

Theology Matters

Vol. 28, No. 2

Spring 2022

Theological Implications of Inclusive Language in Biblical Translation

by Bruce M. Metzger

Editor's note: Bruce M. Metzger (1914–2007) was a well-known biblical scholar. The following are notes for an address written by him and delivered on Alumni Day, May 29, 1984, at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. A recording of the address shows some extemporization in some areas of the talk. The notes are published here for the first time, with permission. © Estate of Bruce M. Metzger 1984.

Since the time of the Tower of Babel problems of translation and communication have plagued individuals and nations alike. Not only does the work of translating a piece of literature require the utmost in concentrated effort, but the result will seldom please everyone—least of all the conscientious translator. In rendering a piece of literature one must give attention not only to the content (what is said) but also to the form (how it is said). The aim is to convey to the modern hearer or reader the same understanding and appreciation that the original author provided for his or her contemporaries. In attempting to reach this aim, the translator experiences what Ortega y Gasset described as the misery and the splendor of the translation process.

The translation of the Scriptures presents special difficulties. Since the Bible is a source of both information and inspiration, translations of it are required to be accurate philologically and pleasing aesthetically. They must be suitable for rapid reading as

well as for detailed study. Ideally they should be intelligible and even inviting to readers of all ages and of all degrees of education. And always, from first to last, the rendering must be faithful to what the author intended. To put into the translation what is not in the original, or to suppress part of what the author wrote is not only unscholarly but is an affront to the author, who is not allowed to say in the translation what he or she had originally written.

We may not agree with an author but that is no reason for altering what was written. Aristotle, for example, held that the institution of slavery is not only right but is a necessary part of society as a whole. If one were to remove from a translation of Aristotle all such references to slavery, the result could not by any stretch of the imagination be called the works of Aristotle. Again, if a translator were to remove from Hitler's speeches all anti-Semitic slurs, the resulting text would be far from giving a correct idea of what the Fuehrer said. In short, it is the first duty of a translator to respect the text and the historical realities presupposed within it.

Table of Contents

Theological Implications of Inclusive Language.....p. 1
From Christ to Christianity.....p. 7
An Invitation to Combat.....p.11

The twentieth century has seen an abundance of English translations of the Bible. Since 1900 at least one hundred fifteen English translations and revisions of part or all of the English Bible have been produced. Some of these were produced for special interest groups, and contain unjustified additions and deletions. Such a rendering, for example, is the *New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures* produced in 1950 by the Jehovah's Witnesses. In order to give support to their own theological orientation, this rendering unjustifiably introduces into the New Testament 237 instances of the word "Jehovah," and deliberately alters other passages which bear witness to the deity of Christ.

Another idiosyncratic version, published in 1981, is *The Sacred Scriptures*, Bethel Edition, issued by the Assemblies of Yahweh, Bethel, Pennsylvania. This is an adaptation of the King James Version, and is characterized by the introduction of Semitic words and terminology into the traditional language. In the New Testament, for example, instead of translating the Greek word *theos* by God, sometimes the Hebrew word El or Elohim is substituted, sometimes Yahweh. Jesus becomes Yahshua, and Elijah is spelled EliYah. A typical salutation in the Pauline Epistles is, "Grace to you and peace from Yahweh our Father and the Sovereign Yahshua the Messiah. I thank my Elohim always concerning you, for the grace of Yahweh which was given you in the Messiah Yahshua, ..." (I Corinthians 1:3-4). On the whole, this version is not so much heretical as eccentric.

In the case of *The Living Bible*, produced in 1971 by Kenneth Taylor, we have an expanded, paraphrastic rendering, with the elements of a commentary introduced throughout the text, and then all of it homogenized together. For example, instead of the first sixteen words with which the Book of Amos begins in the King James Version, Taylor expands the sentence into forty-six words by elaborating in rather obvious and pedantic ways upon the concise statement of the original. Instead of saying, as the Hebrew does, that Amos was among the herdsmen of Tekoa, Taylor expands as follows:

"Amos was a herdsman living in the village of Tekoa. All day long he sat on the hillside, watching the sheep, keeping them from straying."

The title page, however, warns the reader that the volume is a paraphrase and not a literal translation of the Bible.

Other translations have been made by various translators who have had in mind a special reading public. Such, for example, is the *Good News Bible* (1976), issued originally for those for whom English is a second

language. Here the vocabulary is restricted and the syntax is simplified—but the translator is intent to provide a dynamic equivalent (as it is called) and to say no more and no less than the original text allows. There is also now on the market a translation of the New Testament for the deaf (1983). In this edition, in order to facilitate presenting the Scriptures in sign language, the pronouns are often replaced by the appropriate nouns, and the sentence structure is greatly shortened.

In all such renderings made by faithful translators, the sense of the original is conveyed in one style or another. While one might on occasion and for good reason translate a word meaning "red" by using some synonym such as scarlet, crimson, vermilion, or even maroon, obviously one could not use the word "blue." The translator must constantly be aware of linguistic and historical constraints involved in the translation process. In the words of Bishop Butler, "Everything is what it is, and not another."

Modern Trends in English Style

A new set of problems has recently confronted translators in America. Concern over so-called "sexist" language has led a growing number of women—and men—to question the adequacy of the traditional use of the word "man" in referring to both men and women. This concern is merely part of a wider dissatisfaction over the use of what has come to be recognized as masculine-oriented language (as, "Let him who has ears to hear ..."). In fact, for some persons such language has become highly offensive, and during the past several years a wide variety of steps have been taken to attempt to introduce what is called "inclusive language." For example, several major publishers (including Macmillan; McGraw-Hill; Ginn; Holt Rinehart and Winston; Houghton Mifflin; Random House; Scott, Foresman and Co.) have prepared guidelines for prospective authors who plan to submit manuscripts for consideration.

Among quarterly periodicals the editors of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and *Theology Today* have declared that, if articles are submitted which do not use inclusive language, they will be adjusted so as to remove masculine-biased language. During the tenure of the late Mrs. Ella Grasso as Governor of the State of Connecticut, its constitution was revised to make equal references to men and women. Several Protestant denominations (including Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and the United Church of Christ), as well as groups within Roman Catholic orders and in Reformed Judaism, have undertaken to re-phrase their psalter, liturgy, hymns, and a variety of standards, such as the Form of Government, Book of Discipline, and other constitutional documents. Naturally these kinds of

concerns also face the translator of ancient documents, secular and sacred alike.

Recently a symposium was held at the University of Toronto in order to discuss problems that confront a panel of translators of the works of Erasmus. The University of Toronto Press has begun the publication of *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, which eventually will include forty volumes embracing the chief works of that prolific Dutch humanist and churchman. At the symposium we discussed some of the difficulties of rendering into English the ornate and baroque style of Latin which Erasmus delighted to use in his paraphrases and annotations on the New Testament.

In addition to matters involving alliteration and rhetorical figures of speech, we also discussed masculine-oriented language. It was agreed that ordinarily when Erasmus used the Latin word *vir* he meant an adult male, but that when he used the Latin word *homo* (or plural *homines*) his meaning might often be conveyed by the English word “person” or “people.” Nothing, however, was said about changing Erasmus’s language pertaining to the Deity—and this for a very good reason: the panel is intent upon giving a faithful rendering of what Erasmus himself intended to convey. It was taken for granted that to make changes in language about God would betray the author and deceive the reader.

The Revised Standard Version

Already in 1946 when the New Testament of the Revised Standard Version was first published, the Committee had begun to correct some of the over-masculinization of language that is present in the King James Version of 1611. For example, in Revelation 3:20, instead of the traditional rendering, “Behold I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door ...,” the RSV literally follows the Greek (which has the indefinite pronoun) and renders “... if any one hears my voice and opens the door ...” There remain, however, many other such passages that still need such correction as well as other passages on which recent textual and archaeological studies have thrown additional light. The continuing Committee which is responsible for introducing changes into the text of the RSV has been meeting in January and June every year in order to consider and vote upon proposals to make necessary improvements of all kinds. We have now nearly completed our work on the New Testament, and hope to be able to finish the Old Testament by about 1990.

Besides having abandoned the use of the archaic second-person pronouns and verbs in passages addressed to the Deity, we have also eliminated a wide variety of masculine-oriented language when referring to persons.

Of primary concern are those instances where the traditional English rendering has inserted “man” without support from the Greek or Hebrew original. That these should be changed goes without saying. A few examples from the book of Psalms include 37:35, “a wicked man overbearing” becomes “the wicked oppressing”; 54:3 “insolent men” and “ruthless men” become “the insolent” and “the ruthless”; 66:6 “men passed through” becomes “they passed through”; and similarly in 106:16; 119:136; 141:5; 142:4; 143:2.

In other cases, where the Hebrew *’ish* (“man”) occurs in the passage, we have taken into account the possibility that the word may be used in an inclusive sense. For example, in the first Psalm we have replaced “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked” with “Blessed are those who do not walk in the....” The frequently occurring expression, “children of men” or “sons of men” (Psalm 11:4; 12:1, 8; 14:2; 21:10; 31:19; 33:13; 36:7; etc.) has been replaced by a variety of expressions, including “humankind,” “all people,” “everyone.”

In the New Testament typical instances that required adjustment include the following. In the account of the wedding at Cana of Galilee, the King James Version reads, “Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse” (John 2:10). Because the Greek text of this verse has no word for “man” or “men,” we propose to translate more literally, “everyone serves good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk.” In the Letter to the Romans we are suggesting the following changes:

“He who through faith is righteous ...” / “The one who ...” (1:17).

“Wickedness of men who ... suppress the truth” / “Wickedness of people who ...” (1:18).

“Exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” / “... glory of the imperishable God for images resembling perishable humanity” (1:23).

“He will render to every man according to his works” / “... repay according to each one’s ...” (2:6).

“God judges the secrets of men” / “... secrets of human beings” (2:16).

There is, of course, a limit to which such changes can be made by responsible translators. In Old Testament times, in a family of sons and daughters only the male children inherited from their father. Again, a man would marry a wife, but a woman was given or taken in

marriage. In order not to falsify historical documents such historical customs must be conveyed in the translation.

An Inclusive Language Lectionary

In October, 1983, the National Council of Churches issued *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*.¹ This presents the RSV text rather extensively modified, both with respect to language for human beings as well as for the Deity. It is not too much to say that some of the changes introduced in this lectionary are down-right silly. For example, instead of the statement in John 11:1, “Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany,” the Committee has changed it to read, “Now a certain person was ill, Lazarus of Bethany.” Again, at John 9:1, the “man blind from birth” has been changed to “person blind from birth,” and throughout the chapter all references to him as a man and as the son of his parents have been removed—despite the use in the Greek of masculine forms. Why has this been done? In a footnote the Committee explains that, because the one born blind “is never identified by name, masculine pronouns have been omitted in order to invite women as well as men to hear their condition addressed in this passage.” One or two comments are in order.

The attitude represented in the footnote certainly implies that women have a very limited capacity to exercise imagination and empathy with characters in a narrative. In other passages, however, which present unnamed women as principal characters, the Committee has not neutralized the account but preserves the feminine pronouns; examples include the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4:8–16, and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:22–28. Why have these narratives not been altered so that men might identify with the situations described? Does not the Committee inadvertently demean women by supposing that they are less able than men to empathize with a narrative involving someone of the other sex?

In striving to avoid the use of masculine pronouns, at many places the Committee has mangled the English language, and at times reduced it to pidgin English. Not only is there excessive use of the expression “the one” (for example, Daniel 7:13 has “one like a human-one”), but the repetition of a noun in order to avoid using a masculine pronoun produces monotonous and contrived English. The familiar cadences of John 3:16f. have been altered so as to read, “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Child, that whoever believes in that Child should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent that Child into the world, not to condemn the world, but that through that Child the world might be saved.”

Here the fact that Jesus was a male human being is muffled, and the term “Son” is replaced by the far less appropriate word “Child.” Aversion to the use of the pronoun “himself” is carried to the ludicrous extreme of saying “Christ humbled self” (Philippians 2:7).

God as Father and Jesus Christ his Son

The most serious challenge to Christian theology that has come from the current trend focuses on the Bible’s use of Father in speaking to or about God. Disliking the sex-discrimination that some think is implied in the term “father,” this criticism may take extreme forms, as the refusal to use the address in the Lord’s Prayer, or in the wilder counter-discriminatory substitution of Mother for Father.² It is argued that since the Bible was written in a patriarchal culture, the biblical authors are somehow prejudiced by that culture against women’s rights.

It is, of course, true that in Scripture God is presented as caring for his people with the tenderness of a mother as well as of a father. For example, Isaiah represents God as saying to Israel, “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13; cf. 49:15). Again, in speaking of God’s intervention in history, the prophet declares, “For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in travail” (Isaiah 42:14). Elsewhere Isaiah even likens God’s care to that of mother birds hovering to protect their young (Isaiah 31:5).³

Yet nowhere in the Bible is God described as a mother-goddess or addressed as Mother. In Old Testament times Israel was surrounded by peoples who worshiped female deities, such as Astarte and Ashtoreth. But the biblical God is totally different from such goddesses of Near Eastern fertility cults. Even in the metaphor of Deuteronomy 32:18, “You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth,” the controlling idea is not gender (masculine forms are used throughout), but that the paternal and maternal responsibility for Israel’s existence belongs to God alone.

The New Testament has two passages that are sometimes appealed to as suggesting the feminine element in the divine. One is Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). The other is the parable of the woman who swept her house to find the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10). But the point of both passages concerns God’s relationship to the lost and has nothing to do with the sexuality of God. All language about God is metaphorical, for the infinite being of God must be expressed to finite minds by means of analogues, such as shepherd, potter, vine-dresser, and many others.

In assessing, now, the significance of passages such as those that have just been mentioned, it is important to keep them in proper perspective. First of all, every book of the New Testament (except the brief Third Epistle of John) refers to God as Father, whereas not once in either Old or New Testament is God ever called Mother. With regard to the paternal and maternal imagery mentioned earlier, there is a difference between saying “God is our Father” (describing the person of God) and saying “God comforts his people as a mother comforts her child” (describing an action of God). In the former, God is identified (“is”) by a noun, “our Father.” In the latter, an action of God is compared to (“as”) an action performed by mothers.

The upshot of these considerations is that there is no justification for the Lectionary Committee’s re-writing the Bible by adding the words “and Mother” (within square brackets)⁴ whenever God is referred to as Father. This unwarranted addition changes the whole orientation of the writers of Scripture. They knew, and all readers of the Bible should know, that God has no sexuality. According to the book of Genesis, male and female are structures of creation, while God is totally other than his creation.

Furthermore, no metaphor applies literally to God. Thus, when Hosea speaks of God as “husband” to Israel (Hosea 2:2), the prophet does not mean that God performs the conjugal functions of a husband. Such crude anthropomorphism was part of ancient Greek polytheism, but was totally abhorrent to the Old Testament prophets. Yet the National Council’s lectionary committee has imposed sexuality upon God by interpreting “Father” sexually and then adding the female “Mother.” Thus, instead of recognizing that God transcends sexuality, being neither male nor female, people will be led to think of God as bi-sexual.

Besides adding the words “and Mother” whenever God as Father is mentioned, the lectionary committee has also made a great number of other changes, very few of which are brought to the attention of the reader of the passage. For example, whenever the pronoun “he” is used in referring to God, the pronoun is replaced by repeating the word “God.” It does not matter to the committee that this results, at times, in a dozen instances of the word “God” within the space of three verses (e.g. Romans 8:28–30). The masculine “Lord,” of course, cannot be allowed to stand, and so the Lord’s supper becomes “the Sovereign’s supper” (I Corinthians 11:20). Then the Apostle Paul’s statement that, as often as we participate in the communion, we do “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Corinthians 11:26) becomes “you proclaim the Sovereign’s death until Christ comes.” But this introduces a disjunction between Sovereign (Lord) and the Christ, as though they were

different persons. Even “kingdom of God” is too sexist and is replaced by “realm of God”—though of course this expression is somewhat ambiguous. Some changes are made silently and without footnotes. In the account of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman, she is not allowed to address him as “sir” or “lord”; the Committee has simply dropped the Greek word *kyrie* of John 4:11 without so much as a footnote. The climax of such appalling distortions imposed upon the biblical text is that, when these mutilated passages are read from the pulpit as the Scripture, people will attribute the nonsense they are hearing to the biblical authors themselves!

Finally, one of the greatest dangers in using the new lectionary is the inevitable erosion of the Church’s understanding of the Trinity. This doctrine has its basis in the Church’s reflection on the content of Scripture, including such key passages as the baptismal formula at the close of the Gospel according to Matthew: “Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” This passage now reads in the lectionary: “... baptizing them in the name of [God] the Father [and Mother], and of Jesus Christ the beloved Child of God and of the Holy Spirit.” It is not hard to see that this language may come to be taken as referring not to the Trinity, but to a quaternity in the Godhead.

Conclusion

The Bible as canonical Scripture is the normative standard for the Church. Now a special interest group has ventured to introduce grotesque changes into the metaphorical language about God as Father and Jesus Christ as Son. Such alterations of the basic thought-patterns of biblical authors are, at the very least, acts of gross disrespect for those biblical authors—to say nothing about correcting the Word of God! The ancient authors should be allowed to speak as was natural and customary for them to do.⁵

Those who prepared the new lectionary version of the Bible confuse the work of translators with the task of Christian educators. It is the latter who have the responsibility of instructing young and old alike that God is never to be thought of as “the Man upstairs.” He is Father in a sense above and different from all earthly fathers. But the term itself is validated by Jesus Christ and is pervasive in the documents that have imposed themselves as canon upon the Church.

If the lectionary committee had confined its attention to adjusting language about humans, so as to ensure that where the Hebrew and Greek original involves both men and women the English translation faithfully reflects such texts, there could be no objection. It is, however, an altogether different matter to meddle with Christian

theology and to tinker with texts that bear on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.⁶

Many ancient religions worshipped male and female deities, but to conclude that the Bible is merely the produce of its contemporary culture is invalid. That its references to God as Father are not just a reflection of ancient patriarchal customs can be seen from the refusal of the Old and New Testament authors alike to adopt the sexual references to the Deity that were prevalent in contemporary cultures. In the Bible, God transcends masculinity and femininity within the mystery of the Godhead. At the same time, in communicating to the writers of Scripture God has chosen to employ masculine imagery very much more often than feminine imagery. To refuse to use any reference to God as “he” and to use only such expressions as “the divine being” or “the Deity” is to depersonalize God. In the entire Judeo-Christian tradition God is referred to as who and

¹ *An Inclusive Language Lectionary. Readings for Year A.* Prepared for experimental and voluntary use in churches by the Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee appointed by the Division of Education and Ministry, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Published for The Cooperative Publication Association by John Knox Press, Atlanta; The Pilgrim Press, New York; The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1983.

² Sometimes, with a show of spurious scholarship, it is argued that, since the Hebrew word for “Spirit” is feminine (*ruach*), there is somehow a female element in the Old Testament concept of the Deity. But this is to confuse grammatical gender with sexuality. That there is no necessary correspondence can be seen from the fact that in southern European languages the words for “sun” and “moon” are masculine and feminine respectively, whereas in northern European languages they are feminine and masculine.

³ In order to increase these very few Old Testament female metaphors for God, the Introduction to the lectionary pretends to offer several others: “God is compared to a mother suckling her children (Num. 11:12); a seamstress making clothes for Israel to wear (Neh. 9:21); and a midwife attending a birth (Job 3:12).” Not one of these, however, refers to God, as anyone can see who looks them up. Is this typical of the biblical scholarship represented on the committee?

⁴ The insertion of square brackets is merely for the eye and not the ear, because when a passage is read from the pulpit in a service of worship the lector certainly will not mention the presence of each bracket.

⁵ What historian of the Reformation worthy of the name would contemplate “translating” Luther’s or Calvin’s references to

not which. In the simplest terms we call God our Father because Jesus has taught us to do so, and to cease so to call him, is to cease praying as Jesus enjoined us.

In making a final estimate of the overall quality of the National Council’s *Inclusive Language Lectionary*, one must say that, instead of its being a legitimate version, it is a monstrous perversion of the holy Scriptures. If and when it is read publicly from the pulpit the lector owes it to the congregation to introduce the pericope with some such statement as: “The lesson is from the Gospel according to Matthew as modified by the Inclusive Language Lectionary Committee of the National Council of Churches.”

Bruce M. Metzger, Ph.D., served as a Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, from 1944 to 1984.

God as Father/Mother in the way the Lectionary committee has done with John, Peter, Paul, and other first-century authors? How much of the vast amount of Christian literature is to be rewritten so as to make the writers use inclusive language with reference to God?

⁶ While the present article focuses upon the use of inclusive language in the translation of the Bible (which belongs to the whole church) and has no quarrel with those who compose bisexual prayers, liturgies, hymns, and other such private expressions of personal preference, it should be pointed out that the increasingly-used modern alternative of “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer” for “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” substitutes functional language (three things that God does) for personal language (three *personae* that God is). The difficulty is that the functions that can be attributed to God are vastly more than creating, redeeming, and sustaining. Furthermore, none of these three can be exclusively linked with one of the *personae*. For example, the Bible does not equate the function of creating with the Father; the Son is also involved in the creative process. The Fourth Gospel, speaking of the Word, says, “All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made” (John 1:3), and in Colossians the writer states “In him [Christ] all things were created” (1:16). Likewise one of the most venerable liturgical treasures of the Church, the ancient hymn *Veni Creator Spiritus*, explicitly refers to the Spirit as creator. Orthodox Trinitarianism has therefore held to a doctrine of *perichoresis*, or interpenetration of the three *personae*. The currently popular substitute for the Trinitarian formula, by appearing to equate a discrete function to each of the Persons, destroys this important insight about the richness of God’s activity and the interpenetration of God’s *personae*.

From Christ to Christianity

How the Jesus Movement Became the Christian Church in One Lifetime

by James R. Edwards

Imagine that we can travel back in time to the first century, by a time machine, for instance, or as Michael Crichton submits in his book *Timeline*, by “faxing” ourselves into the past. We wish to find the historical Jesus. According to the Gospels, what should we look for, what should we expect to find?

Here are the rudimentary elements of the Jesus movement portrayed in the Gospels:

- Jesus was an **itinerant teacher**,
- leading a **small movement**,
- with **no name**.
- It consisted of an inner circle of **twelve men**,
- but it was augmented by many **other men and women**
- in **rural Palestine**.
- It was centered in the **northwest quadrant of the Sea of Galilee**,
- it was ethnically **Jewish**
- and spoke **Aramaic** in public, but **Hebrew** when reading and discussing Scripture.
- It celebrated **Passover**,
- worshiped in **synagogues**
- on **Sabbath** (Saturdays),
- and it read from **scrolls**.

Now, let’s consider making a second time trip, not to Galilee in the year 28, but to Ephesus or Magnesia on the west coast of present-day Turkey in about the year 100. Ignatius of Antioch wrote letters to these cities at the turn of the century, i.e., about seventy-five years after Jesus died, and he describes the church to which he wrote in his letters. Here is what we find:

- The movement founded by Jesus in rural Galilee is now thoroughly **urban**.
- It is no longer isolated to Palestine but pulsating throughout the **Roman Empire**, particularly on the Antioch-Rome corridor.

- The church is now largely **Gentile** rather than almost exclusively Jewish.
- It has abandoned Hebrew and Aramaic and shifted entirely to **Greek**.
- Christians are no longer meeting in Jewish synagogues, but in “**churches**.”
- Churches are not superintended by Apostles, as in Jesus’ day, but by **bishops**.
- Worship services are no longer on Sabbath, but on **Sunday**.
- The celebration of Passover has yielded to the celebration of the **Lord’s Supper**.
- Sacred scripture is no longer limited to what we know as the Old Testament—Pentateuch, Writings, and Prophets—but augmented by specifically **Christian scriptures**—four Gospels, epistles of Paul and Peter and a Christian apocalypse.
- These scriptures are no longer written in heavy clumsy scrolls, but in the most radical information technology to hit the world at the time, the **codex**, a reader-friendly volume of leaves of paper bound on one edge and written on *both* sides that offers instant access to any part of the volume.

What do these two lists tell us? They tell us that by the turn of the first century, that is to say, *roughly seventy-five years after the death of Jesus*, we encounter a *Christian community that conforms to none of the descriptions of the Jesus movement in the Gospels*.

A few of the above changes have already happened by the time the New Testament was written. One of them is the transition from Hebrew/Aramaic to Greek. All extant early Christian writings that we possess are written, like the NT itself, in Greek rather than in Aramaic or Hebrew. We know that Jesus and his followers spoke both Hebrew and Aramaic, but remarkably not *one* Hebrew or Aramaic Christian document is extant today. Greek eclipsed Hebrew as a

written medium of communication in Christian early and entirely.

Most of the changes, however, were in the process of taking place in the first century.

- The gospel was breaking out of its *Palestinian context* and pulsating along the *Jerusalem-Rome corridor*.
- Christianity was ceasing to be a *rural movement* and becoming a primarily *urban movement*,
- and it began to include *Gentiles* as well as *Jews*.
- The name of the new movement was changing from the *Way* to *Christian*;
- Jesus' chosen leaders were changing from *Apostles* to *elders and bishops*;
- Worship was changing from *Saturday* to *Sunday*.

Still other changes were yet to come, well beyond the time of Ignatius, in fact. The inclusion of Christian writings in what would become the New Testament canon is one such change. Although the documents of the New Testament were *functionally* effective already in the second century, the New Testament canon was not *officially* defined and closed until the fourth century.

It is often the case that the more familiar we are with something, the less aware we are of its significance. Think of this as a “principle of familiarity.” With regard to our present subject, there is nothing revolutionary about our descriptions of Jesus' Galilean ministry. All of us would come up with a similar list on our own. The writings of Ignatius are less well known, to be sure, but all told they are no longer than the Gospel of Mark, and hence they can be read in entirety in less than two hours. If we read them, we would come up with a second list of descriptions equally similar to the one above. Nothing in either list is essentially new to us. Indeed, we consider both descriptions as equally Christian. It is this general familiarity that blinds us to the revolutionary significance of the two lists, for **every single description of the form of the church has changed, but the content of the faith has remained rooted in, continuous with, and descriptive of Jesus without fundamental change.**

Allow me to explain and defend this thesis by making four points. First, the description of Jesus' ministry corresponds to virtually no church that you know of, but the description of Ignatius's ministry corresponds to virtually every church that you know of. These changes

occurred in the first seventy-five years of the Christian movement, and I wish to argue that they represent the most significant developments in the entire history of Christianity.

Protestant scholars, especially, have typically considered the latter years of the first century and early years of the second century, i.e., the years in which Ignatius of Antioch ministered, to be a fallow historical period in which the early church either flat-lined or regressed theologically. Protestant histories of early Christianity typically make a cursory pass through—or a long-jump over—the time period between the death of the Apostles (ca. AD 70) and the appearance of the Apologists—Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian (ca. 150). This patronizing historiography is due to a scholarly prejudice, which was championed by Adolf von Harnack but followed by many others, that viewed the interim between the death of the Apostles and the rise of the Apologists to be a digression or degeneration from the vibrant faith of Apostolic Christianity to a stultified and institutionalized faith that was either unhealthily tethered to or in reaction against Judaism. According to this view, only when the tributary of early Christianity flowed away from its Semitic background and into the major Hellenistic current of the world, as represented in the concepts, vocabulary, and institutional forms of Greek and Latin culture, that Christianity gained access to the means by which it could grow and mature. In other words, only when the church ceased to be “Jewish” and became “Greek” did its theological and ecclesiastical existence warrant genuine historical inquiry.

This paradigm has prevailed in the past century-and-a-half of Protestant scholarship and is based in large part on anti-Semitic prejudice rather than on historical evidence. The opening line of Adolf Harnack's two-volume *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity* begins with the following sentence: “To nascent Christianity the synagogues in the Diaspora meant more than the *fontes persecutionem* of Tertullian's complaint; they also formed the most important presupposition for the rise and growth of Christian communities throughout the empire.”¹ Harnack's monumental study of early Christianity, which still today furthers our knowledge of the early church, portrays the development of early Christianity not simply as a reaction against Jewish persecution, but against *Judaism* itself. His anti-Jewish rant in the fifth chapter is both painful and shameful to read in a post-Holocaust world. I believe this paradigm to be grossly erroneous. The period between Paul and Justin Martyr is not an unfruitful interim, a “holding pattern,” a time in which the church had not “come of age,” or worse, a “devolution.” Rather, the resultant form and structure of the church, as is evident in the introductory contrast

between the Jesus movement of AD 30 and the church of Ignatius in AD 100, reveal the period between AD 70–150 to be *the most creative period in the history of Christianity*.

Second, these tectonic changes were achieved for the most part not by the influence of extraordinary Christian leaders but by the *lay* demography of the church. They were “grass-roots” developments rather than “top-down” impositions.

Orthodox and Catholic scholars have traditionally regarded Ignatius of Antioch as the greatest post-New Testament figure who belongs equally and justly to both Orthodox and Catholic traditions. Ignatius of Antioch is a truly remarkable historical figure, for his fame and influence rest *entirely* on a mere six weeks of his life. Taken prisoner in Antioch, Ignatius was conducted under guard to Rome, where he was thrown to the beasts in the newly constructed Colosseum. As he passed through what today is western Turkey, Ignatius wrote seven letters to churches—some of which were the same churches to which John wrote in the Revelation (Ephesus, Philadelphia, Smyrna). Everything we know about Ignatius derives from the substance of those seven letters, all of which were written within a six-week period. Nothing before or after those six weeks is further known about his life. Both Orthodox and Catholics regard Ignatius as the last figure in the early church whom they hold in common, after whom the single Christian tradition forks into Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

Protestantism, on the other hand, has tended to minimize the significance of the post-New Testament era. The very terms by which it is known, “post-Apostolic” or “the Apostolic Fathers,” compare it unfavorably with the New Testament era; and its leaders, Ignatius and Polycarp, for example, are compared equally unfavorably with the Apostle Paul or the Apostle John or the Apostle Peter. True, the post-Apostolic era lacks figures like Paul, Peter, and John, but equally true, *every* period thereafter lacks such leaders! No other figure in Christianity—not Origen or Augustine, not even Luther—has ever equaled the contribution and significance of the Apostle Paul for Christianity. The same could be said of the Apostles John and Peter. The absence of figures like Paul, John, and Peter is thus irrelevant to the matter. What matters are the tectonic changes in Christianity that we have noted. Given these changes, the absence of figures like Paul, John, and Peter *enhances* the significance of the post-Apostolic era, for the constitutive changes that we noted at the outset were not produced by apostolic superstars (an expression that is a contradiction in terms), but rather by the faithful witness and mission of *mere* Christians

whose names and feats, for the most part, have vanished from the record.

Thanks to the Book of Acts and epistles of the Apostle Paul, which preserve some 150 names of persons and places associated with the early Christian mission in the West, we are fortunate to know a fair amount about the expansion of the early church from Jerusalem to Rome. We know, however, that the early church also spread eastward at the same time that it spread westward to Rome. Indeed, its eastward expansion was *three times* the distance of its westward expansion to Rome—beyond India all the way to China. But we know of no Dr. Luke who wrote its history or Rev. Paul who wrote epistles to the churches of this eastward expansion. Compared to the 150 names associated with the westward expansion of Christianity in Acts and the Epistles, we have a mere dozen names associated with the church’s eastward expansion, and several of the names are seemingly apocryphal. These two branches of church expansion—one well-known, the other almost wholly unknown—tell us that the growth and maturity in the church occurred “democratically” rather than by a few major luminaries of the faith like Paul, John, or Peter. No one calls this generation “the greatest generation,” and yet it achieved what neither its arguably greater forebears nor followers achieved. If ever the church was indebted to “the priesthood of all believers,” it is the effect of that priesthood in the first seventy-five years of Christian history.

Third, the changes we have noted were not accomplished by a strategic mission plan. As we noted earlier, the changes from Jew to Gentile, from rural to urban, from Hebrew to Greek, and so forth, took place in different ways, at different times, and in different regions of early Christianity. There was no centralized plan by which these changes were accomplished. Rather, they were *the result of the early church seeking to organize its corporate life of witness, worship, and mission according to Christology*. The changes that I noted at the outset of this talk were the result of the early church’s commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the formative influence of his Lordship in all aspects of its life, including worship, mission, and structure. In this respect, early Christianity was “Reformed” Christianity—*reformata, semper reformandum*—“Reformed, always reforming.”

The primary “rule of faith” or compass point to which the early church *reformed* its theology, ecclesiology, and mission was a historical narrative that we call today—and may have been called then—the *kerygma*. The *kerygma* is alluded to frequently in the Pauline Epistles, and it is synthesized in the speeches of Acts in the following skeletal form:

I. The Messiah promised in the Old Testament has come.

II. He is Jesus of Nazareth, who

- A. did good and executed mighty works by the power of God,
- B. was crucified according to the purpose of God,
- C. was raised from the dead by the power of God,
- D. is now exalted as “Lord” to the Right Hand of God,
- E. and will come again in judgment to restore all things.

III. Let all who hear believe this message, repent, and be baptized.

The *kerygma* was simple and memorable, it was public and knowable, and it was universal. Unlike the oracle of Delphi, for example, where the *omphalos* was hidden deep in the bowels of the Temple of Apollo and could be discerned only by a special Seer, the *kerygma* of the church was public domain, accessible to rich and poor, male and female, slave and free, educated and illiterate. The *kerygma* was not revealed in a secret place to select devotees, but proclaimed in the agoras and public squares of ancient cities. This dynamic core of the Christian proclamation guided and even determined the external changes in the church that we noted at the outset of this lecture. The changes that occurred between Jesus and Ignatius were determined by the early church’s conviction of the *universal salvific significance of Jesus Christ*. One thinks, for example, of the incongruity of excluding Gentiles from the community of Christ because they were uncircumcised; if the early church was to fulfill the great commission to make disciples of *all nations* (Matt 28:19), which itself had been adumbrated in the call of Abraham that in him *all nations* would be blessed (Gen 12:3), then early Christianity *had* to include Gentiles in the embrace of the gospel. Had it not done so, the church would have failed in fulfilling the universal mission of salvation history. The same is true for other changes we have noted, including breaking free from the confines of rural Palestine for urban centers, and forsaking Hebrew and Aramaic for Greek. If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was of *universal* significance, then it must be made *universally* accessible.

Fourth, and finally, within the tectonic changes in the form of the church, the integrity and essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ remained constant. It was this

¹ Adolf Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity I-II*, trans. James Moffatt (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908), I:1.

constant core that accounts for our being able to proclaim equally Christian both the community of Jesus and the community of Ignatius, despite their external differences. In the first seventy-five years of Christianity, we witness the theological and ecclesial puberty of Christianity: the physique changes, but the DNA remains the same. We see a powerful yet characteristic irony of *the adaptivity of the gospel to new forms without the captivity of the gospel to those forms*. Ernst Lohmeyer pictures early Christianity in terms of a stage on which *two* plays are happening at the same time.

The history of early Christianity offers from its beginnings an unusual double drama. Hardly any other religion penetrated lands and provinces with its message, or entered so fully into human relationships and conditions as did early Christianity. ... Yet scarcely was any other religion so unaffected by the fates and crises of the time in which it began and grew, holding fast to its course, so that it remained largely unaffected by the burning issues and problems that brought down the societies into which it entered.²

The first seventy-five years of Christian history exhibit the most significant development of the church in all Christian history. This was not a fallow era, and interlude between New Testament Apostles and the later church fathers, but the most creative epoch in the history of the church. In these same seventy-five years, the tectonic changes of the church owe more to the faithfulness of ordinary believers—its democratic laity—that to stellar individual church leaders. Nor were these changes and developments achieved in accord with a centralized or strategic plan of the church. Rather, they were the result of the early church seeking to organize its corporate life of witness, worship, and mission according to Christology. And finally, the changes reveal an adaptivity of church forms but not a captivity of its Christological core. ***In the first seventy-five years of the Christian era every description of the form of the church changes, but the content of the faith remains rooted in, continuous with, and descriptive of Jesus without fundamental change.*** Jesus Christ was the New Wine, and new wine required New Wineskins!

Dr. Edwards delivered this address on Oct. 7, 2021, at Theology Matters’ conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Dr. James R. Edwards, Ph.D., is the Bruner-Welch Professor Emeritus of Theology at Whitworth University.

² Ernst Lohmeyer, *Soziale Fragen im Urchristentum* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1921), 129. Translation mine.

An Invitation to Combat

by Richard A. Ray

Theology is a challenging form of inquiry. How can one know where to turn when he is seeking knowledge about the creator of the universe, the concepts of the incarnation and salvation, the ultimate purposes of our creator, and the final meaning of our lives? These are very big questions. Sometimes they even encourage us to think in very different ways. In my case, however, I believe they formed a sense of curiosity before anything else. And that seemed to be an early gift. I was afflicted by questions. A restless soul.

I slid in and out of my high school years like a bemused visitor from another country. A curious mind is hard to keep in hand. When I strolled into a scheduled class I sat down in a desk, took my bearings, and proceeded to ease, for a large part, into my own interior world. It was an interesting place in which to consider the possibilities that life might hold. Even the red head with a nice smile who planned to dance her way into the Radio City Music Hall Rockettes and who sat behind me in English could not always capture my attention. I viewed the world of thought as a great unending mystery, even though at the time I had no conception of what the world of books, let alone the confrontation with other dimensions of thought, would hold.

It was, however, soon after I found my way into college that an initiation occurred. I remember it as though it were yesterday. Seated before an open window, the golden light of a New England autumn pouring through, I turned to my assignment. The essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. And while there would be even greater challenges in time, I dove into the text. When I had finished reading these essays and emerged, I thought to myself, whether this stuff is true or not, I had never encountered such mental dexterity. It was, of course, later that I realized that John Calvin would have choked on it. Even so, an introduction to a broader world was under way. I dimly realized that the arena in which thoughtful people crossed swords with one another was going to entail a special kind of combat. The wonder of unfamiliar ideas opening within one's own mind had made a landing on my small heretofore protected beach.

It was not to the Bible that I turned next. I was yet to know how mysterious and beckoning it could become. There was, however, a vast landscape of books waiting for one who had been captured by his own curiosity. I

climbed over the wall of the required class texts and began to use my small funds to buy all manner of additional publications. Among them were two volumes on the evolution of European moral ideas, one that was written about a hundred years after the former. A Nobel prize winning novel by Hermann Hesse, *Magister Ludi*, investigated mystical thought among intellectuals and, foreshadowing the development of game theory, proved to be a guide to the big bang concept and the expansion of the universe. There were two volumes of research by the psychoanalyst Karen Horney, a critical introduction to James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, and a bewildering fictional account of the nineteenth century French poet Arthur Rimbaud. I recently picked up the latter again and noted that when I had finally finished reading it so long ago I had scribbled on the inside of the dust jacket "This book has led me into the valley of the damned." Unknown preparation in the playing fields of the mind.

Of course, I had no thought at that time that all of this would later become a force which drove the awakening to theology. I later realized that there was nothing so extraordinary about all of this. Plenty of others had been down such paths. The more intelligent ones went far deeper. They eventually recognized that it was a recovery of the classics and the theological works, some of which had been only lightly perused, that had opened the doors to both the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation and prepared the world of faith for a new birth. Where would Aquinas have been, we might wonder, without his Aristotle? Where would Luther have been without his Augustine? And where would the youthful Calvin have been without his Seneca? We may not know. An unsuspected form of preparation on the playing fields of the mind.

It was Desiderius Erasmus, the Christian humanist, who knew that there was no other path than that of *ad fontes*, "back to the sources." He had prepared the texts that even the more traditional reformers could not evade. They all became driven, however, by the recognition that words mattered and that some of them mattered a great deal. In *Humanists and Reformers*, Bard Thompson wrote, "The civilizing effect of language was an idea that possessed the whole of the Renaissance. . . . The issue of whether to include a given item in the curriculum was resolved by asking the question, "'Does it form human beings and make them whole?'"¹ I had

not been interested in the civilizing effect of language. What I had noticed was something much different. Reading books so carefully written but so different from oneself was accepting a challenge for combat.

There was, of course, nothing about the books that had come my way that resembled the ones Erasmus had in mind. And there were none there that Thompson would regard as helping me to become “whole,” a thought that the Renaissance left us. They certainly never would have been regarded as literary comfort food. And that is the point. I read them because they had a uniquely invasive force. They penetrated the cultural world in which I had lived and thereby began to determine the rules of combat which I would face when I began to realize that theology mattered.

They were worthy informants, helping me to know that the humanity was not as simple as I had thought. As later I discovered, such complexity could guide one to look more carefully about the gospel. I also learned that some of the theologians who had been forerunners of the Nicene formulas had spent long years in the study of rhetoric and literature. Apparently, it was a deft form of intellectual combat that eventually begins to prepare such people. And that became the most curious outcome of the whole extracurricular experience. It led me to a world in which one begins to unravel the texture of commonplace ideas and to look for something more enduring beyond them. It also led me in time to understand that the Bible is the most penetrating book of all. In this regard, to read it circumspectly is to become prepared for a unique kind of cultural combat.

Words upon words the biblical texts unroll. And yet until the time is right the curtain remains mysteriously closed. To put it in an even more challenging perspective, some authors had involuntarily tipped me off that when I began to read the Bible it might become my enemy as well as my friend. They thus suggested, to my mind at least, that the perilous thing about reading the Scripture is that it would always remain an invasive presence, and that it was precisely in this regard that it would merit our respect. Those who felt that they had the right to soften or diminish the painful authority of its cut would in time diminish its relevance and become my most puzzling opponents.

We cross paths with an unfathomable depth of both judgment and mercy through the unfolding narratives of Scripture. And does not this peculiar paradox, one which breaks us loose from accounts of European morals and nineteenth century poets, prompt us to read even the passages which would normally be avoided? I have discovered that this mesmerizing dialectic within its pages binds us to a strange accountability.

If we walk through the comforting passages, the long chapters of the canonical text until we approach its conclusion, we come near the end to an alarming passage. There are angels galore, which might be a signal that an authority like no other is near. In Revelation 14 one of them soars over the earth and issues a command, “Fear God and give him glory because the hour of his judgment has come.”

It occurred to me that this was not only enough to move the authors of my extracurricular reading on to a very small place on a back shelf but also to find a place for me there as well. Perhaps some spiritual writers who coddle their readers might shudder when they see what then follows. Another angel puts his sickle across the earth and throws the entire grape harvest “into the great winepress of the wrath of God.” Noticeably, we do not read that we have been given an exemption from this searching test. It could lead us to wonder that if in the biblical perspective, one’s most challenging combat will ultimately include oneself. And our relationship with God will be like no other. Theology committed only to a blissful assurance will find nothing that supports it in such texts. And in such voices as these I have also heard a very subtle warning that the most palliative theologians were the ones that could rot my soul. The ones in which I might find my own political identity confirmed would be the most dangerous of all.

There are works of art which, if we give them a longer look, also have a capacity to pull back the curtain of confidence in our minds. We stumble upon them in unexpected places. And then they inaudibly whisper to us that mysteries are near.

Albert Einstein was known for theoretical physics, but his life gives us pause for thought. Apparently, Einstein attended a Roman Catholic elementary school for a few years as a child. What came of it? In *Einstein: The Life and Times*, Ronald W. Clark notes that in his small Mercer Street study in Princeton, the aging Einstein had “a rather beautiful Madonna and Child” and an “early Italian Christian painting” on a shelf.² There is still more. The mystery deepens. Einstein is quoted as saying, “I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. ... No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus.”³ There is, apparently, more in the reach of the Gospel than we may have realized. Such an insight can move us to recognize that our limitations have been within ourselves.

It is also true that pictures do not explain themselves. Nor do they overtly explain any of us to ourselves or to our friends. They come to us more silently than that. Good art often proposes a riddle which, if we try to solve it, can draw us toward theology.

As a student far from home, New England snowstorms provided a particularly bleak surmise about the world. Their presence in art became especially haunting. Peter Bruegel the Younger, whose father had died when he was five years old and his mother when he was fourteen, produced a painting with the title “Winter Landscape with a Bird Trap.” As suggestive for this picture as the loss of his parents might have been, we wonder if there were deeper reasons why he painted it sixty times before he was satisfied with it. Would it echo the realism of a biblical text as well as that of his personal life?

In the picture the frozen river holds two dozen skaters. The bare dark branches of the trees could be reminiscent of fish nets. Blackbirds haunt the scene, some innocently ambling toward their death, toward the trap that has been set to fall on them. A solitary person is sitting alone in a distant boat. Who is that person, who are these birds and who am I the picture asks us? And who is coming into this winter of my life with an invisible trap?

From 1868 to 1869, Monet worked on “The Magpie.” In it the dark bird sits alone on top, of all things, a gate that someone has closed. Snow covers everything in sight like a shroud. The house on the right has no windows and no doors. One can feel a chill that carries with it more than a change in the temperature. Could the magpie also be as lonely as this scene makes me feel? What might that suggest to us? And if the gate could be opened where would the road lead us? Does it amplify Scripture’s hint that someone is waiting to prepare us for a combat in which we must struggle against heretofore unknown foes? Could the one who was known to paint all things bright and beautiful have suggested that there is a gate waiting for us that we must enter alone?

The nineteenth century American lithographers, Currier and Ives, provide pictures that decorated the walls of homes across the United States. The figures are as motionless as stone statues in most of their pictures. In “Early Winter” a snow imprisoned landscape contains an empty road that comes out from some place of mystery. It crosses a bridge and goes past the pond that holds thirteen skaters. The house sitting on the bank is devoid of apparent entrances. Everyone is very still. Have they, under the morbid sky and the cloak of apparent activity reminded us that, in this great new world to which our forebearers came, we have inadvertently brought cemetery art from Europe with us? Tucked away within such superficial calm, hidden within the still, solemn nature of lithography itself, could such scenes as “Early Winter” suggest to an apprehensive eye that combat in the metaphysical realm could call those as dead as statues into life? Could they remind us that the world waits for Christ to wake it for combat with the universal death, one which threatens humanity within the guise of “Early Winter?”

As a college student, I occasionally carried my ice skates out to the north side of the Dartmouth College campus to the banks of Occom Pond. The surface had been completely frozen across. And there I sat on a snow-covered log and laced them up. There was a bonfire on the other side of the pond, children with their hockey sticks, parents talking, and pet dogs barking. I had quietly slipped into the minds of Bruegel, Monet, and Currier and Ives and I felt the loneliness of the place. There was, I knew, more to it than that. There were quiet murmurs of messages that I could not yet hear. Perhaps a perspective drawn from the earliest and then later the medieval theologians, something akin to metaphysical conflict, might provide food for thought. The fruit in our personal gardens is not always apple red.

Regardless of its poignancy, I certainly felt that I lacked the necessary decoding sensibility to understand an experience like this one. Was something being said, hovering within the social groups and the darkened conifers, hinting even in these post-Enlightenment days that spiritual warfare may still exist? The mystery was not only in pictures on the walls. It comes to us within the primordial garden of our own lives as the familiar text suggests. The invasive contents of Scripture strike us when we have been asleep, telling us that the battle must begin right here. Do they not provoke some of us, unguarded as we may be, to put down our nets and to enlist in that strange struggle to which Christ calls us?

The early theologians, sometimes in remote and painful circumstances, provide an example of spiritual combat. Augustine, after his conversion, did not stay in Milan. He did not write his theological works in Rome. Instead, he returned to north Africa. And from there, one of the most learned men of his time, continues to teach us.

When I consider Augustine’s book, *The Trinity*, written in the dawn of the fifth century, I understand why those who have tried to define his views in succinct descriptions are so often defeated. I read and reread him, reaching for the meaning hidden in his words. There are depths that clearly remain beyond my understanding. Is it because his mind is so filled with an awareness of the profound reality and inexplicable mystery of the Trinity? Surely, but there is also something else. His work is shaped by a relentless concern to overcome his own preconceptions and spiritual weaknesses. And is that combat, witnesses to in almost every work that has prepared him for theology. It is such a victory that enables him to draw from his classical reading the ideas that he will address.

His writing still invites us, after all these years, to sense that theology like this calls us into something very powerful. Significant for us, he did not avoid the term “enigma.” Augustine drew near the end of his fifteenth

book with these words, “So now let us bring this book to a close at last with a prayer in preference to an argument.” He had read so much, written so much, but what had most powerfully prepared him for combating the claims of the Roman Empire that his God was at fault for its fall, was his personal awareness of the Trinity. Here was unparalleled power. Here lies the preparation for combat with the “empire,” whether it lies within us, within our world or even within the church.⁴ The three paintings mentioned hint at the presence of an empire so unfathomable, so enigmatic that only Christ and his cross can ultimately bring victory. I found hints in so many places, beginning when I was in college, reading works that began to unveil “the valley of the damned.”

To study theology is to wake up to the liminal glances, the ones we might not see at first, which suggest transcendent dimensions. There could be more, the books, the art and primarily the personal experiences in our lives, used to sharpen the weapons of the mind. Preparing us to deal with enemies yet unseen. One might learn from Augustine’s early readings, in Cicero, Virgil, and Plotinus, and ask, “How has all that I have read, thought, and deeply experienced been molded into the armory of my mind?” In the end the role of conflict in the most profound theology really does matter. In it you could discover the “luminous figure of the Nazarene.”

Snow had gradually become a symbol for me of a world under siege. One winter evening I sat near the lectern where Robert Frost stood, watching him intently, listening to him read his poetry. It gradually came to mind that there could be more in these simple lines than I had thought, a beckoning, a suggesting, an interrogation. Theology might not be far from the angst of Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” And here words and images come together, print and visual art, as they do for most of us. “Whose woods these are I think I know. His house is in the village though.”⁵ Will he, whoever that might be, also come from “his house” in the village to look for us, within the snow filled scenes of our lives? Perhaps this perturbing moment, reminiscent of Bruegel, Monet, Currier, and Ives, beckons us to consider that within the most subtle settings, when the snow is deep, when the magpie sits on the gate alone, when a trap waits for us, when we feel as frozen as statues, we still have faith that we know whose woods these are. Could it lead us toward those places, in which Christ meets us in what, with Frost, we might call “the darkest evening of our years?”

¹ Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1969), 207.

² Ronald W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: Harper; 1971/1984), 747.

³ Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 386.

And then we join Augustine using his prayer as our own, “Before you lies my strength and my weakness; preserve the one, heal the other.” Augustine knew the one who had prepared him for combat with forces both material and spiritual. And as he concluded his book, he believed that God would bring to him both the reinforcement of his strength and the healing of his weakness. When it comes to us today, perhaps turning again to the words of Augustine, it is the “awareness,” as he put it, of the Trinity that prepare us for battles that no one has ever seen. It led him to prayer. Likewise, abandoning our assumptions and arguments, perhaps we will enter the opaque battles that lie ahead. We should never forget that it is with such chilled encounters that he has prepared us for combat with that which we have long tried to evade and never understood.

We should never assume that the convictions of theologians like Augustine came to them easily. To begin to think theologically is to accept an invitation to be opened by the beliefs that inspired them. But this can never be done lightly or casually. The minds of theologians like Augustine radiate wonders. They open the doors to the doctrines of the Incarnation, the Trinity, and the everlasting life. There is no intellectual invitation as great as the one they have left us.

And here is our own mystery. The books which we read, the art that caught our attention, and the experiences which have marked our lives can be the dust out of which God creates the theological adventure of our lives and an endless source of joy. An important dimension of the Resurrection of Christ and hence of the Trinity is that God thereby gives us a heart and mind that is intellectually alive. It is highly personal. Theology is entrusted to the church, as it draws on the wisdom that was given to it through the centuries. It is also, however, assigned to each of us. Here we have an invitation in which we become prepared for combat against all evil and empowered to seek the good. We will not ignore it.

This essay is part of the address Dr. Ray delivered on Oct. 6, 2021, at the second conference sponsored by Theology Matters at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Richard A. Ray, Ph.D. (St. Andrews University), is chairman of the Board of the Presbyterian Heritage Center, Montreat, North Carolina.

⁴ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 435f.

⁵ Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), 183.

What We Are About

Theology matters because the gospel of Jesus Christ matters. The task of theology is to evaluate the church's proclamation of the gospel according to Scripture and as attested in the catholic creeds and the Reformed confessions and catechisms of the church, in order to ensure that it is an authentic proclamation of the gospel and not something other. This urgent work must be done afresh in every age.

Theology Matters exists to equip, encourage, and inspire members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. We seek to encourage God's people to discern faithfulness in its witness. We seek to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to provide theological leadership.

Since our founding in 1994, when several American mainline denominations officially supported an effort to "re-imagine" Christianity and align the church with radically progressive cultural and political movements, *Theology Matters* has provided an important resource for congregational leaders who have sought to think through the various theological challenges, temptations, and opportunities of our times.

Congregational leaders in America have been taught to think about ministry according to the standards of sociology, psychology, politics, and business for more than a century. Much, to be sure, can be and should be learned from these fields for more effective work in ministry. But *theology alone* keeps ministry responsible to its primary subject matter, content, and theme, which is *God*.

Theology Matters is building a community of congregational leaders who want to reflect responsibly on the work of ministry. And since the work of ministry is essentially about *God*, we believe the way to reflect responsibly about ministry is to do so *theologically*.

Our journal reaches nearly 15,000 people in the United States and eighty foreign countries. We are a completely independent publication and we distribute our quarterly journal free of charge. Our ability to publish, print, and distribute it relies entirely on the financial support of individuals and congregations.

Theology Matters serves to "to equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12) by providing insightful and thought-provoking resources for Sunday School teachers, Bible study leaders, pastors, evangelists, missionaries, teaching and ruling elders, seminary and college students, and other congregational leaders in this United States and throughout the world.

Theology Matters is about the transformation and renewal of hearts and minds. It serves to deepen the faith, sharpen the minds, and feed the souls of disciples of our Lord. We are committed to the mainstream of the Reformed tradition. We seek unity on the basis of a common faith, focus on what binds us as a theological tradition, and strive to listen to the voice of the church's One True Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

We have gathered many of the most gifted and faithful teachers in the church today from the Reformed-Presbyterian tradition. Most of our authors have proven expertise that has been tested in both the academy and pastoral ministry. We want to continue to gather these teachers and offer you the fruit of their labors.

Theology Matters is of utmost importance for the Presbyterian family to grow and move into the future. No church or theological movement involving educated members has been sustained in modern times without such a publication. Many know that theology matters. Some know that it is important. But relatively few know that *good* theology does not simply happen. It requires time, talent, energy, and resources to nurture, cultivate, produce, and distribute. Without the support of individuals like you, this ministry simply would not be possible. Please help us today!

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.

Theology Matters
P.O. Box 50026
Greenwood, SC 29649

Change Service Requested

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION U.S. Postage PAID Greenville, SC 29602 Permit No. 1431

Save the Date!

March 7–9, 2023

Theology Matters

*invites you to a
Theology Conference:*

“Spirituality Old & New”

***Hilton Head Island, South Carolina
Providence Presbyterian Church***

Fantastic rates for hotels on beautiful beachfront.

Reflect on the Faith. Relax with Friends. Rekindle the Flame!

To register online, go to www.theologymatters.com