introduction to the Annotations on the Song of Solomon, n.p.

34. *Annotations*, Introduction to the Annotations on the Song of Solomon, n.p.

35. *Annotations*, Introduction to the Annotations on the Song of Solomon, n.p. Despite this dismissal, it is interesting to note that the introduction closes with an approving reference to Bernard.

36. *Annotations*, Comment *in loco* Prov. 5:19.

37. *Annotations*, Comment *in loco* Prov. 5:19.

38. WCF 10:1 in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994) 54. [Hereafter Confession].

39. WCF 17:3 in *Confession*, 75.

40. WCF 18:4 in *Confession*, 78.

41. Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 3 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979) 2:208.

evidence that “Greek philosophy” was not to blame for the Reformed understanding of the Song (Poole, 2:223).

It should not be thought that this allegorical reading of the Song was the only option available to Durham. Another alternative reading of the book as a prophetic foretelling of the history of the Church has already been adduced. This prophetic understanding was propounded in some detail by Durham’s contemporary John Cotton, who viewed the Song as “historical prophesy.”<sup>42</sup> Whilst not alone in this view, Cotton’s was certainly the minority position.

#### DURHAM’S ‘CLAVIS CANTICI’ OR ‘A KEY TO THE SONG’

From the preceding survey it is clear that Durham inherited an existing tradition of interpreting the Song, which, while not entirely devoid of diversity, was universally allegorical and predominantly focused on the Song as an allegorical description of the love of Christ and his Church. As noted by Clausen, where Durham advances the tradition is his 38 page ‘key’ for opening the Song where he discusses in detail the hermeneutical principles which underpin his exegesis of the Song.

Durham begins his ‘key’ by admitting, with many before and after him, the difficulty inherent in understanding the Song. This difficulty lay for him, not in ascertaining whether the Song has a spiritual meaning or not, but in correctly discerning that spiritual meaning. This issue arose partly from the necessity of “acquaintance in experience with the things here spoken of” (Durham, *Song*, 23). This highlights a key

42. Jeffery Hammond, “The Bride in Redemptive Time: John Cotton and the Canticles Controversy,” *The New England Quarterly* 56:1 (Mar., 1983) 79.

43. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) 2:482. See also with particular reference to John Owen—Jonathan Moore, “John Owen and Knowing the Mind of God,” in *Knowing the Mind of God: Papers Read at the 2003 Westminster Conference* (The Westminster Conference, 2003) 67.

44. Durham believed that “It is recorded of the Hebrews, that whatever scripture was delivered in a poetical frame, they accounted themselves specially bound to take notice of that, and to get it by heart” (Durham, *Song*, 63).

45. WCF 1:9 in *Confession*, 24.

46. Cf. with the views of John Owen explained in Moore, “John Owen and Knowing the Mind of God,” 73.

47. For an example of the experiences to which Durham here refers, see M. Roberts, ‘Samuel Rutherford: the Comings and Goings of the Heavenly Bridegroom,’ in *The Trials of Puritanism: Papers Read at the 1993 Westminster Conference* (The Westminster Conference, 1993) 119–134.

point of Reformed interpretation of Scripture—it is only through the testimony of Christ’s Spirit that any recognise the true meaning of Scripture. The cardinal testimony and experience wrought by the Spirit is of course regeneration. This is expressed well by Richard Muller who states that for the Reformed orthodox it is “Christ Jesus, who regenerates our souls and leads us to the right understanding of God’s word.”<sup>43</sup> Despite this difficulty Durham offers five reasons why the Song cannot be neglected. First, it is Scripture and therefore cannot be laid aside just because it is difficult. Secondly, because this book speaks about Christ, who ought to be the subject of believer’s thoughts, it is profitable to study it. Thirdly, reading the Song captivates and speaks to the affections. Fourthly, the poetic nature of the Song should highlight its significance.<sup>44</sup> Fifthly, as the Song is spiritual in meaning a thorough reading of the book should not leave the reader unchanged (Durham, *Song*, 23–24).

Having summarised his reasons for undertaking the study of the Song, Durham then proceeded in more detail to outline the characteristics necessary in a would be expositor of the Song. The first listed is the knowledge of the whole of Scripture, but especially the Psalms, other scripture Songs, and the gospel. This highlights the fundamental exegetical principle of the Reformed, that “the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”<sup>45</sup> However useful other aspects of learning may be (and they are), the primary appeal is not to the literature of Israel’s neighbors, but to the law and the testimony. This is not to downplay the importance of historical, chronological, geographic knowledge, but to highlight their secondary, rather than primary importance.<sup>46</sup> Secondly, Durham posits that a practical experience of the range of emotions and experiences undergone throughout the Christian pilgrimage, as well as continual fellowship with other believers, is necessary to be a qualified interpreter of the Song.<sup>47</sup> Once Durham’s approach to the Song as a description of the various conditions of the believers’ relationship with Christ is understood, it becomes clear why he thought this condition was necessary. Thirdly, it was not enough simply to be in the state of grace to understand the Song, it was necessary to be walking closely with Christ. Finally, much prayer was necessary to understand the book (Durham, *Song*, 24–25). Again Muller’s comments highlight that Durham is at this point speaking for the Reformed tradition in general noting, “the student of Scripture must pray for wisdom ... prayer is necessary for understanding” (Muller, 2:482).

THE SONG AND THE CANNON

Having made these preliminary points, Durham proceeds to lay down some propositions regarding the Song. The first, and briefest, is that the Song is canonical Scripture (Durham, *Song*, 25). Durham adduces two reasons for this belief. First, the Jews accepted the Song as canonical “and that the same hath been universally received by Christians, may appear by the records of councils, and writings of the fathers, where the catalogue of the books of the Holy Scripture is set down” (Durham, *Song*, 25). Second, echoing Westminster Confession of Faith 1:5,<sup>48</sup> Durham believed that “matter, manner of expression, divine style ... divine power and efficacy” of the Song meant that it, in the words of the Confession, abundantly evidenced itself to be the Word of God. Durham also insists that the author of the Song is Solomon who was the “amanuensis” of the Spirit (Durham, *Song*, 24). This is not to deny any role to Solomon’s own personality, for according to Durham, it is likely that the Song was written after Solomon’s recovery from his backsliding, and his corresponding realisation of the emptiness of all things apart from Christ. This according to Durham may account for the warmth and spirituality of the Song (Durham, *Song*, 24). In speaking of Solomon both as an “amanuensis” and yet somehow still involved in the production of the Song, Durham was following Calvin whose teaching is well summarised by Muller. “Calvin assumed both that Scripture was ‘dictated’ and that it was reflective of individual style and characteristic patterns of perception belonging to its human authors” (Muller, 2:237). Nevertheless, the Spirit is the “chief author” and Solomon the “penman” (Durham, *Song*, 26).

Durham considers two potential objections to the canonicity of the Song. The first is that the Song is nowhere cited in the New Testament. Durham’s response is twofold. First, citation of a book by the New Testament authors is not a necessary condition for canonicity. Second, there are allusions, or “near resemblances,” to the Song in the New Testament. Examples here include Rev. 3:20 and Song 5:2, John 6:44 and Song 1:4, as well as more general allusions to metaphors used in the Song such as Matthew 20 referring to the Church as a vineyard and Matthew 23 referring to the church’s union with Christ as marriage.<sup>49</sup> The second objection Durham considers is that the name of God is not mentioned in the book. Again the response is twofold. First, mention of the name of God is not a criterion for canonicity—Durham references Esther. Second, the Song when understood spiritually does contain many titles of Christ—who is God (Durham, *Song*, 26–27). So far

was Durham from questioning the canonicity of the Song that he argued the Song was to be “preferred” to “all other scriptural songs” (Durham, *Song*, 63).

A LITERAL ALLEGORY?

With the preliminary concern over canonicity taken care of, Durham moves to what is the central, and today in Reformed circles the most controversial, assertion of his key to the song, namely: “This Song is not to be taken properly ... or literally, that is as the words do at first sound; but it is to be taken and understood spiritually, figuratively and allegorically...”<sup>50</sup> This is not that Durham denies the Song has a “literal” meaning, it is just that he denies the “literal” meaning of the Song is to be determined in the same manner as, for example, the literal meaning of the historical books of Scripture. The literal meaning here is not the immediate sense of the words, but the intention of the Spirit in inspiring the words.<sup>51</sup> Durham illustrates his use of the phrase “literal sense” by coining two terms—“immediate literal sense” and “mediate literal sense.” He explains these by reference to two examples. The first illustrates the immediate literal sense of Scripture—1 Kings 3:1, “Solomon ... married Pharaoh’s daughter.” Here the immediate meaning and the literal meaning coincide. This is simply a historical narrative. The second example illustrates the mediate but yet literal meaning of Scripture—Matt 22:2, “A certain king made a marriage to his son ...” etc. Here the literal meaning is not that an actual king made an actual marriage, but mediate, i.e. the text is an image to represent God’s calling the world to have fellowship with Christ.<sup>52</sup> This distinction is designed to evade the

48. Particularly “the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.” WCF 1:5 in *Confession*, 21–22.

49. In a section otherwise dismissive of a typological or allegorical approach to the Song, Tom Gledhill admits that these passages provide “some biblical justification for a moderately typological approach” (Gledhill, 215).

50. Durham, *Song*, 27. This is not to say Durham never comments on human marriage. For instance, he notes “when persons are married, it is most suitable that the wife should very pressingly long for, and express her desire after the husband” (Durham, *Song*, 74). These references are, however, rare.

51. Cf. the helpful discussion of this, in which Durham is considered, in Muller, 2:472–477.

52. Durham references Andre Rivet in defence of this distinction between the immediate and mediate literal sense.

force of the criticism, that Durham is engaged in the allegorical interpretation of scripture, by positioning his exegesis as interpretation of allegorical scripture. This distinction is explored in greater detail later.

Durham then considers whether the literal meaning of the Song is mediate or immediate. He advances several reasons why immediate literal reading is not appropriate (Durham, *Song*, 28–29). Firstly, Durham does not believe there is sufficient “edification” in setting out “human love” in such detail. Therefore, *a priori*, the Song must have a meaning other than the immediate literal reading.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, and perhaps somewhat weakly, Durham argues that the parties in the Song are not fitted to be understood literally of human love. Some of the metaphors used, are to him inappropriate, some are obviously not literal in any case—e.g. “paving a chariot with love.” Thirdly, Durham argues that the depth of love expressed in this song would be bordering on idolatrous if set forth as the pattern for Christian marriage. To, perhaps paraphrase Durham’s argument somewhat, if this is the ideal Christian marriage, where is the time spent in devotion together to the Lord? Fourthly, Durham argues that the Song is not a portrait of ideal human love as many things in the Song simply are not compatible with godly love—e.g. “as to propose him to others, to excite them to love him” (Durham, *Song*, 29).

#### ALLEGORY OR TYPE?

Having answered the question of whether the literal meaning of the Song is mediate or immediate Durham proceeds to discuss the nature of the mediate understanding of the Song, namely whether the Song is to be understood as typical or allegorical. He lists five differences between types and allegories (Durham, *Song*, 30–31). These differences overlap and can really be summarised under three differences. First, types have a basis in historical fact—e.g. Jonah’s three days in the belly of the fish and Christ’s time in the grave which allegories have no necessary basis in fact; e.g. the parables of Christ. Secondly, types only compare facts and see similarities, but allegories cover a broader range of positive

53. This is perhaps where there is some vulnerability against the charge of depreciating the physical at the expense of the spiritual. It is likely that Durham’s response would be that as it does not fit with the intention of Scripture to teach farming or science so it does not fit with the purpose of Scripture to teach in this level of detail regarding the physical side of marriage.

54. Having said this Durham does on occasion make reference to Solomon in the Song as a type of Christ—e.g. Durham, *Song*, 179.

didactic doctrine and practice. Thirdly, types are restricted in their range to being Old Testament persons or facts who prefigured a New Testament reality, while allegories have no such limitation. In summary “allegories are much more expansive in their meaning and application, than types ... and so are much more doctrinal ... and may more warrantably be applied and made use of ...” (Durham, *Song*, 31).

Having laid down this distinction Durham proceeds to argue that the Song is an allegory and not a type; that is, the Song “is allegoric, not respecting Solomon, or his marriage, but aiming to set out spiritual mysteries in figurative expressions ... without any respect to that story or fact of Solomon’s” (Durham, *Song*, 31). Durham’s argument that this is an allegory rather than a type is sixfold. A selection of some of his arguments are, first, the Song, as it is poetic, looks like an allegory. Second, why should this marriage be more of a type than any other marriage? Thirdly, what is this a type of? The mystical union between Christ and believers was as much a present reality for Old Testament saints as it is for New Testament ones. Given a type is when an Old Testament figure represents a New Testament reality, the type cannot be the love and union of Christ to believers—so what is it? Finally, Durham argues that “it is hard to coin types without scripture authority” (Durham, *Song*, 32). He posits that if typology were to be let wild, then, for instance, a type could be made of anything—e.g. Solomon’s wives from many nations could be made a picture of Christ’s saving from every tribe and tongue. This, for Durham, would simply be unsound typology. As then there is no clear Scripture authority for making one of Solomon’s many marriages a particular type of anything, the avenue of typology is closed, leaving allegory as the only remaining option.<sup>54</sup>

#### AN ALLEGORY OF WHAT?

Having defined the Song as allegory, Durham’s third proposition follows by defining what that allegory is, namely, “the mutual love and spiritual union, and communion that is betwixt Christ and his church, and their mutual carriage towards one another, in several conditions and dispensations” (Durham, *Song*, 32–33). Durham’s key argument for this reading of the allegory comes from a comparison with other scriptures. He explicitly refers to the traditional protestant maxim that scripture is the best interpreter of scripture: “Scripture must agree with scripture, and one more obscure place, must be expounded by others more clear” (Durham, *Song*, 33). Durham argues that the assignation of Psalm

45 to Christ in Hebrews provides clear warrant for taking the image of a marriage and seeing it as Christ and the Church. The language of the Psalm and the Song are similar; therefore the allegory in one (the Song) must match up with the New Testament understanding of the other (Ps. 45). Durham also sees keys to understanding the Song in the use of the image of the vineyard in Matt. 21 and the use of marriage in Matt. 22. Further, the many occasions in Scripture where marriage is used as a picture to represent spiritual truths (Jer. 3, Hos. 2:3, Ezek. 16; Matt. 22, Luke 14; 2 Cor 11.1; Rev 19:8) lead to the identification of the allegory in the Song of Solomon as the love between Christ and his Church (Durham, *Song*, 33). For Durham this glorious topic meant that the Song was to be “preferred not only to all human songs, but even to other scriptural songs.”<sup>55</sup>

Durham then considers the main allegorical alternative to his proposal that the Song speaks of Christ and the Church, namely that the Song is a prophecy of the future course of the Church in history. His main objection to the prophetic understanding of the Song is that it would leave the interpretation of the Song “wholly to uncertainty, or men’s pleasure, as their groundless conjectures, would lead them to apply it.”<sup>56</sup>

#### ‘THE KEY’ ON THE KEY FEATURES OF THE SONG

Having outlined his understanding of the correct interpretation of the Song, Durham proceeded to outline five key features of the book. First, the Song shows to us the various conditions of the church (both weakness and strength) and Christ’s care of the church in all these conditions (Durham, *Song*, 35–67). The conditions include the experiences of sinfulness, of persecution, of being in close fellowship with Christ, of being under faithful and also under faithless pastors (Durham, *Song*, 36). A summary of all these conditions and more form the basis for the Song, together with “the love and care of Christ to them ... in every condition.”<sup>57</sup> Durham pauses here to note the Song is unique among scriptural songs in that it is made up of a conversation between various parties. This he believes is necessary in this instance to make clear the variety and breadth of spiritual conditions covered in the Song (Durham, *Song*, 36–37).

Secondly, important in understanding the Song is the distinction between the visible and invisible church. The visible church<sup>58</sup> is held out in the Song by the images of the watchmen, a mother’s house, gardens of many believers together and the Daughters of Jerusalem. The invisible church, by contrast, is that which has “real” (and not only professed) “union with Christ” (Durham,

*Song*, 37). For Durham, many of the images and privileges in the Song only belong to members of the invisible church—such as true union with Christ. Durham does not believe he is here guilty of dividing the church into two different and mutually exclusive parts, but rather, he is simply looking at the whole church under two different considerations. He uses the image of a heap of corn and chaff to explain his position. If we look at the heap it is one heap, comprising corn and chaff. But the heap could also be considered only in its ultimate and useful form as corn. So the church may be considered as one, “having both renewed and unrenewed in it,” or, alternatively, as the renewed only “yet so as the renewed are a part of the whole, under one consideration, viz. as they are visible professors; and also, are the invisible church, being distinctly considered, as they have more than a visible profession” (Durham, *Song*, 37–38). This definition of the church as one, but yet as capable of consideration under the distinct purviews of visible and invisible, was, for Durham, vital in understanding, not only the Song, but also other significant passages of Scripture—for example the “Letters to the Seven Churches” in Revelation 3–4. Everywhere in Scripture it was important to bear in mind that things said to, and of, the Church could relate to it as either visible or invisible.

The third ingredient necessary for a sound understanding of the Song, for Durham, was a realisation that applying the Song to the condition of individual believers was difficult, that is, it was difficult to be clear whether the Song is speaking at any point of the church as visible or invisible, of true believers or only outward

55. Durham, *Song*, 26. It appears that Durham thought the Song appropriate for singing in the public worship of believers stating, “this Song, [is] intended to be made use of in the praises of God; and so composed, both for the matter and manner, as it might best attain to that end, and prove edifying and comfortable also to believers in their singing of it” (Durham, *Song*, 62). Thus while Durham believed that there is a restriction on the form of what may be sung in worship unlike prayer (see Durham, *Song*, 70), it appears that the restriction envisaged by Durham is to the songs of Scripture rather than to the 150 Psalms themselves. This may shed some light on the actions of the Scottish Church in 1647 in commissioning metrical versions of “other scriptural songs.” However, see the cautionary words of Matthew Winzer in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 4 (2008) 259–60.

56. Durham, *Song*, 34. The irony, of course, is that exactly the same is said of Durham’s approach to the Song today.

57. Durham, *Song*, 36. Durham at this point references Bernard’s famous work on the Song.

58. Defined as “visibly professing Christ and worshipping him in ordinances” (Durham, *Song*, 37). Elsewhere Durham explains that “the visible church is the common mother, who hath children born after the flesh, as well as the Spirit” (Durham, *Song*, 95).

professors etc. Durham's key appeal is again to scripture as the interpreter of scripture. First, in applying any passage due regard must be given to the context and drift of the Song at that point. Secondly, judgement must be applied as to whether it is most likely that what is being said applies to the invisible or visible church, etc. Thirdly, other scriptures must be considered which use the same images and time must be taken to understand how they are applied and to whom. Finally, Durham returns to the context in the Song by noting consideration of who is speaking, in what emotional condition, to whom and for what purpose it will be easier to understand the intention (Durham, *Song*, 39–40).

The fourth important element to grasp in understanding the Song is that it is most appropriate to think of it as applicable to individual believers. The whole church, Durham argues, does not generally go through the same experiences at the same time. Rather, in any church there will be believers who are weak in faith, believers who are strong in faith, believers who are growing in grace, and believers who are backsliding. Similarly the experiences of the bride in the Song will apply to different individual believers as the whole Church will not be "sick of love" etc. at any one point in time (Durham, *Song*, 40–41).

The fifth and final foundational principle necessary to correctly understand the Song is to grasp that what is held out in the Song under an allegory, namely Christ's love and care for the Church, is held out clearly in other Scriptures. Thus there is nothing "new, strange or uncouth" in the song, but plain teaching found elsewhere in scripture. Indeed it is only "the folly and vanity of men's minds" that would draw any teaching from the Song not found elsewhere in Scripture. To be sure, the Song presents these same truths "in bright and lovely colours," but they are the same truths of Christ's love to his people and his people's experiences in this life that are found in other Scriptures.<sup>59</sup> This hermeneutical conservatism pervades Durham's approach to the Song.

59. Durham, *Song*, 41. Durham also observes that "if we look to the degree of warm affections that breath forth here, we may conceive that there is something odd and singular in this Song: but, as to the kind of doctrine here delivered, there is nothing new" (Durham, *Song*, 51.)

60. Durham, *Song*, 43. This approach would of course be contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith which declares the sense of scripture to be one and not manifold. WCF 1:9 in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 24.

61. Durham, *Song*, 44. This is entirely in keeping with the Reformed ideal of scripture. To reiterate a point made earlier, Scripture is given for a purpose and that is to reveal God's redemptive dealings to man. So, Durham would argue if he was speaking frankly, just as it is absurd to expect Christ to teach us about farming, it is also absurd to expect the Song to be teaching sexual technique. Both are beyond

#### EXPOSITION OF ALLEGORY OR ALLEGORIC EXPOSITION?

Having laid down these necessary principles for understanding the Song, Durham, draws some final conclusions. Some of these conclusions recapitulate points Durham has previously made in his introduction. Nevertheless, Durham does introduce significant new points in his conclusions which deserve consideration. One of these points relates to the distinction Durham makes between "an allegoric exposition of scripture, and an exposition of allegoric scripture" (Durham, *Song*, 43). An allegorical interpretation of scripture was for Durham, the practice of many of the church fathers and the schoolmen. Durham defines this approach to Scripture as "when they allegorize plain scriptures and histories, seeking to draw out some secret meaning, other than appeareth in the words; and so will fasten many senses upon one scripture."<sup>60</sup> For Durham that approach is "justly reprovably" and is guilty of making plain passages of Scripture largely unintelligible. The example he gives of an allegorical interpretation of Scripture relates to the incident of David and Goliath. Here an allegorical interpretation would be to ignore the actual events and expound the passage as the combat between "the flesh or the Devil" and "the Spirit, or Christ" (Durham, *Song*, 43). While Durham observes that this kind of interpretation may "have some pleasantness," the trouble is it has no "solidity" and interpretation becomes entirely at the whim of the interpreter (Durham, *Song*, 43–44). Durham singles out Origen as a representative of this school of thought. By way of contrast an exposition of allegorical scripture (such as Durham is proposing for the Song of Solomon) does not impose a false sense on the historical portions of Scripture. Rather, it takes a Scripture where the true meaning is hidden under images (e.g. the parables) and makes them clear.

Durham then proceeds to outline five ways to determine that a scripture is allegorical. First, if taking a scripture literally leads to "absurdity" then it is clear that the Scripture must be understood allegorically. Durham cites as examples the eating of Christ's flesh, the command to pluck out our eyes and the anthropomorphisms where God is said to have hands, etc. (Durham, *Song*, 44). Second, if taking a scripture literally does not tend to spiritual edification, then it is likely the scripture is allegorical. Durham's example here is the parable of the sower and the seed, where Durham believes *a priori* it is clear Christ "could not be [aiming] to discourse husbandry [farming] with them."<sup>61</sup> Thirdly, if a literal interpretation would make Scripture false, then it is clear

to Durham that portion of Scripture is allegorical. For instance, Christ’s claim that he would destroy the temple and raise it in three days is obviously not speaking of a literal temple. It is of course important to note the clearly implied assertion of the infallibility and inerrancy of scripture—any interpretation which makes a scripture false is not admissible. Fourthly, it is clear that a scripture is allegorical, if a literal interpretation would make one scripture contradict another. Again the inerrancy of Scripture is affirmed—the bible cannot contain contradictions, there is no room in Durham’s doctrine of scripture for “messiness.” Fifthly, it is sometimes clear from the context of a speaker’s words that he is speaking allegorically—e.g. Christ’s parables (Durham, *Song*, 45).

Durham is also aware of the inherent danger of allegories, and so offers five rules to prevent people “coin[ing] what exposition they please of such scriptures” (Durham, *Song*, 46). First, some are just plain and require little interpretation, such as the command to take up the cross and follow Christ. Secondly, the general and common use of an expression can help to determine the meaning in an allegory. So when God is said to have eyes, it points to his knowledge of events. Thirdly, in interpreting allegorical scripture it is important to know how similar phrases are used in the rest of Scripture and to what purpose. Fourth, immediate context is vital—the general teaching of scripture and the analogy of faith is not enough to understand a particular passage. Finally, interpreting an allegory is easy when Scripture itself provides that interpretation, e.g. the parable of the sower (Durham, *Song*, 46–48).

Durham returns again at this point to his defence of identifying the Song as an allegory of “Christ’s love to his church and people, and their [spiritual] exercises” (Durham, *Song*, 48). His main defence of this interpretation is again the similar use of the marriage metaphor in other Scriptures. He refers again to Isa. 5:2, Jer. 3, Matt. 22 and Rev. 19:7, as well as to the 45<sup>th</sup> Psalm. In reference to this Psalm Durham argues “that Psalm and this Song are to one scope, and of one style or strain ... [both are] a Song of love for the King, and a spiritual marriage is the subject thereof” (Durham, *Song*, 49). So then when Hebrews 1:8–9 fixes the meaning of Psalm 45 to Christ and his Church, it also implies that this is the true reference of the Song of Solomon as well.

#### OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

Having laid down his conclusions, he then considers some final objections to his views. First he posits the

objection that if the Song simply contains the same doctrines as other scriptures, then the allegory is pointless and the truths should simply be expressed in plain language (Durham, *Song*, 52). He responds by arguing for the usefulness of allegories in several ways. First, he believed that allegories were useful teaching tools which can instruct the mind in ways that plain teaching cannot. Durham also believed that allegories had a power to affect the emotions in a way that plain truth sometimes does not. He gave as an example the case of Nathan in convicting David of his sin with Bathsheba. He used a parable to arouse David’s passions before bringing the plain truth before him. So it is with gospel truths on occasions as “Christ’s love becomes thus more comfortable and our relation to him the more kindly-like, when it is illustrated by marriage, and the kindly expressions of a husband and wife” (Durham, *Song*, 53). Durham also argues that allegories are often more memorable than plain statements and so help us to retain truth in our minds. In scripture’s use of allegories can be seen “both the wisdom and care of God, who taketh divers ways to commend his truth unto men” (Durham, *Song*, 53).

The second objection Durham raises is that some might argue that reading the Song as an allegory of Christ’s love to his church is to “make this Song look more like the gospel of the New Testament, than a song of the old.” Durham’s answer to this objection is forthright and depends heavily on the underlying unity of the covenant of grace. He states that Old Testament believers had “the same gospel” as New Testament believers and that “their faith and communion with God stood not in outward ceremonies, which were typical; but in the exercise of inward graces, faith, love, &c. which are the same now as then.” He goes on to argue that Christ was the “same” to believers in the Old Testament and in the New. They had “the same [S]pirit, covenant, &c. and so the same cases and experiences ... [as] are also applicable to us now.” The fact that Christ had not yet come in the flesh did not mean that Old Testament believers had “another gospel, covenant, faith, yea, nor church; we being grafted in that same stock which they once grew upon, being by faith heirs of the same promises, which some time they possessed” (Durham, *Song*, 55).

The third, and related, objection Durham considered was that Solomon may not have intended, or understood, the Song to be speaking of the gospel and, therefore, neither should New Testament readers (Durham, *Song*, 55). Durham answers firstly by arguing that

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the purview of scripture and belong to the fulfilment of the creation mandate which is not the special sphere of the church.

it is not so much the intention of Solomon that matters but the intention of the Spirit. Even if Solomon, or Isaiah for another example, did not fully understand the gospel truths they were revealing, that is no bar, for Durham, to later believers looking back with the fullness of light from a completed revelation to see the gospel clearly in the Old Testament. However, be that as it may, Durham's main argument is that "there is no ground to think, but Solomon knew much of the mind of the Spirit in the Song, yea, more than any learned man now a-days."<sup>62</sup> He based this conclusion on several grounds. First, Solomon was a true believer who wrote elsewhere of Christ (e.g. Prov. 8).<sup>63</sup> Second, Old Testament believers knew first hand the experiences of Christ's love and were therefore equipped to write and understand such a book as this. Thirdly, the phrases of this book are so well suited to illustrate Christ and the Church that it would be almost inconceivable to think Solomon did not understand what he was doing.<sup>64</sup>

The fourth objection considered was that making the Song speak about the love of Christ and his people "would seem to say, that no doctrines may be drawn from it, for the edification of those who are unrenewed; and what use can it be of to them, who yet are the greater part of the Church" (Durham, *Song*, 57). This objection may seem strange to some today, but for a mid 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed preacher this was a real concern. For Durham there were two great duties of a minister: "There are two great works that the ministers of the gospel have to do: One is to engage people to Christ, and to persuade them to receive Him and close with Him; the other is to induce them to walk worthy of Him."<sup>65</sup> If the Song spoke only

to the later end then Durham would have failed to fulfil the full duty of his office. It was therefore important to him that his understanding of the Song enabled him to address unbelievers as follows: "This is our commission to you today. We tell you that the King has made ready for the feast; yea, all things are ready. Come, then, and let there be no more debate about the matter ... Only deliver up yourself to Him, and, in the Lord's name, I tell you that you shall be dearly welcome" (Durham, *Unsearchable Riches*, 78–79). In response, then, to the objection Durham states that the Song speaks of the church not only as invisible, but also as visible, and therefore contains doctrine suitable for the unrenewed. In addition inferences can be drawn from truths applicable to believers that are relevant for unbelievers—e.g. the love of Christ to his people can be used to draw those who are unbelievers to see the beauty of Christ.<sup>66</sup>

Durham concludes his introduction by outlining the main parties in the Song and who they represent, and with some final rules for understanding the Song. The main parties are identified as follows: the bridegroom is Christ; the bride is the church; the bridegroom's friends are ministers (as are the watchmen); the virgins, children, daughters of Jerusalem are members of the visible church;<sup>67</sup> the mother is the universal visible church containing believers and unbelievers. His final rules contain one important addition to what has been previously discussed, namely, Durham's warning against pressing the allegories in too much detail and trying to turn every detail into something significant. He advises against "stick[ing] too much in following of every thing, which these allegories seem to bear" and "insisting too far upon the similitudes."<sup>68</sup> While Durham may not be entirely consistent in applying this rule it does prevent his commentary from having the luxuriant (to use Durham's description of Origen) exegesis found in some commentaries on the Song. An example of this can be seen in his handling of Song 1:10 "Thy cheeks are comely with rows of jewels, thy neck with chains of gold." Here Durham states that "what is meant by neck, or cheeks, or chains, or rows of jewels, we think not necessary to be particularly enquired into" (Durham, *Song*, 109).

In all this, whatever may be said of Durham's approach to the Song, it cannot be claimed that it lacked thought.

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE SONG

Durham did not give an outline of the structure of the Song. However from his commentary on the individual verses of the Song it is possible to piece together his outline of the Song as follows:

62. Durham, *Song*, 56. As an aside in this section of his introduction Durham references the commentaries on Ephesians 5 by Zanchius and Bodius as testimony to his understanding of the Song. He also refers again to Athanasius positively and to Origen who "in plain scriptures is too luxuriant."

63. For Durham's detailed arguments that Solomon was a true believer see Durham, *Song*, 64–66. Reference is made by Durham to the opinions of Bellarmine, Tannovius and Augustine.

64. This is of course an indirect refutation of the allegations that Reformed theology held to a "bare dictation theory" of Scripture. If Solomon had no part at all in the images chosen why should their suitability be an indication of the degree of his understanding?

65. Durham, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* (repr.; Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002) 80. [Hereafter *Unsearchable Riches*].

66. For one example of Durham's application of the Song to unbelievers see *Song*, 144.

67. For a detailed discussion of the identification of these "daughters of Jerusalem," see Durham, *Song*, 91–92.

68. Durham, *Song*, 61. Or again, "every similitude is not to be narrowly searched into" (Durham, *Song*, 132–133). See also Durham, *Song*, 295.

OUTLINE OF THE SONG OF SOLOMON							
Section	Speaker	Subsection	Detail	Section	Speaker	Subsection	Detail
1:1	Introduction				Bride	5:7	Recounts treatment at hands of the watchmen
1:2–7	Bride	1:2–4	Addresses Christ			5:8	Addresses Daughters of Jerusalem
		1:5–6	Addresses the Daughters of Jerusalem				
		1:7	Addresses Christ	5:9	Daughters of Jerusalem	5:9	Daughters of Jerusalem question the Bride
1:8–11	Christ	1:8–11	Addresses the Bride				
1:12–14	Bride	1:12–14	Addresses Christ expressing her love	5:10–16	Bride	5:10–16	Commends Christ to the Daughters of Jerusalem
1:15	Christ	1:15	Commends the Bride				
1:16–17	Bride	1:16–17	Addresses Christ praising him	6:1	Daughters of Jerusalem	6:1	Desire to seek Christ with the Bride
2:1–2	Christ	2:1–2	Addresses the Bride	6:2–3	Bride	6:2–3	Answers the Daughters of Jerusalem
2:3–7	Bride	2:3–7	Speaks of Christ to the Daughters of Jerusalem	6:4–13	Christ	6:4–10	Christ commends the Bride
2:8–17	Bride	2:8–9	Christ at a distance			6:11–13	Invites the Bride’s return
		2:10–15	Bride recounts Christ’s past words to her	7:1–9	Christ	7:1–9	Continues commendation of the Bride
		2:16–17	Bride comforted in Christ’s love	7:10–13	Bride	7:10	Rejoices in her union with Christ
3:1–5	Bride	3:1–2	Bride describes her condition without Christ			7:11–13	Expresses desire for communion with Christ
		3:3	Bride addresses the Watchmen	8:1–4	Bride	8:1–3	Desire for communion with Christ continued
		3:4	Bride finds Christ			8:4	Addresses Daughters of Jerusalem
		3:5	Addresses Daughters of Jerusalem	8:5a	Daughters of Jerusalem	8:5a	Questions the Bride
3:6	Daughters of Jerusalem	3:6	They commend the Bride	8:5b–8	Bride	8:5b–7	Addresses Christ expressing undying love
3:7–11	Bride	3:7–11	Commends Christ to the Daughters of Jerusalem			8:8	Desires others would know Christ’s love
4:1–15	Christ	4:1–7	Commends the Bride	8:9	Christ	8:9	Accepts Bride’s prayer
		4:8	Invitation to the Bride	8:10–12	Bride	8:10	Confirms Christ’s answer to prayer in her own case
		4:9–10	Expression of love to the Bride			8:11–12	Gives thanks that Christ has built his Church
		4:11–15	Further commends the Bride				
4:16	Bride	4:16	Addresses her desire to Christ	8:13	Christ	8:13	Desires to hear the Bride
5:1	Christ	5:1	Addresses the Bride				
5:2–8	Bride	5:2–6	Recounts her behaviour to Christ, loss of his presence	8:14	Bride	8:14	Desires Christ’s permanent presence

KEY ASPECTS OF DURHAM’S TEACHING ON THE SONG

Having looked at Durham’s understanding of the Song and his understanding of its structure, it now remains to

highlight some of the key themes in his exposition. The key themes to be examined are his emphasis on the experiential aspects of Christian experience, his emphasis on the role of the Church in piety and his Christology as revealed in the Song.

## EXPERIENTIAL

Summing up the teaching of Samuel Rutherford on the Christian life, Maurice Roberts outlined the following key features: “the tender relationship between Christ and his Church as that of Bridegroom and Bride, the second coming of Christ as the marriage day to which both Christ and we look forward, the vicissitudes which must be experienced on earth by believers till the end of the world, the assurance of Christ’s love for us now as the love of a heavenly Husband, shortly to embrace us in his arms, and the believer’s yearning desire that time would make speed and hasten forward the longed-for Day” (Roberts, 120). A similarly rich and deeply experiential strain runs through Durham’s commentary—indeed Robert’s words are as true of Durham as they are of Rutherford.<sup>69</sup> Durham focuses, not so much on the objective truth of union with Christ, but on the subjective experience of communion with him, that is, the believer’s conscious enjoyment of all the privileges they have as a result of being “in Christ.”<sup>70</sup> It was his firm belief that “the great scope and desire of believers, if they had their choice, is to have sensible [i.e. felt] communion with Christ” (Durham, *Song*, 76). This desire for

69. “The term *experimental* comes from the Latin *experimentum*, meaning trial. It is derived from the verb *experior*, meaning to try, prove, or put to the test. That same verb can also mean to find or know by experience, thus leading to the word *experiential*, meaning knowledge gained by experience. John Calvin used experiential and experimental interchangeably, since both words in biblical preaching indicate the need for measuring experienced knowledge against the touchstone of scripture” (Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004] 425). Durham himself uses the term experimental—Durham, *Song*, 318.

70. This is not to deny the importance of the “mystical union” for Durham, just simply to highlight the balance seen in *this* work. The union between Christ and the believer is “always the same” but the communion varies and this experiential aspect is where the work on the Song focuses (Durham, *Song*, 135). For Durham on union with Christ see *Song*, 153.

71. Durham, *Song*, 82. Related to this desire is Durham’s teaching that believers may pray to the Spirit “considering the Spirit essentially as the same God with the Father and the Son.” Additionally “to pray to one person of the Godhead, is to pray to all three, who in our worship are not to be divided” (Durham, *Song*, 241.)

72. Durham, *Song*, 83. See also Durham, *Song*, 240–242.

73. Durham, *Song*, 284. On a pastoral note Durham argues that this is a far better use of time than spending time talking of “the faults of ministers, or miscarriages of others” (Durham, *Song*, 285).

74. E.g. Durham, *Song*, 159.

75. E.g. Durham, *Song*, 318.

76. Not that this is always the case. It is possible for Christ, in his sovereignty, to withdraw from communion with a believer “without any respect to any particular provocation, as having a sinful influence thereon.” Durham, *Song*, 133.

this communion comes from an appreciation, wrought by the Spirit, of who Christ is, of his beauty and desirability. Advice on how to maintain and, if necessary, reinvigorate this communion with Christ is a leading feature of the commentary. Key to communion with Christ is the work of the Spirit. Even as the Bride desires communion with Christ “so she desires his Spirit, that he may by his powerful operations draw her near to him [Christ].”<sup>71</sup> Close communion with Christ is impossible apart from the operations of the Spirit, “none of which can be got at without the Spirit’s drawing.”<sup>72</sup> This lack of confidence in self and a dependency on the Spirit, was of course a key feature of Reformed spirituality. Indeed to be conscious of an “inability” to maintain union with Christ, will drive the believer to depend more on the Spirit, thereby enriching communion with Christ (Durham, *Song*, 242). It is only by faith resting on Christ that the believer “is sustained, and carried through the duties of a holy walk, and the difficulties in her way, till she come through the wilderness unto the land of rest” (Durham, *Song*, 413).

Fundamental to possessing the ongoing work of the Spirit is a life of prayer. Durham notes that “Prayer is a necessary and excellent means for stirring up one in a secure frame and for attaining the Spirit to revive and quicken the work of his grace” (Durham, *Song*, 242). Believers should not just pray for themselves, they should also seek the fellowship of God’s people and seek that they would also pray for them. This mutual prayer one for another “is a duty of . . . fellowship.”<sup>73</sup>

Communion with Christ was not thought of as all or nothing; rather, there were several degrees of closeness or communion with Christ, some more precious than others (Durham, *Song*, 124). It can range from experiences of desertion and distance<sup>74</sup> to great and overwhelming joy with which nothing is comparable.<sup>75</sup> Desolation can be caused by sin, which provokes Christ and drives him away (Durham, *Song*, 174)<sup>76</sup> Indeed it is possible for the believer to fall into a state of spiritual slumber where the calls of Christ are met with “indisposition” and “laziness” (Durham, *Song*, 249). This is part of the believers’ ongoing battle against sin. There is the “flesh” and there is the “spirit” and these contrary elements are both found in the believer “lusting” against one another (Gal 5:17). When the flesh is yielded to, though a true believer is never without some life, a state of slumber can overcome the believer’s spiritual life so as to be devoid of any sense of Christ’s presence. This is contrary to the will of Christ who “desires a place in their hearts” (Durham, *Song*, 256). When in this condition nothing but the power of Christ’s Spirit can waken

the heart from slumber and incline the believer to seek the Lord afresh (Durham, *Song*, 261–262). Of, course Christ could have kept the believer from falling into this state of sin but to show his sovereignty and to show believers what they are when they are without him, he does not (Durham, *Song*, 263). The believers’ return is seen in repentance for sin, and then in an active seeking for Christ and his fellowship. Often Christ will make the believer seek hard for him following backsliding before revealing himself. This is not out of hardness on the part of Christ, but is to teach the believer the seriousness of sin and to encourage the believer to maintain fellowship when it is restored (Durham, *Song*, 273). This process of desiring the presence of Christ but not attaining it “will be a very sad exercise to the believer, and affect his heart very much.”<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless by perseverance in the exercise of faith following use of private diligence, public ordinances and fellowship with the saints, fellowship with the beloved will be restored (Durham, *Song*, 276).

If the experience of having to seek a lost Christ could be a difficult one this paled in comparison with the great joy of communion with Christ. To experience the blessings of near communion with Christ is for Durham “a heartsome life” (Durham, *Song*, 87). The joy of communion with Christ is not the same as joy in the good things of this world—it is “the joy of the Lord” and therefore is not merely “carnal delight.”<sup>78</sup> Believers are entitled to this joy because “Our Lord Jesus allows his people to be fully confident of his love, and of obtaining welcome from him ...” (Durham, *Song*, 359). Durham, while not making assurance of the essence of faith, was fully supportive of the teaching of the Westminster Confession that “such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love Him in sincerity, endeavouring to walk in all good conscience before Him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.”<sup>79</sup>

Another key feature of the Christian’s experience, and a fruit of communion with Christ, will be a desire to see others saved. For Durham “Those who love Christ and others truly, will endeavour nothing more, than to have Christ made known unto them....” Indeed Durham goes so far as to say that “this may be a mark of love to Christ, an earnest desire to have him esteemed of and loved by others.”<sup>80</sup> The great means used by God to bring people to know Christ is the public preaching of the gospel by ministers (Durham, *Song*, 429).

Whatever the communion attained with Christ in this world, the believer always longs for a better day.

This desired day is the return of Christ—a day which “goes as far beyond what believers possess now, as day exceeds the night” (Durham, *Song*, 155). All in this world can be compared to a shadow, but on that day Christ shall be seen in full light; sin shall be no more, and all mediate communion with Christ will be replaced with immediate sight. And this immediate communion will not be subject to ebb and flow, will not be blighted by sin, but will continue for all eternity. The hope of this day can refresh and encourage believers in the midst of the difficulties of this life (Durham, *Song*, 156). Therefore “this glorious coming of the Lord Jesus is much in the thoughts of his people, and useth to be meditated on by them.”<sup>81</sup> Indeed the Song closes with a prayer for the second coming of Christ, and Durham’s exposition ends with the prayer “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Durham, *Song*, 460).

#### CHURCHLY

A key feature of Reformed spirituality for Durham is its churchly nature. In the quest for closer communion with Christ believers must not expect to find “any new way to heaven ... nor any new means, ordinances, or officers ... nor yet must ye expect immediate revelations; but walk in the light that shines to you, by the preaching of my word by my ministers” (Durham, *Song*, 104). It is only “in his own ordinances” that most sweet and comfortable communion can be found.<sup>82</sup> Indeed there is “no living with Christ, nor fellowship with him” apart from “ordinances, word, sacraments, promises of the covenant &c.” (Durham, *Song*, 123). Further there is, for Durham, no believer who may safely neglect the preaching of the gospel, or the “public ordinances,” even the strongest would soon find themselves as lost as sheep without a shepherd if they took that course of action (Durham, *Song*, 408–409). It is for Durham a good sign if the public ordinances are “frequented and esteemed” (Durham, *Song*, 452). The ministry and the preaching of the word is therefore a great means to keep

77. Durham, *Song*, 275. Indeed “it is much more difficult to win to enjoy Christ, than it is to lose him” (Durham, *Song*, 278).

78. Durham, *Song*, 87. Not of course that this joy is an end in itself but as it glorifies Christ in honouring his salvation (Durham, *Song*, 243).

79. WCF 18:1 in *Confession*, 75–76.

80. Durham, *Song*, 325. See also Durham, *Song*, 427.

81. Durham, *Song*, 458. This is their duty—it is the duty of a believer to long and pray for Christ’s second coming” (Durham, *Song*, 459).

82. Durham, *Song*, 113–114. Not that the ordinances are to be trusted in as mere forms devoid of what they signify and to which they point—Durham, *Song*, 168.

“keep souls from error,” and is of primary importance in the Christian life.<sup>83</sup> Given the seriousness of this office none ought to enter it but those who have a clear commission from Christ (Durham, *Song*, 444).

As well as listening to the voice of the Church today through the gospel ordinances, Durham also advises believers to listen to the church in ages past and learn from that as well. In particular, Durham highlights two areas where the advice of the past should be sought. The first is in relation to new doctrinal ideas. Durham argues that “it is commendable, and often safe in times when new opinions and doctrines bear sway, to follow their way, who we are sure went to heaven before us” (Durham, *Song*, 104). The second is not so much doctrinal as practical. In considering the question “how then should we live” Durham urges believers to consider how preceding generations of Christians lived and not simply to be conformed to the standards of their present age (Durham, *Song*, 104). The advice to consider the past teaching and practice of the church is still subordinate to “the first pattern, Christ, 1 Cor. xi. 1” (Durham, *Song*, 104).

Durham is nonetheless realistic about the visible church. He recognises that “often in outward things, the profane members of the church have the pre-eminence; and the most godly, as to these things, are in the meanest and basest condition” (Durham, *Song*, 97). For the profane members, and particularly for false teachers, the ordinary course is the exercise of church discipline. False teachers are, for Durham, the greatest calamity that can overtake the church. He argues that “there is no hurt, nor hazard, that the church of Christ meets with ... more grievous and dangerous”

83. Durham, *Song*, 105. Ministers are “the great means Christ hath appointed for preventing the hurt, and promoting the good and edification of the church” (Durham, *Song*, 281). See also Durham, *Song*, 443. Accordingly they are to be respected and submitted to by believers (Durham, *Song*, 450).

84. The whole area of how to handle error and the responsibility of ministers with regard to church discipline is handled in great detail by Durham in his classic work *A Treatise Concerning Scandal* entitled ‘Concerning Doctrinal Scandals’—James Durham, *A Treatise Concerning Scandal* (1680; repr., Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1990) 127–222.

85. Durham, *Song*, 171. See also Durham, *Song*, 348–349. This designation was a common place in Reformed theology—see e.g. John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.4. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 Vols. The Library of Christian Classics Vol XX. & XXI, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, n.d.) 2:1016. This visible church is “beautiful in her ordinances, external profession and order” (Durham, *Song*, 346).

86. Durham, *Song*, 225. Of course “The love of Christ is manifested in nothing more for his people than in his sufferings for them” (Durham, *Song*, 256).

than propagators of error (Durham, *Song*, 149). Faithful ministers are charged with the exercise of this discipline, and for Durham, it is no small part of their calling. Indeed the very image of “watchmen” (Song 3:3, cf. Ezek. 33:7) implies that ministers are those who are to guard the church against false teaching. For Durham this is no easy task, but rather is “necessary, burdensome, and of great concernment to the safety of the church” (Durham, *Song*, 163). However, it is not always performed successfully as the watchmen in Song 5:7, whether “by malice, or want of affection, or through unskillfulness and want of experience ... did make the righteous sad” (Durham, *Song*, 280–281).<sup>84</sup>

Durham recognises the traditional designation of the church as “mother”—applying this to the visible church.<sup>85</sup> It is in the visible Church that believers are born again in newness of life, and it is there they are nourished. No matter what growth in grace believers experience, they are never to think they outgrow the church but are always to “honour their mother.” So “those who desire Christ should not run out of the church to seek him, or expect any way of finding him, which others have not found out before them ... but should seek after him in the ordinary means, in his church” (Durham, *Song*, 333).

#### CHRISTOLOGICAL

It would be impossible to summarise all that Durham has to say about Christ in his work on the Song. Instead all that can be done is highlight certain leading features of his teaching. The first striking feature is the depth of love that Christ has for his people. Expounding the phrase “ravished with love” (Song 4:9) Durham says this is an image borrowed from men to show in a picture the “unspeakable” and “inexpressible” love of Christ for his people. It shows Christ’s love is endued with “the passionateness of love, when it seizes deeply on a man, it leaves him not master of his own heart, but the object loved hath it, and (as it were) possesseth it, and commands it more than the man himself” (Durham, *Song*, 225). This staggering image is designed to teach that “Love in Christ to a believer, it is at a height ... it is love of the highest degree: there is no greater intensiveness thereof imaginable.”<sup>86</sup> Expressions of, and meditations in this love abound in Durham’s commentary as he sought to show the loveliness of Christ to his readers.

Another aspect of the character of Christ frequently highlighted is his tenderness in dealings with his people. For Durham “Christ is tender of fainting believers, and

of their consolation.... He is a sweet and gentle constructor of them and of their service; and is not rigid even when they have misconstructions of him.” This is seen in a number of different ways, but particularly how easily and quickly Christ answers his peoples desires. A phrase seen several times in Durham’s work is that Christ is “easily entreated” of his people.<sup>87</sup> That is he swiftly answers believers prayers and desires for communion—“Christ is easily invited and prevailed with to come to his people ...” (Durham, *Song*, 244). Durham sees this as one of the most common features of the Song: “It is observable that there is not one thing oftener mentioned in this Song than the wonderful expressions of Christ’s yielding himself to be prevailed over by them ... as if he gloried in this, that he is overcome by them, which is indeed the glory of his grace” (Durham, *Song*, 376). This tenderness is also seen in Christ’s faithful and sympathetic friendship with believers (Durham, *Song*, 322) and in his being “the sweetest passer-by of transgressions that can be” (Durham, *Song*, 341).

The Christ presented by Durham is not only tender and kindly but also kingly. In his Kingly glory Christ is seen as “God co-essential with the Father” (Durham, *Song*, 191). He is also seen as invested with “power, authority and glory” in his mediatorial office where he has a rod of iron to rule over his enemies. (Durham, *Song*, 191–192). Durham uses the image of Solomon to flesh out the characteristics of Christ’s kingdom, listing them as numerous subjects, power, glory, wisdom and peacefulness (Durham, *Song*, 179–180).

Another important facet of Durham’s Christology is his understanding of Christ as a covenanting party in the covenant of redemption. This covenant is “the old transaction, concerning the salvation of the elect betwixt the Father and the Son.”<sup>88</sup> In the covenant of redemption the Father promises to the Mediator a redeemed elect people on condition of his suffering on their behalf (Durham, *Christ Crucified*, 255). It is in this covenant of redemption “wherein most eminently the glory of his grace and love to sinners doth appear” (Durham, *Song*, 186). The covenant is so important for Durham, as it is only through the revelation of the covenant of redemption in preaching that sinners can come to know and experience the love of Christ.

Durham also uses the list of the Bridegroom’s features in Song 5:11–16 to draw out several attributes of Christ—divinity, mediatorial office, youth (i.e. vigour), omniscience, loveliness, omnipotence, love for and tenderness to his people (Durham, *Song*, 295–323). However, what comes across perhaps most clearly in the Song is the sheer beauty of Christ. For Durham Christ

is all in all, he is incomparably lovely and worthy to be loved. One of many examples is as follows: “Christ is the most lovely and excellent object that men can set their eyes on, that they can cast their love and affection on: there is not such an one as Christ, either for spiritual soul-ravishing beauty that is in him, or the excellent desirable effects that flow from him” (Durham, *Song*, 292).

#### CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this survey of Durham’s work has demonstrated that the traditional allegorical understanding of the Song of Solomon, whether ultimately found convincing or not, is worthy of respect and remains a viable option for Reformed believers. In addition, the key theological elements of Durham’s commentary need to be heard again. His teaching on the experimental piety of the Reformed tradition is a warning against an unfeeling intellectualism which is always a danger. His focus on the church as the source and sustainer of true piety is much needed in this individualistic age. His rich and tender Christology warms the soul and encourages the believer to love the one who first loved them. James Durham, being dead, yet speaks to the Church today! ■

87. Durham, *Song*, 86, 226–227, 244, 411.

88. Durham, *Song*, 442. Here the Father is taken as shorthand for all three Persons of the Trinity, and the Son is considered as Mediator. Elsewhere Durham speaks of “the concurrence of all the Persons of the Trinity in promoting [advancing] the work of redemption of sinners” (Durham, *Christ Crucified: Or, the Marrow of the Gospel in Seventy-Two Sermons on the Fifth-Third Chapter of Isaiah* [repr.: Dallas: Naphtali Press, 2001] 375) and explicitly includes the Spirit as a covenanting party (Durham, *Unsearchable Riches*, 143). The covenant of redemption then is “the fruit of the ancient council of the blessed and glorious Trinity” (Durham, *Unsearchable Riches*, 312).