

Theology Matters

Looking Back, Looking Forward: The Protestant Reformation

by Paul C. McGlasson

The year 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the onset of the [Protestant Reformation](#). On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the castle church door in Wittenberg. It was, appropriately, high noon, though his posting was intended not so much for dramatic effect as for scholarly discussion among his theological colleagues at the University of Wittenberg. In fact they were written in Latin, the language of learned debate.

The immediate issue of the 95 theses has long since passed from the historical horizon: the power and efficacy of indulgences (though in some ways the sale of indulgences can be seen as an early version of our all too popular prosperity gospel, still very much alive). Indeed, it had already done so during Luther’s lifetime. The famed—or infamous—seller of indulgences, Johannes Tetzel, outlived the controversy, and late in life expressed deep regret for the part he played. Characteristically, Luther wrote him a letter of comfort and consolation on his deathbed, making it clear to Tetzel that the controversy was bound to happen anyway, and not to fret.

The first thesis is stunning: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘[Repent](#),’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ By late medieval times, repentance had become a transaction between the individual and the clergy, performed periodically, and often involving monetary payment (indulgences). Put simply: the primary way of finding the grace of God was simply to confess your sins and literally pay up. The church was arrogating to itself the

sole authority and ability to remit sins; that was the rub of the matter.

Luther hammers home the central issue. It is not the church as an institutional structure, but the “most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God, the true treasure of the church”² which offers the free gift of forgiveness. The gospel, the word of divine grace in Jesus Christ, is the one joyous truth of all existence. The grace of God cannot be bought and sold for human wealth; only the cross of Jesus Christ gives true security before God. Indeed, it is far better, says Luther, to spend money in care for the poor and needy than buying worthless [indulgences](#). To see [needy people](#) and ignore them, using the money instead in the vain attempt to buy God off in the form of indulgences, does nothing more than purchase “God’s wrath.”³ Repentance is not something you do, now and then, to ease your conscience; repentance is a radical change of life, which happens daily, turning from the old, turning to the new, in conformity to Christ.

What began as a short series of academic theses soon expanded into a church-wide revolution. Luther certainly led the way, but he was joined by figures such as Melancthon, Zwingli, Calvin, [Vermigli](#), Bucer, Bullinger, Brenz, Capito, Cop, Farel, Hedio, Musculus,

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Oecolampadius, Viret, Zell, and so forth. Theology—the witness of the church to Jesus Christ—was rethought, and recast, from the ground up. There were of course differences between the Lutheran and [Reformed](#) camps. Some of those rested on misunderstandings, some on real disagreements which are still being debated among theologians to this day. Nevertheless, what tied together the primary witness of the [Reformers](#) far outweighed the differences.

What follows is a brief attempt to summarize the main thrust of [Reformation](#) teaching, especially according to Luther and Calvin, in my judgment its most prominent and persuasive advocates (I am hardly alone in this assessment). A few points should be made clear at the outset. First, while the [Reformation](#) defined itself over against late medieval Catholicism, it is no longer a defensible position either historically or theologically simply to describe the [Reformation](#) now as an opponent of contemporary Roman Catholicism (or Eastern Orthodoxy). We have come too far in ecumenical discussion for such uninformed polemics. To be sure, [Protestants](#) even today will likely have serious problems with papal infallibility, but few, if any, serious Christians now think that Pope Francis is the Antichrist. [In some profound sense in the sight of God, we](#) are today all [Protestants](#), all [Catholic](#), all [Orthodox](#).

Second, there are of course many different ways of looking at the [Reformation](#). It was an epoch making event in the historical, social, cultural, even economic life of Germany and Europe as a whole. Rural and urban issues were involved. Family and educational structures were transformed. Political arrangements were made and unmade, then made again. However, I am proposing to see the [Reformation](#) as the [Reformers](#) themselves saw it: and that is primarily as a *theological* event. God by his Spirit through the witness of Scripture was teaching, almost daily, the living church something new about the crucified and risen Lord, exalted over all creation: that is what the [Reformers](#) believed. I am inclined to agree, and that is how I will assess their message below.

And third, we who consider their witness cannot be dispassionate observers. The same God who [Reformed](#) the church by his word and Spirit then, reforms the church even now, even this very day. That does not mean hero-worship of the [Reformers](#), the surest way to lose touch with their genuine contribution. Nor does it mean attempting to return to their teaching, which contradicts the essence of that very teaching. It means, rather, that a genuine encounter with the teaching of the [Reformers](#) is perilous to a complacent church, whether on the left or on the right; yet, to those with eyes to see and ears to hear, such an encounter can lead

forward to newness of life in the service of the risen Lord.

Scripture Alone

The [Reformers](#) began by attacking one opponent, and ended up being forced to attack two. On the one hand, both Luther and Calvin faced a lifelong running battle with late medieval Catholicism, which in due course would become the modern system of Roman Catholic teaching at the Council of Trent. It should be duly noted: after Vatican II, much that the [Reformers](#) rejected was in fact altered by Roman Catholicism itself. On the other side, there emerged a variety of voices and movements which tried, as it were, to outrun the [Reformation](#) ideas on the radical extreme. Luther called them “enthusiasts,” Calvin “fanatics”; either way, the point was that they took the ideas of the [Reformers](#) out of context, and turned them into an extreme caricature unrelated to the theological substance of the [Reformation](#) itself. Often, both [Reformers](#) felt that the late medieval catholic position on the one hand, and the [Radical Reformation](#) position on the other [hand](#), portrayed mirror images of each other. Extremes meet, in the sixteenth century as in the twenty-first.

Nowhere is this echo effect more clear than in the doctrine of Scripture. We begin with a definition: Holy Scripture alone is [the one normative witness to God’s will for the church and for the world](#) (*sola scriptura*). That is the [Reformation](#) position, and in my judgment continues to hold valid for the church universal. But straightaway we must clear up a basic misconception. It is often said that the [Reformers](#) affirmed the Bible and rejected tradition; and that is both true and false. It is true in this sense: both [Reformers](#) soundly rejected the idea that tradition, the church’s own history of interpreting the Bible, constituted a second mode of revelation from God side-by-side with Scripture. That was their objection against late medieval Catholicism. Yet, fanaticism being what it is, inevitably there arose the view that readers of the Bible need take no interest whatsoever in the history of interpretation. Every reader is armed by the Spirit with his or her own interpretation! Away with the voices of the past! [Throw away the creeds and confessions!](#) Away with scholarship and the church! Tear down the idols of university and learning! No more elitism, we must turn to the voice of the people! Against this view, both Luther and Calvin were equally adamant: tradition has a vital role to play. Luther and Calvin were themselves deeply learned in the history of interpretation, in fact perhaps the most learned of their generation.

So, how to solve the problem? Calvin solved it this way, and I think his solution is brilliant and satisfying. It is a matter of priority. The medieval scheme of

theological education put study of the Bible first, then theological training last. [In other words](#), first get Bible out of the way, then turn to the *real* task of learned theological discussion. Calvin reversed that entire educational structure. Theological instruction comes first. His own *Institutes* is a primary example. [In other words, first listen to the highlights of the church's longstanding conversation with the Bible and](#) learn the basic issues that tradition has raised concerning the witness of faith, in order that you will not be led astray. Then turn to the Bible and the Bible alone. Face to face with the risen Christ in the school of Scripture, under the guidance of the Spirit, the church is led from faith to faith in the knowledge of God. First tradition, then Scripture alone. That is the way Calvin shaped the *Institutes*: as a manual of instruction for ministers and readers of the Bible.

When we thus turn to the Bible, what do we find? Again, both Luther and Calvin differed radically from both left and right in their time, and indeed from both left and right in our own. It is one thing to assert the authority of Scripture, but it is quite another to live under that authority in the faith and practice of the community. On the one hand, there is a logic of confirmation. One turns to the Bible to confirm what one already knows, or [thinks](#) one knows, about the substance of faith. It is the way of the church at rest, the church complacent and sure of itself, the church already convinced it knows all the right answers. It is not the way of the [Reformation](#). For Luther and Calvin, it is essential to approach the Bible with a logic of discovery. Luther puts it this way: "To stand still on God's way means to go backward, and to go forward means ever to begin anew."⁴ We turn to the Bible to find out what we don't know, or don't know well enough; to find out what we need to learn, in order to live, breathe, and move in this world. We turn to the Bible [hungering and thirsting](#), not full, and there suddenly find the fullness of life. We read, and suddenly realize that we are ourselves being "read" by the author of life, who weaves into our lives the joy and peace which only he can give.

As we read, according to Luther and Calvin, we should never lose a sense of the whole. We start of course with the words of the Bible. Both Luther and Calvin were trained in Hebrew and Greek, and once again virtually without equal in their generation in their ability to handle the Bible in the original languages. Yet both were committed to the task of translation: Luther translating the Bible into German, Calvin into French (actually a revision of the so-called Olivétan Bible). The Bible is for the whole people of God, not for the priestly elite. Yet we read the words of the text in order to lead by the Spirit of God to the one subject matter of which they speak, which is Jesus Christ. The Bible is a

witness which points to a reality, a risen and exalted Lord. Every word of the Bible points to him, and every word gains its true meaning in reference to him. Without a sense of the whole, it is easy to get lost in trivialities, or distractions, or worse. Only with that sense—Calvin calls it the scope of Scripture—do we truly understand each individual section, yet only by learning each individual section do we develop a full appreciation for the magnificent beauty of Christ the Lord, the true substance of the Bible.

One final point concerning Scripture. We read the Bible always with the truth-question front and center. For Luther, for Calvin, for all the [Reformers](#), the central burning question becomes: what is the truth of the gospel? What is the truth of God's will for the world? Now, truth has nothing to do with a closed system of revealed propositions, set in order according to logical norms. That was the scholastic method of medieval theology and became once again the standard approach of [Protestant](#) scholasticism (and its modern conservative evangelical heirs). Nor is truth a matter of personal authenticity (as in modern [Protestant](#) liberalism); for the [Reformers](#), we adjust the deepest treasures of our lives to the truth of God's will, not the reverse. Truth is rather a living encounter with Christ the Lord through the witness of Scripture. "I am the truth" (John 14: 6), Jesus proclaims; he leads the conversation, and we follow. But follow we must, with all that we have, and all that we are, gladly and freely.

Grace Alone

We are put right with God by grace alone (*sola gratia*) apart from all moral striving. That is the second dimension of [Reformation](#) teaching we consider here. The entire redemptive act of God for the reconciliation of the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is an event of utterly free mercy and grace, apart from all works of righteousness, all efforts of moral self-improvement.

Once again, we need to preface our reflection with a small bit of historical context that was simply unavailable to the [Reformers](#), Luther in particular. Luther thought he was arguing against the entire structure of medieval theology and reaching back to the teaching of Augustine and ultimately of course to the apostle Paul in his doctrine of free grace. He was right about Augustine and Paul, but in hindsight we now know aspects of medieval teaching he could not then know. Both Roman Catholic and [Protestant](#) scholars now agree that Thomas Aquinas, the primary theologian of Roman Catholicism, in fact held a position virtually identical to Luther's [on the doctrine of grace](#). Once again, Luther was [arguing \(and Calvin too\)](#) against a late medieval view (known as nominalism, held by William of Ockham among

others), but thought they were arguing against all of medieval theology. They were wrong historically, even though I for one am still convinced that Luther's profound formulation of the doctrine of grace found in Scripture has no equal in the medieval period, including Thomas.

So what was the issue? In fact it has a very contemporary ring. The late medieval church—Luther and Calvin's contemporaries—were teaching the following: If you do the best you can to follow the will of God, to obey his command, then he will give you grace; you will then be saved; and when he gives you that grace, you yourself must work with God, must cooperate, in the way that grace works out in your life. To put it in a contemporary idiom, God helps those who help themselves. Against this view, universal in the church at the time, Luther and Calvin stood in absolute opposition based on Scripture.

It began in the struggles of Luther's understanding of Scripture, in fact with a single verse: "For in it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" (Rom 1: 17). How, Luther asked in deepest anguish, is this gospel good news? He wrestled with the notion of God's righteousness. How can I ever measure up to the righteousness of God? How can I ever do all that God expects me to do? I am told to do my best, and God will be gracious to me; well and good. But how do I know that I have done my best? Maybe I have left out an act of kindness here, or committed a careless mistake there? I am doomed before I even start! This is not good news at all!

His friend and mentor, Johannes von Staupitz, gently redirected the furious self-torment of Luther by making a productive suggestion: Go learn Hebrew and Greek. And that he did. Luther spent three years, yes, three years, trying to understand the meaning of that single phrase, the righteousness of God, in Romans. And then finally it dawned on him in a moment of exegetical epiphany. The word "of" in Greek (as in English) can mean more than one thing. It can mean the righteousness that God *is*, the righteousness of God in the sense of God's own perfection. But it can also mean the righteousness that God *gives*, the righteousness that comes from God as a gift, received by faith. Righteousness—justification (the two words are related in Greek)—is grace, pure and simple.

From beginning to end, reconciliation with God is an act of gracious mercy. We do not initiate it, we do not cooperate with it, we do not earn it, we do not deserve it. God, and God's grace, is all, in all. There is a human response of faith (we will consider that below), but even the response is part of the gift. Through the word of the gospel God reconciles us to himself, bridging the

chasm of sin; and renders us a new creation through the gift of the Spirit who lives in us, making us who we are as authentic human persons.

Even during the Reformation there was controversy. And one of the controversies concerns the point we are now considering. A scholar named Osiander offered the view that the new creation and the free act of divine justification were, in fact, the same act. God makes us new; and in that very moment we are put right with God. It seemed to Luther and Calvin, and their followers that Osiander was once again treading on sacred ground. He was once again making it seem that God accepts up because of who we are in our moral superiority, not because of who he is in his merciful love. There were two responses.

One came from Calvin alone, one of his finest contributions to Reformation doctrine. Luther often spoke of justification and the new creation, or justification and sanctification, in different ways. It was entirely understandable, in the first flush of profound exegetical discovery. But Calvin saw the danger. On the one hand, justification and sanctification cannot ever be severed. God never puts anyone right with himself without at the same time rendering them a new creation by the gift of his Spirit. That is clear, for example, from Romans 8, one of Calvin's favorite chapters. On the other hand, justification and sanctification must not ever be simply collapsed, as Osiander is doing. We cannot and must not say: God puts us right with himself because he has rendered us a new creation. That is a clear contradiction of the free grace of the gospel. So Calvin speaks of a twofold grace (*duplex gratia*), of justification and sanctification. Not two graces, but one grace in two forms, which cannot be confused, but must never be separated.

The other way in which Luther and Calvin underscored the grace of the gospel is through their affirmation of God's electing love. Once again, Augustine is in the background, but the Bible is the genuine source. Long before we believed, long before we were born, indeed, long before there was a world, or a universe, God set the seal of his love on us. He called us his own, and named us, gathering us unto himself. Why? Certainly not for any reason found in us. Neither we, nor anything at all, even yet exist! God's electing love is grounded solely in the mystery of his gracious purpose. He wills to be with us, and us to be with him, simply because of his good pleasure. His love for us brings him joy; that is the Reformation doctrine of electing grace.

Faith Alone

We are justified by grace through faith alone (*sola fide*). For Luther and the Lutherans, but no less for Calvin and the Reformed, this was the central affirmation of the gospel. The context of the affirmation however is all-important. Neither Luther nor Calvin sought to set up an us/them wall between those with faith and those without faith. In fact, quite the opposite. The radical truth of the doctrine of faith applies first and foremost to the church itself. Following the prophets of the Old Testament (upon which both Luther and Calvin commented widely), and the trenchant critique of the scribes and Pharisees by Jesus, Luther and Calvin saw the doctrine of faith in the context of a dramatic assault of the gospel on the perversion and distortion of the Christian religion itself.

“Faith alone,” not the vaunted moral superiority of Christian piety and spirituality. “Faith alone,” not the self-aggrandizement and self-promotion which pass for true humble leadership in the sight of God. “Faith alone,” not political and cultural fanaticism setting up a theocracy in the name of the gospel, which in the end does nothing but call down scorn upon that very gospel. “Faith alone,” not the higher righteousness of a religious elite, but the daily walk of the ordinary pilgrim in the journey of life, called to serve Christ in family, church, and society. For both Luther and Calvin, the doctrine of faith simply turned the entire world of Christian religiosity upside down.

Both Luther and Calvin wrote brilliantly on faith, Calvin in a marvelous section of the *Institutes* (III.2), Luther especially in his lengthy commentary on Genesis (which took him ten years to write!) in which the stories of the patriarchs become for Luther models of true faith in all its astounding dimensions. We return to these issues shortly. But first, once again, we need to walk our way through a controversy that then, as now, simply cannot be avoided if we are to gain real clarity.

The issue is the idea of free will. In the early church Pelagius, during the Reformation Erasmus, and in contemporary theology both conservative evangelicalism and Protestant liberalism, each in different ways, all embrace the notion of free will. Human beings, it is argued, have the capacity to believe in God, even after the Fall. The gospel reaches out to that capacity, but it is up to the individual to “accept” the gospel. Augustine in the early church, and of course Luther and Calvin in the Reformation (among many others) roundly rejected this idea of free will as a fundamental and catastrophic denial of faith.

Luther’s treatise *On the Bondage of the Will* is certainly the most sustained theological argument he ever put forth. Usually his view comes in

systematically unsystematic form; here, Luther pounds away point by point, leaving out nothing, pressing forward with the full force of biblical conviction. We do indeed respond in faith to the gospel. We are not like stones that God just moves around; we have wills, and we exercise those wills in the matter of faith. Nevertheless, because we are sinners to the core, we cannot, literally cannot, choose God. We are trapped, as Paul says in Romans 7, knowing what is right, inevitably choosing what is wrong. Only the free grace of God gives us a new will to believe; only the free mercy of God renders us a new creation, including the gift of faith. It is we who believe; but it is God in his mercy who gives us the freedom to believe, a freedom we do not have apart from him. So-called free will is a lie of the devil. So Luther.

And of course so the apostle Paul: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2: 8-9). Faith itself is a gift, and therefore a life of arrogant boasting is absolutely excluded from the confessing church of Jesus Christ. Few would deny that we live in an age of almost pathological boasting, even on religious grounds. Perhaps our age is not so different from the world of Luther and Calvin after all.

So what is faith? Here the music of the biblical word sounds with all its wonder in both Reformers, and we can only invite the reader to tap these sources for themselves. A few brief points will have to suffice. Faith is first of all characterized by absolute trust. There are times in every life when all human reason and experience tell us that God is against us. Whatever the situation, everything we think and know tells us: God has turned away from my life in utter disregard. Faith, true faith, clings to the proclaimed word of promise even despite the appearance of human circumstances. God’s word of promise is more powerful than all obstacles; faith knows that God will do the impossible, the metaphysically impossible, for the good of his children.

Faith is knowledge of God’s word. As we have noticed, the Reformers rejected the populist idea that “every person is his or her own interpreter.” Yes, every person can and should daily read the Scripture. Nevertheless, through the astonishing will of God, Christ the Lord continues to speak his word through the voice, the often stumbling and bumbling voice, of the called minister of the word and sacrament. Heinrich Bullinger summarizes this point succinctly: “The preaching of the word of God is the word of God.”¹⁵ Faith grows as it hears, reflects, applies and lives the proclaimed word of God, which is itself based on Holy Scripture.

Faith is a risk. Neither Calvin nor Luther had any time for the modern idea of apologetics, the idea that God can somehow be proved. A god who can be proved is an idol, because such a god is subject to the canons of human reason and logic, and therefore an extension of human cognition: a mirage, a fake. No, the call of God comes into human life from above, and seizes our existence. He gives us no proofs, no guarantees, often enough no long term plans, sometimes nothing more than a simple direction for the next step. No matter: faith follows the call of God wherever it leads. Faith leaves everything else behind—literally everything—and follows Jesus Christ, for he alone knows the way, and indeed is the way.

Christ Alone

Jesus Christ alone is God's one redemptive purpose for the whole world, indeed for the whole cosmos: that is the one great truth of the [Reformers](#) (*solus Christus*). We have spoken of the Scriptures, of grace and faith, and of course could consider other aspects of their thought. However, the center, without which nothing else makes sense or even matters at all, is Jesus Christ himself. And here we do not mean a [Christological](#) proposition, though both Luther and Calvin strongly affirmed the orthodox doctrines of the early church concerning the divinity and humanity of Christ. We mean, rather, the living Lord of all creation, the crucified and exalted Christ himself, the one head of the church and ruler of all reality. He alone is the content of Scripture and indeed the voice it speaks; he alone is the grace of life for all the world; he alone is the content of faith and the assurance of faith. Christ alone is the Lord and Savior of life, from the beginning of time, indeed before time, and until time shall be no more. His kingdom, in the words of the Nicene Creed, shall have no end.

There was absolute agreement on this point, not only between Luther and Calvin, but among all the major [Reformers](#). Only Socinianism would soon come to challenge the affirmation of *solus Christus*, and the [Reformers](#) were at one in their opposition. Nevertheless, there was nuance, subtlety, [and](#) variation in the way Luther and Calvin spelled out their united confession of Christ. In my opinion, the variation should not be seen as a doctrinal split, but as an enriching family resemblance within the one church of Jesus Christ.

Luther saw in the late medieval church the desire for earthly splendor, riches, success, all supposedly in the name of Christ. He saw the same desire among those who tried to set up an earthly Christian theocracy in the name of the gospel, a Christian society. Whether the catholic, or the Anabaptist, both embraced what Luther

calls a theology of glory. Now, it is true, Christ is crucified, raised again, and ascended into glory. Luther's point—the point of the [Gospel of Mark](#) in fact—is that there is no way to the resurrection which does not first pass through the way of the cross. The path from one to the other is not crossed just once, in the life of Jesus; it must be crossed for all time among those who follow him. We must all take up our cross daily. We must all live under the shadow of the cross, embracing, not avoiding, its shame and scorn. For it is only in the dignity of the cross that we find the true glory of Christ. Luther thus argues powerfully for a theology of the cross to replace the medieval theology of glory. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would follow him in this, in his brilliant study, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

Calvin on the other hand read the story of Jesus against the background of the Old Testament. There is in the Old Testament a twofold movement. God comes to meet humanity in the covenant on Mount Sinai. God appoints human beings, prophets, priests, [and](#) kings, to come before [him](#) in the enactment of that covenant. Calvin argues powerfully: Jesus Christ is the true fulfillment of *both* directions in the Old Testament. He is God himself in our midst; he is true humanity living before God, the true prophet, priest, and king. Jesus Christ therefore is the one substance of the eternal covenant between God and humanity. In Christ, a relationship between God and all humanity is established. Calvin stresses: There are not two covenants, a plan A and a plan B. Later [Reformed](#) theologians, Olevianus, Polanus, Wollebius, etc., will speak of two covenants, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace. Not Calvin. Both Testaments have only the one covenant, whose one substance is Jesus Christ himself, though that covenant is administered in different ways to Israel of old and to the church. There is only plan A.

Conclusion:

We need perhaps to take a step back to take the full measure of the [Reformation](#) affirmation of the *solus Christus*. In our own age, the issue of pluralism has become a major focus; it was not to the [Reformers](#). Their position was quite clear: there is no salvation outside of faith in Jesus Christ. But that is not the full import of the affirmation of “Christ alone.” That would be directed to those outside the church; Luther and Calvin were far more concerned with “Christ alone” inside the walls of the church. We are reminded: Judgment begins in the household of God. Luther saw countless distractions, from the search for a “worldview” to politicized troublemaking to the naked grab for wealth in the name of piety. His fury knew no bounds, but it was for the sake of his one desire: To show forth the beauty of Christ to the world. Calvin witnessed well-intentioned people getting tripped up on

matters of virtually no importance, as if the future of the church rested upon them, while at the same time others could pass right by the most significant issues of the Bible as if they did not matter one whit. He saw people trying hard to read the Bible, and making little progress; and so he wrote to teach, to instruct, to guide, to help, his fellow believers do the one thing necessary, to find the true scope of the Bible which is Christ the Lord, and Christ alone. It is the church, first, which needs to learn the true meaning of *Christ alone*; only then can it proclaim it forth to the world in word and deed.

We end with an obvious concern of many of us: So where is the Reformation vision of truth now to be found in the church? It is of course the burning question, and will be asked this year no doubt in a wide variety of forums. We still have our fanaticism on the religious right, with its vain pursuit of an ethno-nationalism, a “Christian America,” an idol no different than those already condemned by Luther and Calvin, and still to be condemned in our day. We have the continuing effort of spiritual transcendence on the religious left; the shape of piety has changed, but the effort to find a gracious God through self-renewal and self-improvement is all too familiar, and all too human. [Indeed, the confessing church of Jesus Christ has already condemned Protestant liberalism as false doctrine in the Barmen Declaration; the human effort at self-transcendence, then as now, can only set humankind disastrously over against God’s good will for his beloved creation.](#) So what then? What of the knowledge of Christ and faith? What of grace and reverence for the authority of Scripture, not as a set of right human words about God, but as God’s own living and overpowering word about us?

It is, I think, worth observing, that the very first scholar to ask these questions was Martin Luther. In 1528, just over a decade since the Reformation began in full force, Luther set out on a tour of the new churches. How had the new Reformation doctrines of the Bible fared? He was frankly appalled, indeed outraged. Everywhere he went, he found gross ignorance among laity and clergy alike concerning even the basics of Christian doctrine. “Good God, what a wretched calamity I beheld!”⁶ Similar words are found in Calvin

and the other Reformers. The Reformation itself was not a smooth process of laying out a new direction for the church. Looking back it may seem that way, but in fact it was a moment of grave crisis, in which literally everything seemed in the balance almost daily.

And that of course is exactly where we find ourselves today. We look to the right and there is no help; we look to the left and can find no comfort. Nor is the answer to look back in nostalgia, which, as the Bible warns, is always the way of the fool: “Do not say, ‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this” (Eccl. 7: 10). No, faith always looks forward, never backward. Luther said it best: “To change our mind is the purpose of every word of Scripture and every action of God.”⁷ To change our mind: not to drive us into the so-called greatness of the past, where nothing exists but the old age that is passing away, nor to lure us further into the self, where all is bondage, but to set us free to encounter anew the risen Lord, and so be ourselves for the first time.

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¹ Martin Luther, “Ninety–Five Theses,” in *Career of the Reformer I, Luther’s Works* vol. 31, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 25. Hereafter cited: “Ninety–Five Theses.”

² Luther, “Ninety–Five Theses,” 31.

³ Luther, “Ninety–Five Theses,” 29.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* in *Luther’s Works* vol. 25, ed. Hilton Oswald (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 370. Hereafter cited: *Lectures on Romans*.

⁵ Second Helvetic Confession. ch.1, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *The Book of Confessions*, 5.004.

⁶ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Small Catechism.” Alt. cit. “Good God, what wretchedness I beheld!” *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 338.

⁷ Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, 54.

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Surveying Presbyterian Beliefs “Theological Reflection” and Reformed Theology

by Michael D. Bush

Recently the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) released the results of a Presbyterian Panel survey entitled “Theological Reflection.” It describes the views of members and ministers in three areas: Interreligious issues, understanding and affirmation of the Presbyterian theological tradition, and certain matters related to vocation and worship. In this article we focus on the second set of issues, the theological concepts and themes. For those who care about the tradition of Presbyterian and Reformed Christianity, there is some good news in these data, along with evidence of considerable misinformation and confusion.

Some of the confusion in the responses is grounded in the survey itself. Someone answering the survey might be perplexed how to assess some options alongside others. For example, in a list of spiritual resources Christians might use in decision making, “Jesus Christ’s life, teaching, or example” and “God’s will” are listed as though they were somehow independent of “Scripture,” “prayer,” and “the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”

The report does not clarify how its authors imagine Christians might learn, apart from Scripture, what Jesus did and taught. In fact, we have no information about Jesus’s life, teaching, or example independent of Scripture. To be sure, many books attempting to reconstruct Jesus’s life on the assumption that the biblical narratives are unreliable have appeared since 1836. The weakness of these reconstructions is that they cannot explain why we should care what Jesus did and taught. Why not some other Hellenistic, middle-eastern teacher? For that matter, why not nearly any other person who has ever lived? And even with such limitations, these reconstructions depend on evidence only available in Christian Scripture. But Scripture identifies Jesus as God living a human life, a good reason for thinking his life and teaching can guide us.

Moreover, is not discerning God’s will the entire point of consulting a “spiritual resource” in decision making? What sense does it make, then, to treat God’s will as itself a “spiritual resource”? The survey’s implied reasoning here is circular. To learn God’s will, I consult God’s will? This is like a dog chasing its tail: It may be better than boredom, but it does not lead anywhere.

In reality, we have direct access neither to God’s will nor to the life and teaching of Jesus. These come to us through prayerful reading of Scripture under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, or we know nothing about them at all. It is a category mistake that can only confuse to include “God’s will” and “Jesus Christ’s life, teaching, or example” as options within a list of other spiritual resources a Christian could actually consult.

Turning to what we learn of the theologies of Presbyterians, we find the survey asked about how members and ministers see salvation in Christ. Respondents were asked first whether they agree that “Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord.” 74% of members and 73% of ministers agreed that this statement is true. They were then asked which of four statements reflected their view: 1. “God chooses who is to be saved through Jesus Christ,” 2. “People choose Jesus Christ as their Savior,” 3. “God saves everyone,” and 4. “Salvation is an outdated concept.”

Not many (6%) said they believe salvation is outdated. Fewer than 30% said they were universalists by agreeing that “God saves everyone.” Nearly half (46%) of members but only 15% of ministers chose the historically Arminian position (most closely associated in America with John Wesley and the Methodist movement) that “People choose...” On the other hand, half of ministers but only 20% of members chose the orthodox Presbyterian and Reformed view that “God chooses...”

(Respondents could select only one option, so the results could be hiding small groups who hold a combination of these views. For example, some may be familiar with the idea of dual causation as that term is used in theology. Such people would realize that an act of God, such as election, does not mean a corresponding human act is not freely chosen. But this is rarified theological air that seems unlikely to be breathed by many respondents in a polling sample.)

It is good news that only 6% reject salvation as an outdated concept. This percentage is but a little higher than the sampling error of the study. That there are some who affirm it should come as no surprise. In the most hopeful cases, the word “salvation” may have associations with a legalistic or revivalist upbringing,

and perhaps a few now reject the word for that reason. Possibly some of these would accept a similar (though narrower) concept such as “justification.” As to those few intentionally rejecting salvation itself as meaningless today, we can only remind ourselves that the church on earth is a mixed body. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, “not all that are reckoned in the number of the Church are saints, and living and true members of the Church.”¹ Jesus asks us not to try to sort this out, but rather to let the wheat grow together with the tares until the time of the harvest (Matt. 13:30).

Second, it is a relief that only 28% of members and 29% of ministers say they are universalists. I, for one, am glad to learn those percentages are no higher than they are. What is more, it is possible for those of us who are not universalists to see it sympathetically as a pious error rather than as a pernicious one. As John H. Leith used to say, every Christian should want to be a universalist; there is something wrong if we want to send people to hell. Furthermore, we must admit that universalism is not devoid of biblical warrant. For example, the Apostle says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). We who reject universalism must show why the word “all” means one thing in the first half of that sentence and something else in the second half. Such showing has been done, of course, and many of us find it persuasive in the context of the whole biblical witness. But it does seem to me that we can exercise a judgment of charity toward a minority view on this point.

The most interesting insights in these survey results are in the other two categories, and their interaction with theological ideas explored further on in the survey. Again, few ministers, but a large plurality of members, affirm the historically Arminian view that people choose Jesus Christ as savior for themselves. On the other hand, only a fifth of members, but half of ministers, affirm the Presbyterian view that God chooses who is to be saved through Christ.

For the positions “God chooses...” and “People choose...” to be meaningfully different, we must assume the question intends to get at responsibility for our faith in Christ. “God chooses...” must mean God is ultimately responsible for our salvation in Christ, while “People choose...” must mean people are ultimately responsible. This is because even the most committed Arminians believe in the prevenience of grace, a kind of “election-lite” that agrees God is at work in people’s lives preparing them to choose faith in Christ. (To a Presbyterian and Reformed mind, this looks like a concept that has not been thought through to the end.) So for our survey question to be meaningful we must understand it to distinguish those who believe God’s

choice causes our salvation by grace through faith from those who believe human choice causes it.

To the degree people who seriously intend to be Christian in the Presbyterian and Reformed way believe they are responsible for their redemption by choosing Christ, the church and its representatives have been ineffective in communicating the gospel to them. This is a position our Lord himself rejects, saying to his first disciples, the seed of the church, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...” (John 15:16). And yet these data seem to show that degree is significant.

No doubt some of that plurality of Presbyterians who believe they choose Christ have come by it honestly, in that they have been taught by ministers who believed the same, whether in the PC(USA) or during a formative period in another church and tradition. Even within the PC(USA) at the time of the study, it is likely that many Arminian members have Arminian pastors. Likewise, it is likely that many members who are orthodox Presbyterians on this point would find their pastors among the one-half of ministers who are similarly orthodox.

However, the data do not line up as neatly as that across the board. Nearly half of members accept the Arminian view, according to the study, while only 15% of ministers do. The conclusion seems unavoidable that some ministers have a remedial task before them. It seems that some ministers who understand the gospel in the Presbyterian way have not been communicating it effectively or persuasively. This need not be a condemnation or even a criticism of those ministers. (For anything I know, I may be among them myself.) And we also must acknowledge that few ministers are their congregation’s only source of theological reflection and teaching. However, these study results do give us who preach and teach motivation to assess the quality and persuasiveness of the teaching we offer.

Signs of theological confusion and misinformation appear even more clearly in the data when we see how these affirmations interact with responses to questions about certain “Presbyterian principles.”

Though only half of ministers and a fifth of members affirm the doctrine of election, fully 95% of ministers and 82% of members go on to say the concept of grace is important or very important to them. Just as surprisingly, 85% of ministers and 72% of members say the same of the sovereignty of God. Since grace and divine sovereignty are inextricably bound together with the issues of election and human freedom, one cannot avoid the question whether some within these large majorities understand the meaning of God’s grace and

sovereignty. These principles should correspond for Presbyterians to an affirmation of the doctrine of election (“God chooses...”) and a rejection of Arminianism (“People choose...”). Clearly, many Presbyterians do not yet see this connection.

For clarity, we might look to Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), who was among the most able theologians in Christian history and an important influence on the Presbyterian tradition. Taking his cue from Paul (Rom. 15:11), Augustine speaks repeatedly of “the election of grace,” by which he means election has its source in God’s sovereign grace. Augustine insisted that election and God’s sovereignty and grace go together. For example, in the “Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints,” Augustine writes, “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, predestinating us to the adoption of children, not because we were going to be of ourselves holy and immaculate, but He chose and predestinated us that we might be so. ... Moreover, He did this according to the good pleasure of His will, so that nobody might glory concerning his own will, but about God’s will towards himself.”²

The Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* makes clear the connection between grace, sovereignty, and election as well. For example, the Scots Confession teaches, “Our faith and its assurance do not proceed from flesh and blood, that is to say, from natural powers within us, but are the inspiration of the Holy Ghost.... As we willingly disclaim any honor and glory for our own creation and redemption, so do we willingly also for our regeneration and sanctification ... he who has begun the work in us alone continues us in it, to the praise and glory of his undeserved grace.” Similarly, Question 13 of the Larger Catechism makes the connection, saying, “God, by an eternal and immutable decree, out of his mere love, for the praise of his glorious grace,... hath chosen some men to eternal life, and the means thereof....”³

Most religious and spiritual traditions focus on the human spiritual seeker’s quest for a transcendent reality. For example, a new Buddhist takes refuge in the three jewels and begins to follow the eight-fold path. There is no question of a calling from outside time and space. Moreover, enlightenment is an achievement, the fulfillment of an arduous process, not a gift. Karma means everyone receives with exquisite precision the results he or she causes; it offers no grace. In a religious tradition that focuses in this way on the human quest for the transcendent, it only makes sense to speak of human choosing as the point of entry.

The Christian gospel is not such a tradition. The gospel shows us that in truth God is the seeker. God comes looking for us while we are still lost, indeed, when we are “yet unborn” (Ps. 139:16). Jesus’s mission, he says,

is “to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The gospel means salvation is a gift, not an achievement or even, in the most important sense, our choice.

Those who say they choose Christ for themselves might fairly reply that you cannot begin the life of a Christian without being aware of it. There is always a moment of decision. This is obviously true. On the other hand, when a new Christian makes a profession of faith, God is not surprised. God is not waiting in keen anticipation to discover what this new believer will unexpectedly decide. He or she was one of God’s own before the beginning of the universe. The commitment of faith is an acceptance of the electing God’s choice, not a believer’s independent initiative.

The Theological Reflection survey gave respondents a chance to write in “Presbyterian Principles” important to them that were not included in the survey. Several wrote that one or another wording of the idea that the church is “always being reformed” was important. As I have shown before in this journal and elsewhere, the historical meaning of this principle is not what is so often suggested: an ecclesiastical Trotskyism (“the revolution never ends”) that idealizes change in the church’s theology and practice.⁴ Rather, it means the faith and faithfulness of the church of Jesus Christ is always at risk because of our weakness, requiring constant vigilance to maintain. Left to ourselves we will let the gospel and the insights of the Reformation slip away. Idolatry comes naturally to us as human beings, so renewal in the gospel is a constant need. This survey makes it clear that while there are many faithful in the church, the PC(USA) remains an *ecclesia reformanda*, a church needing to be reformed.

¹ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Confessions*, 5.139.

² Augustine of Hippo, “Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints,” in P. Schaff, ed. *Saint Augustin’s Anti-Pelagian Writings*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, series 1, vol. 5 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1905).

³ *Book of Confessions*, 3.12; 7.123.

⁴ Michael D. Bush, “Is the Reformation Ever Finished?” in *Theology Matters*, v. 22, no. 1, Spring 2016, 11 ff. See also “Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings,” in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, Herman J. Selderhuis, ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008, 286 ff.

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The Catechized Prodigal: When Covenant Children Lose Their Way

by James P. Hering

Of the numerous passages in the Scriptures which admonish the parent concerning the rearing of children, the Book of Proverbs contains some of the most pithy and memorable. Who cannot finish the folksy rendering of 13:24, “Spare the rod and...”? Such proverbs have endured in the collective consciousness of our society due, in part, to their candid, striking images.

The classic proverbial form suspends the complexity of our human condition between two poles, creating an either-or dialectic in which no mediating resolution seems anticipated. As frustrating as this may be for the modern mind, *contrast* is the teacher here, not synthesis. The proverb, by virtue of this feature, requires the reader to engage in a process of assessment, a sober self-identification, before practical application is to be made. The ethical implications and responsibilities lie, typically, along a spectrum between various extremes: life or death, truth and lies, fool vs. sage, etc. The reader, like it or not, is called to choose a path, and to a certain degree, challenged to define it, as well. The latter element, defining the characteristics of the particular virtue or lifestyle, constitutes the arduous inquiry into the “way of wisdom.”

The Promise of Proverbs 22:6

Perhaps the most provocative exhortation delivered to parents and children can be found in Proverbs 22:6:

“Train the child for the path of his life, and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Here we have an observation that is both mundane and extraordinary. Human life is divided into the spheres of familial development and later, mature deportment. There also appears to be a promise, if not a formula, by which parental training precedes and the child’s later lifestyle follows in unbroken continuity. Although the two phases of life are recognized as discrete realms, they are inextricably joined in parental training, via the imparted path. The desired [good] outcome is presented as contingent upon faithful instruction.

Training, then, appears to provide the bridge which connects childhood and adulthood, forming, in the end, one straight and uninterrupted path. It is the centerpiece of the proverb, carrying the weight of its implications. It is not surprising, then, when encountering this proverb in the church that a simple cause and effect result has

been often assumed and given exaggerated significance. It is regarded as a formula of success (or failure), extrapolated, at times, with mathematical certainty.

Which one of us has not met parents who have adopted this proverb as their pedagogical credo, taken comfort in its promise and known unruffled success? And are there not equally many in our churches who adopt, *bona fide*, the same responsibilities of consistent, genuine and loving training, only to be shattered by the dissolute lifestyles of their adult children? The former insist, correctly, that the Lord’s promises have proven faithful. The latter compound their pain with the inevitable conclusion of parental failure. Both have correctly identified the critical role of instruction. The catechized prodigal begs the question: Why does this proverb appear only sometimes to hold true?

The answer does not fall to hand, for the proverbial form precludes formulaic precision in terms of content or remedial assessment. We see the only bookends of inception and result. The parents must rely on familiar models of instruction and discipline, which allow for a more or less coincidental level of consistency. While most assume that the proverb does not demand perfection,¹ we are yet disturbed by the uneven application and result among believers. We ponder: What of the “failed” training? Were there critical gaps in the content of instruction? Was there an alienating level of harshness in its presentation? Or does the problem lie somewhere outside the instruction? Has the parents’ “faith” been genuine and free of hypocrisy? Have there been unfortunate circumstances which have left some families exposed to damaging influences, hence nullifying otherwise good training? Where are the tipping points of failure? To what degree does the child carry responsibility in adopting the instruction? Can youthful rebellion empty the force of promise?

These questions, typically asked, are denied any clear answer, for who can know or measure these things? If we attempt to do so, we quickly find ourselves in the place of Job’s comforters, searching for the elusive root of guilt. Add to our inquiry the remarkable counter-examples of God’s grace (such as nominally Christian or pagan households producing glowing disciples of Christ), and the outcome of our deliberations becomes more uncertain still. One thing does seem sure: there is not *always* an observable correspondence between

parental training and the child's adult behavior. The proverb, then, appears to lose its force in direct proportion to the anticipated level of contingency. To put it another way: because of the many variables noted above, success in child-rearing is regarded as the circumstantial blessing of a fortunate few. The rest must take a seat at the window, straining for a glimpse of the prodigal to come home.

Perhaps we should inquire whether the common understanding of Proverbs 22:6 as a "formula for success" is, in some aspect, fundamentally flawed. Does Proverbs 22:6 make any promise at all? If so, are there undisclosed conditions? Who actually carries responsibility? Is there any encouragement here for those who have trained children who have "left the way"? The following literary analysis is an attempt to answer these questions by examining the constituent elements of the verse.

To Train

The Hebrew verb *הִנִּיחַ* means, when applied to persons, to train or initiate. As such, it is rare in its Old Testament usage.² We find its only other biblical incidence in Genesis 14:14, where Abraham calls forth his "trained" men to help recover his nephew, Lot.³ The verb has an inceptive element of "starting off" in its meaning, as the translators of the New English Bible, for instance, have elected to show in their rendering of this verse, "Start a boy on the right path..." The sense, then, is a training which inaugurates, or more graphically, launches the child into adulthood (and, ultimately, unto the safe haven of old age).

Here we find, typical of the proverbial form, the drawing together of extremes. In this case the initiation and completion of life, as seen in the child and the old man, illustrate the ultimate value and wisdom of the author's command to train. The considerable effort expended is justified, because, simply put, instruction does not lose its vitality. The training which is imparted belongs to those things which, like wisdom, are timeless and suffer no depreciation. The proverb captures this truth, and is intended to strengthen the parents in their sacred charge. The emphasis is, then, not actually the child (as many read the verse), but rather the parents, and their crucial didactic role in the child's life. Our proverb's decidedly positive outcome depends, not upon the child, but upon the initial discipline of training. As the voice of wisdom calls out elsewhere in Proverbs for children to heed parental instruction (with stern warnings!),⁴ our verse calls parents to the responsibility of providing this instruction. The tenor here is one of encouragement; for those who undertake this crucial endeavor (in obedience), the results are sure (promise).⁵ A parent might well wish for more details, considering the pivotal role of their training in the child's life. The

brevity of the proverbial form precludes, however, the inclusion of any methodological tips or didactic goals. It appears that the author assumes a certain level of consensus in the matter of training, or perhaps simply allows for a degree of latitude in terms of its implementation.⁶ One thing, however, is sure: the parent receives here a command to train, with the promise of efficacy. Between parent and child stands the only constant, and the proverb's strongest bulwark of encouragement: the enduring value of wisdom's voice.

The Path

As our proverb does not include the particulars of training, its objective, "his way," is similarly lacking in descriptive detail. Here we find the common noun, *דֶּרֶךְ*, which means way or path in both the literal and figurative senses. 22:6, of course, is speaking of a figurative path, a way of living. It should be noted that the noun is modified as "his path," i.e., the path of the child to be trained. This may be a reference to instruction appropriate for a child (basic skills), but it seems more likely that the common translation "in the way he should go" catches the sense of training which is fitting for the challenges of adult life, as well.⁷ This would be in concord with the broader use of the word in the Hebrew Bible, which indicates an observable manner of living.

Not surprisingly, the "path" is usually characterized as either good or evil. In Gen. 6:12, we read that the people of earth had adopted corrupt ways, resulting in the judgment of the deluge. Prominent Old Testament figures, including the kings of Israel and Judah, were assessed in terms of their "way." The "way of the Lord," in turn, serves as the universal rubric for covenant fidelity and as a contrast to the lifestyle of the unbeliever or apostate. Proverbs contains the most instances of the word, and follows the broader biblical pattern of identifying the path of life in either positive or negative terms. Those who are on the wrong "path of death" are the fool (refusing wisdom and instruction), the sluggard, seducers, liars, the wicked, etc.

On the other end of the spectrum the righteous and wise walk in the way of wisdom and life, the "way of the Lord." Although the Proverbs do not explicate the term, it is most certainly a reference to God's will as revealed in the narratives of the Patriarchs, as well as the instruction of the Law and the Prophets. For the faithful follower of Yahweh, "the way of the Lord" always played the central role of ethical (re)orientation. We can assume that the intended "child's way" was, in terms of instruction, cast by the faithful recounting of the ancient traditions (portraying both good and evil), with particular attention given to the gracious and sovereign works of God.

The way, then, can be characterized as being a manner of living that is learned through the process of instruction, and carefully held in contrast to the way of evil. Not merely principles from which life is interpreted or mere philosophy, it is knowledge of God's character and will and knowledge of man and the complexities of life. It is, at its very root, a theological undertaking. The command assumes that the parents themselves, as engaged believers, are intimately familiar with the "curriculum." The child, however, is a different story.

In the initial stages of instruction, this "way of the Lord" must be seen as independent of the child, since it is being mediated (and therefore presented) via the parent. It cannot properly be considered to be the "child's way" until the child has, for lack of a better word, internalized it. The Proverbs speak of "receiving" instruction; this is, it would seem, a process of continual reception and internalization until the point when the "way" truly becomes the child's. The biblical accounts indicate that children at times "walked in the way of their fathers" (for better or worse!), or as with the sons of Eli, chose to reject the lifestyle and instruction of the parents.⁸ Ultimately, then, what is adopted and internalized by the child—good or evil—determines the path of life.

To Depart

This word, rendered סור in Hebrew, means, both literally and figuratively, to leave, turn aside, depart. It is haunting in its tone, for it can indicate the movement from good to evil, from truth towards darkness. As a matter of our common life, the infidelity to the truth touches us all: "All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Ps. 14:3; Pauline citation, Romans 3:10–12). Beyond the universal turning away that is part of fallen humanity, the Scripture draws our attention to individuals (and of course, the nation of Israel) who are in danger of departing from the path. This can be seen in the Lord's instruction to Joshua in Josh. 1:7. Note the element of promise here, as well: "Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go."⁹ And, as we have seen, the biblical record informs us that it is indeed possible for a child, like the people of Israel and her kings, to reject the instruction of parents (and the Lord).

How can it be then, that our verse claims that the child will not depart from the path?¹⁰ The simplest answer, of course, is that the child never truly received/adopted the parental instruction, a possibility noted above. The child, then, walks in the default, evil way. Here we could end our deliberations and accept that the discrete responsibilities of instruction and reception operate in total isolation, and that our verse only appears to

indicate an intimate bond between the two. The "promise," then, is actually only an observation of the potential of good training, nothing more. This, however, does not seem to be the case. There is a clear promissory element attached to obedience to the Lord's command, which we may not dismiss. But how can we make sense of the promise in light of the possibility of the child rejecting instruction, as is manifestly evident in both the Scripture and our own experience?

The answer may be found in a closer analysis of the biblical use of the verb סור. As noted above, it has a literal sense, such as to turn away from a path, turn into a house, etc. This is quite common in the Old Testament narrative. Its most infrequent usage, in contrast, is of that mentioned above, when a person (or the people of God) figuratively leave the way by turning from God's instruction. This has been the meaning associated with our verse: the child, being instructed in the way, consequently remains in it. This understanding of the proverb places the emphasis upon the child, and his/her conformity to the instruction.

The emphasis of our verse, however, is not foremost upon the child, but upon the parents' obedience to the command to instruct. Instruction, then, is the condition of the promise, not the child (who, without instruction would be as the undisciplined fool spoken of in the Proverbs). The impartation and integration of the training in the child's life is what acts as leaven; without it, there is no expectation of ultimate success. It may be, then, that our perception of what it means to "depart" has been incorrectly construed in terms of its subject (the child) and the nature of movement (from the way). Is there another potential reading?

This brings us to a second, more frequent usage of the verb סור. Here we do not find a person remaining or leaving an essential object such as the way (where the person is central and actively effects a change through departing), but rather the essential object departs from the person(s). A few examples illustrate this particular usage, with the verb "to depart" in boldface:

Genesis 49:10: Jacob pronounces blessings upon his sons, including this prophecy: "The scepter will not **depart** from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his."

Deuteronomy 4:9: Here Moses issues commands regarding the lessons which the Israelites had learned in the wilderness: "Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or **let them slip** [depart] from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."

Judges 16:19, 20: This citation recounts how both his supernatural strength and the Lord himself depart from Samson: “[Delilah]...having put him to sleep on her lap, she called a man to shave off the seven braids of hair, and so began to subdue him. And his strength **left** him. Then she called, ‘Samson, the Philistines are upon you!’ He awoke from his sleep and thought, ‘I’ll go out as before and shake myself free.’ But he did not know that the Lord had **left** him.”

What should we make of these examples?¹¹ They serve to open the possibility of understanding our verse in another manner. If we allow that essential objects such as instruction, the Spirit of God or blessings can, of themselves, depart from an individual, the command of Proverbs 22:6 takes on a new meaning, with the emphasis placed appropriately upon the instruction itself. Our verse could then be rendered as follows:

Train the child for the path of his life, and when he is old, it will not depart from him.

This reading, of course, goes against a long tradition of understanding the child as the main agent, with the assumption that “leaving the path” is the most natural reading. For this reason, any new configuration of the elements will sound awkward. But apart from the matter of familiarity, can this verse legitimately be translated in this manner? Are there not grammatical considerations which would prevent us from conveniently “swapping” the subject and object of the second clause? The answer, in this instance, depends upon several grammatical variables. Do both the words for “child” and “path” share the same gender, so as to be interchangeable and hence indistinguishable in their pronominal forms? These words do indeed share the same gender (masculine), so that the second clause actually reads: “...and when he is old, he/**it** will not depart from it/**him**.” Our rendering (in boldface), then, is certainly grammatically possible. Indeed, there is a grammatical indicator that suggests it is not only possible but it is perhaps the preferred reading.¹²

Observations

We have noted that the traditional understanding of Proverbs 22:6 is attended with several difficulties regarding the role and effectiveness of instruction, the responsibility of both parent and child, and ultimately, whether this verse can be understood as promise. When understood as promise and read in the traditional manner, there is a need to account for prodigal behavior. This is normally laid at the feet of the parents, or perhaps, if the reader diminishes the connection between training and promise, the child may be held responsible. Others may, in a candid moment, wonder if the promise has failed.

We have attempted to show that the first clause of our verse is directed to the parents, with the primary emphasis upon the efficacy of instruction. The promise of the second clause, then, does not depend upon the child, but is related, following the first clause, to the objective value of the instruction. If the obedience to instruction (parents’ and child’s) is indeed central to the proverb’s reasoning, a new rendering of the verse is not only possible, but preferable. The promise, then, declares that the imparted way, like wisdom itself, remains as a living voice, calling to the child unto old age. If our literary analysis holds true, parents may be encouraged by the intrinsic value and enduring nature of instruction, which remains to guide even a wayward child.

A final word of encouragement to parents may be derived, by analogy, from our observations and the broader context of our Christian faith. In particular, consider the relationship between Christ our Lord and your child. Our proverb, we have argued, promises that holy instruction, imparted into the child’s very being, is both efficacious and lasting. If our reading is correct, the child, including the prodigal, is never truly alone, is never without the voice of an inner compass.

He whom we know as the Word, Truth, Life and Path likewise indwells the covenant child by faith. He, like wisdom, lifts each believer from futility and sin, and vouchsafes the transfer into his kingdom. It is *he* (not we) who seals our children by *his* power (not ours) and for *his own sake*; it is not *of* us, we can rest assured. The child’s path, hidden in Christ, is traced, not merely in (mis)deeds, but in Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

The path, however, is often dark and dangerous. It is understandable that—tired, fearful, and heartbroken—parents often ask: “Will *our* child return?” In place of despair, we can only humbly commend the posture of anticipation our tradition teaches: “We are to have a good hope for all” (Second Helvetic Confession, ch. 10). The Christian parent, though unsure regarding the content and manner of the child’s training, can be sure of one thing: Jesus Christ, who is the path, is, more importantly, the child’s life, the very fountainhead of all knowledge and wisdom. As with parental instruction in our proverb, it is he that is the constant element of preservation; it is he who will never depart.

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¹ The notion of the “way” and “departing from it” tend to be vague categories for most, so that the determination of what constitutes failure is inevitably lenient. The observable tendency is to overlook missteps (parent or

child) as part of the learning, failure being adjudged only in extreme cases.

² Although the use of the verb here is singular, the Proverbs are not silent in the matter of training children. Instruction, מָסַר, is cited 24 times, most of which indicate parental training, as 1:8–9: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.” An interesting aspect of instruction is that it is treated as an object to be received (the wise) or despised (the fool). The responsibility here is placed upon the young, and the path is determined by this choice. In terms of understanding our passage, it is unfortunate that the LXX cannot be consulted, as this verse, perhaps a later editorial addition to the MT [Wildeboer], was not transmitted in the Greek OT text.

³ The verb is elsewhere used to convey the sense of beginning or dedication, for example of a house (Dt. 20:5) or the Temple (1 Ki. 8:63). The nominal form, הִנְחָה is translated “dedication, consecration.” Examples can be found in 2 Chr. 7:9 (the altar), Neh. 12:27 (the wall of Jerusalem), or most famously, 1 Macc. 4:52, in the (re)dedication of the (desecrated) Temple under Judas Maccabeus on the 25th of Chislev, faithfully remembered (and rendered!) today as *Hanukkah*.

⁴ The Book of Proverbs assumes *shared* responsibility for the child’s eventual choice of lifestyle, being replete with commands to children, as well. The instruction stands between parent and child as objective truth, which the child may indeed reject (depicted as being hardened to instruction). There appears to be no assumption that the parents are solely responsible for the outcome.

⁵ As children receive both command and promise in the 5th commandment, it may be that our verse provides a similar command-promise pattern for parents. If so, the expectations of faithfulness in the life of the instructed child should be extrapolated in similar terms to our understanding of the considerable blessings promised to obedient children.

⁶ The Book of Proverbs shows there was much being said about training children, including matters and methods of correction, instruction, discipline, and establishing or avoiding habits, all seasoned with vivid illustrations.

⁷ Alternative interpretations have been posited, which emphasize not the path, but rather the developmental, psychological, and vocational status of the child, the “dynamic applications” (Hildebrandt, 19) implied in training. These anachronistic emphases may be helpful in executing certain didactic aspects of the training, but they do not comport with the narrower, moral character of the “way” found in Proverbs. Cf. T. Hildebrandt, “*Proverbs 22:6a: ‘Train Up a Child?’*,” GTJ9 (1988), 3–19.

⁸ 1 Samuel 2. The sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, had disregarded their father’s instruction and dishonoured both him and the Lord. For this the Lord planned to cut them off from long life and blessing (the promises contained in the

5th commandment). Here we see the responsibility for the failure of instruction placed upon the child. Note the positive counter-example of Samuel, who also grew up in Eli’s household.

⁹ See also Exodus 32:8; Dt. 9:12, 11:16; Judges 2:17; the people of Israel; Dt. 17:17, instructions to the king.

¹⁰ If instruction *always* carries positive results, then the case law found in Deut. 21:18–21 cannot be logically explained. The parental instruction is assumed to be adequate, and the responsibility for disobedience and rebellion is laid solely at the feet of the child.

¹¹ See also: Ex. 8:11, 20; Lev. 13:58; Num. 14:9; 1 Sam. 6:3, 16:23, where the hand of God operates in a negative manner; the rest are positive, sustaining workings, cf. Num. 12:10; 1 Sam. 16:14; 18:12; 28:15, 16; 2 Ki. 17:18. It is interesting that these examples represent a departing, in some manner, of the presence or activity of God.

¹² The final word of our passage is a preposition with a pronominal suffix. It has traditionally been translated, “from it,” assuming that the antecedent is the masculine noun *derek*, “way.” One would then assume that the prepositional construction would agree with the corresponding antecedent in terms of gender and number, as is normally the case in biblical Hebrew. In our passage, the two possible antecedents are *derek* “way” (traditional reading) and *na’ar* “youth” (our reading), both third person masculine singular nouns. The literal rendering of the prepositional construction would be, then, “from him,” allowing, grammatically speaking, for *either* masculine antecedent. This finding would constitute a neutral observation in terms of favoring a new rendering of the proverb, since the antecedents are grammatically identical/interchangeable in terms of gender and number. Our verse, however, introduces an element of grammatical dissonance which may provide a positive indicator for preferring the reading “from him.” The prepositional suffix, surprisingly, does *not* agree with either antecedent in terms of gender. Its declension is, rather, third person *feminine* singular. This unexpected departure from the grammatical norm reflects a certain logical flexibility of the Hebrew idiom. The gender of antecedent/pronoun or subject/predicate may, in certain cases, not agree. This exceptional rule applies to nouns such as *na’ar* (as well as their predicates and referents), which represent indefinite personal, collective or epicene subjects. The masculine-feminine potential held within their meaning may at times introduce a level of logical interference which obscures the absolute/prior gender of the subject (in our case masculine), resulting in the alternative feminine-gender grammatical markers. *Derek* (“way”), of course, does not fit this category of noun, whereas *na’ar* (“youth”) does. This provides a cogent explanation for the grammatical peculiarity found in our verse, while pointing to *na’ar* as the more logical antecedent of the prepositional suffix, best rendered “from him.” Cf. Gesenius: *Grammar*, 1990:391.

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416 or admin@theologymatters.com or at our web site: www.theologymatters.com.

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Editor's note: The following is from the papers of Professor Bruce M. Metzger (1914–2007), America's greatest biblical scholar, who served as a Sunday School Superintendent early in his career and cared deeply about making disciples.

If I Were a Church School Teacher Again

Observation reveals that religious instruction is still very much a matter of conveying religious facts, and that this concern with religious knowledge is a Protestant characteristic. If I were a church school teacher again, I would seek constantly to emphasize the importance of Christian duties.

1. The Christian Duty of Saying Grace.

Saying grace is a beautiful and assuring Christian custom. If the scholars were young, I should teach them simple poetic graces for their own use—verses that express the gratitude we all should feel to our Heavenly Father for His good gifts.

2. The Christian Duty of Prayer.

I should begin and end my class with prayer. I should give the scholars simple prayers to learn by heart. I should have one of the scholars say a memorized prayer in class. I should try to impress the beauty and restfulness of the habit of nightly prayer before one lies down to sleep. Perhaps we should together form a prayer, and agree to say it each day for a week or month; and I should tell them Jesus' habits of prayer.

3. The Christian Duty of Church Attendance.

I should endeavor to teach my scholars the meaning of the church, and the value of church attendance. I should take them with me to church. I should ask them to notice the hymns we sang, and the Scripture that was read, and the text the minister used. The following Sunday we should find that text, and recall the main message of the minister.

So that my scholars might enter into the hour of worship as fully as possible, I should urge them to say a little prayer when they took their seats in the sanctuary, such as: "May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord."

4. The Christian Duty of Confirmation and Communion.

I should see that my scholars did not join the Church until both they and I were sure they wanted to know Jesus Christ in their personal experience, and walk in His ways. I should set forth the privilege and solemnity of that moment of confirmation when they would appear at the altar before God and His people, and take their stand with Him and them. I should try to make it, what it is, one of the great days of their lives. I should tell them the tragic story of the first communion in the Upper Room. How terrible to be a Judas! How wonderful to be Jesus' friend! I should see that they went to take the bread and the wine at their first communion with "the full assurance of understanding," treating it as a rare privilege, reserved for the friends of the Master.

5. The Christian Duty of Bible Reading.

I should treat the Bible lovingly, and be enthusiastic about its contents. I should be true to its traditional doctrines, and yet to modern scholarship, so that no future knowledge might cause my scholars to doubt its religious value.

I should see that each had a Bible of his own. I should also encourage them to find some treasure in its pages to show me.

6. The Christian Duty of Service.

This would be exceedingly important. I should not despise the habit of a daily good deed. I should try to lead them to have pity—for the poor, the sick, and the suffering—and tell them of the great agencies of mercy, whose work they might assist, and I should be careful to relate all their services to their Master, by considering all as in the light of His presence.

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