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Introduction: Christianity, Philosophy, and the Arts

Ben Holloway
Guest Editor

In his book, *Art and the Bible*, Francis Schaeffer asks whether Christians should forget about art and culture and focus only on religious matters.[1] His answer is in the negative, but Schaeffer's question is curious. First, it seems that we don't have a choice in the matter. How could we *forget* about art and culture? Art and culture are unavoidable. We just do it. Second, the question indicates that we also don't see culture as necessary. It isn't like farming. We won't die if we stop doing it. So, what is the point of it?

The first question may be answered by considering what we mean by culture. As Theodore Gracyk defines it, "a culture exists when a social group's belief structure and values are intergenerationally transmitted."[2] Culture is just what happens when we disseminate our beliefs, norms, and practices from one generation to another. We start schools, establish courts, paint pictures, write works of fiction, and compose music. We could "forget about art" if we gave up preserving our beliefs, norms, and practices over generations. But we aren't going to do that in a hurry. Indeed, the Bible instructs us not to (2 Tim 2:2).

But the second reason Schaeffer's question is curious is because although education and social organization account for securing both the climate and the content of our traditions, art appears peripheral. Surely, teaching our children and ensuring order is enough. Somehow, though, we can't help generating something more.

Consider a church. It has all three—education, politics, and art. We form Sunday schools, seminaries, and members' meetings, but we also write hymns, design our buildings, cultivate our gardens, paint, and compose sermons. It isn't peripheral for us. Nor is art peripheral to the Lord. God could have called a philosopher to write a systematic treatment of his work, will, and nature, but our go-to for all things proper in our theology is a book of poetry, the psalter. Aesthetics isn't peripheral for God.

In order to see why, perhaps we should consider the alternative. I once

[1] Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (InterVarsity Press, 1973), 1.

[2] Theodore Gracyk, *The Philosophy of Art: An Introduction* (Polity, 2012), 94.

visited East Berlin in the early nineties, not long after the wall came down. What struck me was that the communists had attempted to remove all beauty. When traversing the boundary from the west, it was like going from technicolor to greyscale. People were alive—the lack of beauty didn't kill them, at least not physically—but it was as close as I have ever been to hell on earth. God has made a beautiful world, and he has made us capable of appreciating it. He didn't have to. He could have made it greyscale, but God is gratuitous, making all things good (Gen 1).

Consequently, art has always been a central component of Christian life. A preacher not only considers the content of what he wants to say, but he wants to say it in the right way, alliterating not merely in order to remember, but to achieve literary merit. Again, he could strip his sermon of all illustrations, stories, and verse, and what is necessary would still be there. But it would lack something important.

So, what is the point of art in the church? And how can Christian philosophers help work out the answers? Working out what Christians gain from artistic pursuits requires an overall explanation of the relationship Christians have with art and a detailed examination of the nature, purpose, and value of various artforms and works.

Christianity and Art

Although Christians have a clear idea about the importance of education and church polity, Christianity's relationship with the arts has been fraught due, in part, to a wider change in relationship between religion and the arts. Gordon Graham proposed that we understand the history in a simplified, two-phase story.[3] Phase one involved a natural affinity between the artifacts of culture and the religious beliefs of its members. Painting, architecture, music, literature, education, work, and family life were, in large part, determined by the beliefs of Christians.

Phase two involved the modern movement to disentangle the arts from their utility, culminating in the nineteenth century's slogan, "art for art's sake." Kant, for example, denied that art could aid with doctrine or should be employed for religious ends. Instead, it should only be for the contemplation of the aesthetic. This intellectual movement was followed by the "art crisis" of the twentieth century. Having detached art from its use, it was not clear what it was.

Graham argues that consequent to these events, religious people in the west hold to one of two points of view. According to one view, art is liberated from its constraints. It does not have to seek an aim beyond

[3] Gordon Graham, "Art and Religion," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (Routledge, 2013), 509–18.

itself (religious purposes, for example). From the other perspective, art suffers from spiritual bankruptcy that can only be remedied by a return to its purpose as given by Christianity.

Working out the relationship between art and Christianity is one component of a philosopher's task.[4] It is likely that both the effect (or utility) and the intrinsic merit of an artwork should be considered. But the other issues facing Christians relate to particular artforms and works. Are some styles of music better for worship than others? What is the role of fiction in the Christian life? What regard to aesthetics should be given when designing a new church building? These questions and many more are both practical and rooted in questions that philosophers have been interested in since the discipline's inception.

Philosophical Issues in Aesthetics

If Christian philosophers are to offer any help on the matter, we should wonder what kind of role they have. Must they *be* artists? Are they to be critics, discerning the good from the bad? These tasks do not appear obviously philosophical. But then it isn't clear what help a philosopher could be.

Monroe Beardsley suggests that there are three levels of discourse about art.[5] The work of a critic is a matter of empirical data and "interpretive skill." Discerning whether a piece of music is in a minor key, or whether a painting is of a certain kind occupies the critic's attention. A theorist works at a more fundamental level, concerned with definition and categorization. For example, a theorist may be concerned with the criteria for categorizing a literary work in a genre.

The philosopher is concerned with the most fundamental questions, "about criticism itself, about the terms it uses, its methods of investigation and argument, its underlying assumptions."[6] Philosophical methodology first involves the clarifying concepts, assessing arguments, and constructing explanatory models. Applied to the domain of art, the method will involve analyzing aesthetic concepts such as beauty, meaning, interpretation and art itself. The aim of analysis in this sense is clarity. For example, what do we mean when we talk about the *meaning* of a literary work?

Philosophers are also interested in what makes an artwork good or bad. Is aesthetic value a property possessed by the work or something

[4] For a good example, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Eerdmans, 1979).

[5] Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present* (University Alabama Press, 1975), 13–14.

[6] Beardsley, *Aesthetics*, 14.

dependent upon us? Does the value of a work depend on its context such as where it is exhibited? Or does art only have instrumental value, depending on its use for some other good?

The implications for any results of such enquiries have effects on our practices in the church. For example, in worship services we attempt to bring what we have made to the Lord in song. Presumably, we want to bring what is good, or at least our best. In his essay, "The Aesthetics of Contemporary Worship Music," Logan Wigglesworth considers the merits of simplicity in worship music, arguing that its merits have not only intrinsic values, but instrumental value for congregation.

Aesthetic value is often taken to relate to moral value. But the relation isn't always clear. It is possible, for example, to judge an artwork to have immense aesthetic value without having any good moral value. A work promoting an evil regime might nonetheless be aesthetically impressive. Likewise, we often recoil at reading a work written by someone known to be immoral even if the work is of high aesthetic value. Somehow the moral status of authors detracts or adds value to a work.

Chris Lee's essay ("The Greatest Possible Story Theodicy") suggests that the moral status of God and the work of our lives (as narratives) bestows a kind of aesthetic value on a life, even one lived with great suffering. When assessing the overall value of life, we shouldn't ignore its aesthetic qualities.

Philosophers have always been interested in the effects of art on its audience. Famously, Plato thought that art could corrupt the soul. But might art have a more positive effect? Adam Groza, in his essay titled "My Pulitzer Project," suggests that the reading of great fiction aids in the moral formation of Christians as we reflect on the themes of human life in light of Scripture. Hence, it has practical use in ministering to others and can form a significant aid to the pastor's teaching ministry.

Although fiction may have value for moral formation, perhaps we should not grant fiction other kinds of value. For example, since fiction is largely the work of the imagination, we should constrain our temptation to see it as having evidential weight. Caden Farr and Ben Holloway argue that fiction has a limited use in education. After all, we don't think that merely imagining something gives us any reason to think it is true.

Christians are perhaps most interested in literary works. In part, our interest stems from the fact that the Bible is, among other things, a literary work. In recent decades, theology departments have been engaged in a lively interaction with philosophical work on interpretation. One perennial issue has been whether the author of a work fixes its meaning. In his contribution ("A Defense of 'Extreme' Intentionalism"), Ben Holloway argues in the affirmative against a series of forceful objections.

Further Issues

Whereas some topics in philosophy have indirect effects on the daily practice of the church, the utility of a Christian philosophy of art is fairly immediate. Churches are constantly engaged in art making. Sermons, buildings, songs, décor, dress, and even potlucks exhibit the works of Christ's followers.

Moreover, some artforms are part of church activities without anyone asking what purpose they serve. For example, in classroom settings, I ask students to imagine that they are the worship pastor of a church with a new senior pastor. The new pastor says that he would like to remove all music from the service. He prefers the spoken word and cannot see the point of setting any of it to music, let alone having music with no words. Knowing that such a decision will likely restrict the worship pastor's activities if not cost him his job, the worship pastor must provide a defense of the use of music. Suppose also that the new pastor is aware of any commands there might be to use music in the Bible. However, unless there is a reason given for such a command, he is not inclined to think it applies in his situation.

Students often appeal to the emotional component of worship. Some contend that music has its own special kind of language. Others suggest that worship is bringing our best to God and music serves as a quality offering to please the Lord. Each of these suggestions require a philosophical argument in their favor along with replies to objections.[7]

Other examples include a historical debate over the status of icons. Are they idolatrous artforms or legitimate aids to worship? Much of the debate depends on having worked out what kind of relation exists between objects and their depictions, upon which philosophers have much to say. Further questions relate to buildings and rooms. Should a church building be designed only for use or also for its aesthetic value? How much of that value depends on its location (in a city, suburb, or rural village)? Philosophical theories have a bearing on many debates that likely take place among a church building planning committee.

Indeed, *much* conversation about Christian life is about our relationship with secular culture and its artforms, and our use of art in the Church and for evangelism. As the servant discipline, Christian philosophy ought to aid our conversations, providing clarity, rationality, and above all aiming to help Christians live biblically to glorify God with what we make and consume.

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[7] For a good discussion of this and other issues, see Gordon Graham, *Philosophy, Art, and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). The title and idea for this edition of *STR* is largely based on Graham's book.

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A Defense of "Extreme" Intentionalism

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Abstract: *Intentionalism is a theory about the interpretation of artworks, particularly literary works. In this essay, I defend a form of intentionalism according to which the intentions of authors are both necessary and sufficient to fix the meaning of their literary works. In the first part, I offer brief definitions of intentions, interpretation, and work-meaning. Second, I defend E. D. Hirsch's argument for the necessity condition. Finally, I argue that prominent objections to the sufficiency condition fail.*

Key Words: *E. D. Hirsch, hermeneutics, intentionalism, interpretation, philosophy of literature*

> … what matters, the point of language or speech or whatever you want to call it, is communication, getting across to someone else what you have in mind by means of words that they interpret (understand) as you want them to. Speech has endless other purposes, but none underlies this one.[1]

Intentionalism is a theory about the interpretation of artworks, particularly literary works. The strongest of its proponents subscribe to the view that authors' intentions are both necessary and sufficient to fix the meaning of their works.[2] It follows from such a view that interpreters of a work will arrive at the *correct* interpretation of a work if and only if they recognize the author's intentions.[3] Hence, intentionalism is a view both about what determines (or fixes) the meaning of a work and about the conditions under which an interpretation is correct.

[1] Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri (Kluwer, 1994), 11.

[2] "Extreme" intentionalists include William Irwin and Kathleen Stock. See William Irwin, *Intentionalist Interpretation: A Philosophical Explanation and Defense* (Greenwood, 1999); and Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[3] "… the meaning of an utterance is explicated in terms of the speaker's intention to reveal to an auditor that the speaker intends the auditor to respond in a certain way" (Noel Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger [Temple University Press, 1992], 157).

Competing intentionalist views suggest that though an author's intentions are necessary to fix the meaning of a work, they are not sufficient. Even if the author's intention is recognized, when an author fails to intend a possible conventionally established meaning, the meaning is either undetermined or is fixed by conventions and perhaps the context of utterance.[4]

In this essay, I will defend an extreme form of intentionalism according to which the intentions of the author are both necessary and sufficient to determine (or fix) the meaning of a literary work. In the first section, I explain the significance of the issue for theological studies. Second, I will provide some definitions for the key terms: meaning, intentions, and interpretation. Third, I will defend the view that an author's intentions are necessary to fix the meaning of a work. Support for this position is found in the case provided by E. D. Hirsch. Finally, I reply to the main objections to the view that an author's intentions are sufficient to fix the meaning of a work, thus clearing the way for the extreme view.

Significance for Theology

In the face of new critical theories and other post-modernist ideas, evangelicals have played a significant role in successfully defending the necessity of discerning authorial intent for accurately interpreting the Bible.[5] The effect is impressive. It would perhaps be surprising to see a defense of an alternative view in a text on hermeneutics supported by an evangelical seminary professor.[6] So, it might seem unnecessary to rehash arguments in its favor. Nonetheless, rehashing is a worthwhile task even if its need is not felt. Afterall, the weakest points of a set of views are often the ones with the widest agreement. If there is not an immediate need to defend it, we might just forget why we believe it.

[4] Modest intentionalists include Noel Carroll, "Art, Intention, and Conversation," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger (Temple University Press, 1992); and E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1967). Another view is *hypothetical* intentionalism according to which an interpreter aims to arrive at the most justifiable interpretation of a hypothetical author (rather than the actual author).

[5] For example, Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Zondervan, 1998).

[6] Walter Kaiser, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Zondervan, 2007); William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Zondervan, 2017); Robert Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Kregel, 2021); Grant R. Osborne. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2006).

Further, as Kathleen Stock comments, there is widespread opposition to intentionalist views of interpretation in both literature and philosophy departments in the wider academy.[7] It would be unwise to assume none of those influences will have any effect on biblical studies departments outside the more liberal schools.[8] Indeed, Kevin Vanhoozer warns of the "tendency of professional readers to profess types of criticism that either read against the grain of or overrule the author's communicative intentions."[9] Such a tendency is not merely limited to literature departments. It affects the direction of biblical studies departments as well.

The significance to the theological task is (at least) twofold. First, intentionalist theories entail a set of strategies for interpretation. If one is interested only in a valuable personal experience from reading, one would not necessarily be as concerned with the interests of the author.[10] In contrast, the intentionalist aims at discovering the interests of the author even if one cannot find anything applicable to the reader. Hence, the effect of adopting intentionalist views of meaning-fixing has far-reaching effects on biblical studies.

Second, interpretation is tied to the doctrine of inerrancy. Ordinarily, when discussing the truth of Scripture—its inerrancy—we are talking about the relation of what Scripture says to states of affairs in the world.[11] But according to the doctrine of inerrancy, what is claimed to be true is whatever was asserted by the author.[12] When we refer to inerrancy of Scripture, we are talking about the *correct* interpretation of Scripture.[13] We are not talking about any interpretation. Intentionalism is a view that provides a theory of what makes a correct interpretation.

[7] Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation, and Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 14.

[8] See also Vanhoozer's comments to similar effect: Kevin Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Zondervan, 2024), 5.

[9] Vanhoozer, *Mere Christian Hermeneutics*, 324.

[10] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181.

[11] "We AFFIRM that the Bible expresses God's truth in propositional statements, and we declare that biblical truth is both objective and absolute. We further affirm that a statement is true if it represents matters as they actually are, but is an error if it misrepresents the facts" ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," *JETS* 25 [1982]: 398).

[12] "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," 400. See also, Paul Feinberg, "The Meaning of Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy,* ed. Norm Geisler (Zondervan, 1979), 297.

[13] That is not to say that we must know the correct interpretation, only that, whatever the correct interpretation, it is true.

Meaning

In order to defend intentionalism, some definitions must be supplied. Many debates between the holders of various views depend on how one defines "meaning," "intentions," "authors," and "interpretations." But to make a case one needs some idea of the concepts involved.

The term *meaning* has a variety of senses. In this context, I am using it to speak about the meaning of literary works. A literary work is a set of linguistic items—words, phrases, and sentences organized into paragraphs. A work may include all sorts of other items such as repetitions, allusions, and alike, all of which are selected and arranged by its author. For each level of organization of a work, "meaning" has a different sense. A word has a sense and reference.[14] A sentence can have truth conditions, but a word cannot. A work has a meaning in virtue of the selection and arrangement of sentences to produce an overall meaning. The meaning of a work involves a hierarchy of sentence meanings and an arrangement of content to produce main themes, sub-themes, theses, claims, or arguments.

It is important to note that while intentionalism is a theory of *what fixes* the meaning of a literary work (and perhaps other artworks), it is not itself a theory of meaning. One can adopt a range of theories for the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences.[15]

Interpretation

The term *interpretation* has two senses. First, interpretation can mean a psychological process, involving a complex mental activity of assessing the relative importance of sentences, summarizing long passages, elaborating for comprehension, and noticing logical implications.[16] Second, interpretation can mean a set of statements about the meaning of a work. According to this sense, an interpretation is the *product* of an interpretive process.

As a product, an interpretation is not merely a translation, a *re*statement of a work.[17] An actor can learn the lines of a poem in his language,

[14] Gottlob Frege, "On *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*," in *The Frege Reader,* ed. Michael Beaney (Blackwell, 1997), 151–71.

[15] I locate the present discussion in the *pragmatics* of language rather than a study of its *semantics* or *syntax*. For help with this distinction see chapter 7 of Gary Kemp, *What Is This Thing Called Philosophy of Language?* (Routledge, 2018), 120–35.

[16] Walter Kintsch and Tuen Van Deijk, "Toward a Model of Text Comprehension and Production," *Psychological Review* 85 (1978): 363.

[17] Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 129–30.

translate them into another, and recite the translation without knowing what the poem is about. In contrast, an interpretation is the result of an activity in which the interpreter attempts to state what authors mean by what they say.

Further, interpretations are produced for desired ends. When approaching a single object, two different interpreters may have different aims. For example, one person may be looking for a satisfying experience, the other, the author's intended meaning. Bible studies are often composed of conversations split between various aims. One person wonders what Paul meant by a phrase, another, how the passage helps her spiritual walk, still another, the significance of certain poetic constructions.

Moreover, for the intentionalist, the property of a literary work of primary interest is the *intentional semantic content* of a work. Unique to utterances is their possession of cognitive or semantic content. I do not mean anything semantic by intentionally going to the fridge to get some food, whereas John does when he asserts "Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them!" (John 20:19 NLT). One cannot translate the action of going to the fridge into another language while one can translate John's sentence into French or Chinese.[18] All that is not to say that there are no other aspects of a work that are of interest. It is only to say that some properties of objects are intended to convey semantic content and that a correct interpretation of a literary work requires knowing what those properties are.

Nor must we ignore non-intentional properties of a work. Rather, the intentionalist contends that intentional semantic properties are what yield a *correct interpretation of a work*. For example, one might be interested in the effects of a work on a reader. Although such a study would be of interest, there is no normative aspect to the answer. One might be able discern what a correct effect might be by reference to what effect the author intended, but *merely* studying a work's effects would not automatically yield that result.

Part of the intentionalist case must not only be to *prefer* one aim over another, but a defense of a *proper aim,* at least for certain kinds of objects. The latter contention indicates that some objects have properties in virtue of which an interpretation has a proper aim. This leaves open as to whether all objects have such properties. There may be a proper aim for some and not for others.

Finally, interpretation is a rational activity performed with reference to an artifact, in this case a literary work. Some have suggested that interpretation is not a rational activity. Instead, it is merely a causal interaction

[18] One can, of course, translate a *description* of an action given in one language into another language.

between an object and a person or a community of persons. We may be able to describe what occurs when we interpret, but we cannot assess the rational merits of an interpretation. Nor can we be objective. Consequently, assessing an interpretation amounts to measuring its continuity to a particular tradition, or its benefits to a community, not whether one can provide sufficient evidence to support one interpretation over another.

Although a discussion of such views would take us further afield, a brief criticism of such views is worth making. The view assumes that though we have epistemic access to how things appear to us, we cannot objectively assess one view over another. Our perspectives are determined by our psychological dispositions, social conditioning, and our autobiographies. Since we cannot "climb out" of our perspectives, we cannot be objective. This claim is false for it fails to recognize the distinction between *possessing* a perspective and *applying* it.[19] An interpreter can possess a host of psychological, sociological, and autobiographical conditions but not apply them in a given interpretive situation. If so, then the interpreter is not forced to apply her perspective when considering the merits of a variety of interpretations of a work.

Intentions

An authored literary work is produced by an agent who has intentionally selected and arranged its linguistic materials. Crucially, the work is the result of the author's intentional actions. An intention is a mental state that explains an action and any resulting product. For example, a person can be hungry and believe that there is food in the fridge. As a result, he intends to visit the fridge. When he does so, one can infer from his actions that he intended to get some food from the fridge. Similarly, John can believe that Jesus Christ died and was raised from the dead (having witnessed the events), desire to inform others about these events, and believe that writing the good news in a book will convince his reader that the events occurred. John can form the intention to inform his reader and write his Gospel. Importantly, the author can intend the reader to recognize his intentions by reading his work. Recognizing those intentions from examining his Gospel is the aim of an intentionalist interpretation.

Further, intentions are not necessarily discernable either by readers or by authors. A reader may fail to recognize what the author intended to say. And it is even the case that an author can fail to recognize her own

[19] Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Hackett, 1982), 37–39. Cf. John Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Crossway, 2013), 117–22.

intentions. Perhaps she forgets what she meant by saying something. Intentionalism does not rest upon successful interpretations. Rather, it rests on the conditions for there being a successful (i.e., correct) interpretation. Whether we arrive at a correct interpretation is not relevant to the issue of whether there is one.

Support for the Necessary Condition

Perhaps the most well-known proponent of the intentionalist view is E. D. Hirsch. Hirsch argues that if one rejects the intentionalist view, then it cannot be possible to arrive at a correct interpretation: "once the author had been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text's meaning, it very gradually appeared that no adequate principle existed for judging the validity of an interpretation."[20] The gist of Hirsch's argument is as follows:

1. If the author does not determine the meaning of a text, there can be no correct interpretation of the text.
2. There can be a correct interpretation of the text.
3. Hence, the author determines the meaning of a text.

In defense of (1), Hirsch argues that, for any word sequence, there are an array of potential meanings. If no one chooses a meaning, a word sequence cannot actually mean one of its potential meanings. Hence, if a word sequence has an actual meaning, someone must choose to mean something by it.[21] Even if the range of possible meanings is constrained by conventions, there remains no correct interpretation as long as those conventions admit multiple possible meanings. He writes,

> [N]o mere sequence of words can represent an actual verbal meaning with reference to public norms alone …. Under the public norms of language alone no … adjudications can occur, since the array of possibilities presents a face of blank indifference. The array of possibilities only begins to become a more selective system of probabilities when, instead of confronting merely a word sequence, we also posit a speaker who very likely means something.

[20] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* 3.

[21] "Meaning is an affair of consciousness not of words. Almost any word sequence can, under the conventions of language legitimately represent more than one complex of meaning. A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside of human consciousness" (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* 4).

> Then and only then does the most usual sense of the word sequence become the most probable … sense.[22]

Someone might wonder why a work could not have a determinate meaning in virtue of its sequence. To fill out his argument, we might begin by restating a part of the first argument. That is, for any word sequence, there are an array of possible meanings. At this point, an array of possibilities would not render anything probable. That is because it is an analytic truth that if one of the possible meanings is more probable than another, it is more likely to be correct than another. It follows that if one of the possible meanings is the correct meaning, it must be the actual meaning. An agent is required to actualize one of those possible meanings.

Now the question becomes: who is the agent? There are only two possible answers: the author or the reader. Contra to the reader-response advocates, readers do not get to be the meaning-fixers of texts. Consequently, the only option available is to consider the intentions of the author as the final authority.

Hirsch argues that the meaning of works must be reproducible. But if there is no such thing as *the* meaning of a work, then we could not "share" meanings with one another.[23] Suppose that there is not a determinate meaning. Hirsch argues that if there is no determinate meaning in a text, there is nothing to reproduce. To reproduce a text is to put it in your own words to explain its meaning. But if there is nothing to reproduce, then no one can reproduce it. If so, then no one else could understand it (it could not be shared). Sharing is an activity that can only occur if there is something to share. Indeterminacy renders the activity impossible.

The Intentional Fallacy

According to a famous objection, intentionalists commit the 'intentional fallacy.'[24] One must discover a sufficient biography of an author to understand any of his texts. But we do not need a comprehensive biography of an author to understand his texts. Hence, the intentions of the

[22] Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 225.

[23] "If meaning were not reproducible, it could not be actualized by someone else and therefore could not be understood or interpreted. Determinacy on the other hand is a quality of meaning required in order that there be something to reproduce. Determinacy is a necessary attribute of any shareable meaning, since an indeterminacy cannot be shared: if a meaning were indeterminate, it would have no boundaries, no self-identity, and therefore could have no identity with a meaning entertained by someone else" (Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 44).

[24] W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468–88.

author are not what fixes the meaning of the text.

However, intentionalists do not say that we must somehow get behind the work to the psychology of its author. Instead, the intentionalist says that one can know what the author intended by examining the text. It is not part of the intentionalist view that we must have an extensive biography of the author to know what an author meant to say.

Further, intentionalists recognize that intentional utterances are embedded in cultural practice. As Ludwig Wittgenstein points out, one does not first form an intention to say something and then think about the language in which one will say it. One has the intention *in the language one uses*. He writes, "An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions.… In so far as I do intend the construction of a sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak the language in question."[25] It follows that interpreters can discern intentions from the work itself. Although evidence for the meaning of a work from biography may help, the text itself can provide evidence of an author's intention. Hence, the objection fails.

The Problem of Authorless Texts

Let me now turn to a couple of further objections from Monroe Beardsley. In his first objection, Beardsley asks to consider a text without an author. Surely such a text would have a range of meanings, some of which are better than others. But then, having a correct meaning does not require an author. Beardsley writes, "Some texts that have been formed without the agency of an author, and hence, without authorial meaning, nevertheless have a meaning and can be interpreted."[26]

It may be the case that there are texts without authors (the most impressive example is text produced by computers). However, is it the case that texts produced without authors have determinate meanings? It is not clear that they can. A determinate meaning is the correct meaning. If no meaning has been determined by an author, then there is no *correct* meaning. One may interpret a computer's poetry any way one likes or by considering the conventions of a given linguistic community. It is not as if one could interpret an authorless text incorrectly. As Hirsch suggests, there is no other way a text could have a correct actual meaning if it is not

[25] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Pearson, 1973), § 337. Cf. John Feinberg, "Truth: Relationship of Theories of Truth with Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible: Papers from ICBI Summit II*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Academie, 1984), 37.

[26] Monroe Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," in *Intention and Interpretation,* ed. Gary Iseminger (Temple University Press, 2010), 25.

fixed by a conscious agent. Hence, any text that has no author has no correct interpretation. Computers just are not the kinds of things that form intentions. Hence, a computer cannot mean something by what it says.[27]

Dead Author Objection

Another of Beardsley's objections suggests that the meanings of texts can change over time, even beyond the death of the author. At least those changes cannot be a result of the intentions of the author. Hence, intentionalism is false. He writes, "The meaning of a text can change after its author has died. But the author cannot change his meaning after he has died. Therefore, the textual meaning is not identical to the authorial meaning."[28]

The argument assumes that the determinate meanings of texts can be changed.[29] But that is false. One is not changing the meaning of a dead author's work. One is misinterpreting the text (or perhaps creating a new one). This is even true when an author changes his or her own interpretation of something she previously wrote. She is either misinterpreting her work or creating a different work. She is not changing the meaning of the work as she originally wrote it. The significance of a text, even to its author, is not the same as the meaning of a text. A text has the meaning it has in virtue of what the author meant to say at the time of writing.

Humpty Dumptyism

Many are prevented from holding to the more extreme view because it seems to entail that there are no constraints on authors. Authors can use words and sentences any way they want. The view has been referred to as "Humpty Dumptyism" after a scene in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* in which Humpty Dumpty tries to persuade Alice that he can make any word mean whatever he wants.[30] Now, no one in his right mind wants to belong to a philosophical camp called "Humpty Dumptyism." However, as I shall argue, the more extreme view is much more

[27] That a computer cannot intentionally perform an action (it has no beliefs or desires) does not entail that an agent cannot say something by what has been produced. An A.I. may generate a company memo, which is then selected and arranged by the C.E.O. and sent to its recipients. But the A.I. itself cannot be an *author* in the sense I have supplied.

[28] Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," 26.

[29] For a similar argument, see Berys Gaut, "Interpreting the Arts: The Patchwork Theory," *The Journal for Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 600.

[30] Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (Clarkson N. Potter, 1960), 268–70.

palatable than its detractors make out.

The Humpty Dumpty objection is subject to an often-missed reply. As Michael Hancher points out, one should take into account the context of the scene in the work. Things work backwards in the fictional world inhabited by Alice and Humpty Dumpty. For example, the Queen cries *prior* to pricking her finger. And Humpty Dumpty uses his terms before defining them. If he had inhabited a world where things happen in the right order, he would have *stipulated* that he would use "glory" to mean knock-down argument prior to using the term. Nonetheless, stipulate his use he does.[31] Hence, he *can* use any word to mean anything he wants. So can we. And we do it all the time. Stipulation is a common enough practice.

In the Humpty Dumpty case, I am inclined to think Hancher is correct. Hence, it is not a troubling case of Humpty Dumptyism. Nonetheless, it is quite possible to imagine a more troubling case. For example, Sherri Irvin asks us to suppose an author writes *cauliflower* instead of *broccoli* by mistake. According to the intentionalist, if an author writes *cauliflower* when he means to write *broccoli*, and the meaning of the text is determined by his intentions, then *cauliflower* means *broccoli*. But this is absurd. Hence, the author's intentions are not sufficient to determine the meaning of the text.[32]

Take another example. Suppose an author writes *righteous indigestion* when he meant *righteous indignation*.[33] Since the meaning of the text is determined by the author's intention, *indigestion* means *indignation*. But we would not say this about any other activity. For example, if a pole vaulter fails to vault over the pole, we would not count it as a success even though we recognize the vaulter's intent to get over the pole.[34]

In reply, the intentionalist can argue that there is nothing absurd about *cauliflower* being used to mean *broccoli*. For one thing, when a speaker misspeaks, interpreters often recognize a speaker's intention and thereby correctly interpret what is said. Second, the mistake is not necessarily a failure to utter. Rather it is a failure to accord one's choices with conventions, how we usually use words and sentences. But that does not entail that speakers have necessarily failed to mean anything by their utterances.

Some of the objection rests on a misunderstanding of the extreme

[31] Michael Hancher, "Humpty Dumpty and Verbal Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40 (1981): 50.

[32] Sherri Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2006): 116.

[33] Beardsley, "The Authority of the Text," 26.

[34] Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," 116.

view. As Kathleen Stock argues, extreme intentionalists are not committed to the view that conventions are irrelevant to interpretation, only that authors do not always abide by them. Sometimes they use words and sentences in ways that deviate from conventional use.[35] Hence, interpreters do not have to split the difference by saying that when intentions match conventions, intentions determine the meaning, but when they do not, conventions take over.[36] Once one distinguishes between what an author means by uttering and what utterances mean in the speaker's language, the objection dissolves.[37]

Further, as William Irwin argues, intentionalists are not committed to the view that speakers (and writers) can make anything mean whatever they want *no matter what*. For example, one cannot *merely will* something to occur and thereby form an intention.[38] To merely will does not on its own produce an intention. One can want someone to understand without believing that anyone could understand. If one lacks such a belief, then one cannot intend anyone to understand.

More controversially, it is not a necessary condition on an intention that the speaker *is justified* in believing that he will be understood. A speaker neither must be in possession of a reason to think she will be understood, nor must it be the case that she will be understood.

Someone might object by suggesting that such a denial allows for an *irrational* belief, one not grounded (or groundable) in any reason. One might suggest that misspeaking is a case in which the speaker *cannot* expect to be understood. How is an interpreter supposed to know that the

[35] "Speaker meaning normally (and intentionally) makes use of conventional sentence meaning. However, speaker meaning is not wholly determined by those meanings: it may deviate from them" (Stock, *Only Imagine,* 38). Irony and conversational implicature are two examples of deviation.

[36] A moderate intentionalist may hold to such a view. For example, Iseminger argues that the meaning of a work is "a *function* of … *utterer's meaning which is compatible with the meaning of the word-sequence uttered*" ("Actual vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism," 322). Stock replies that, according to the intentionalist, "Appealing to the conventional meanings of a sentence when uttered by a particular speaker *is a way of* recovering the speaker's speaker meaning (her intentions). However, as with irony, it is *not the only way*" (*Only Imagine,* 39).

[37] Elmar Geir Unnsteinsson, "Wittgenstein as a Gricean Intentionalist," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24 (2016): 164. Intentionalists can be committed to a fairly strong sense of the literal meaning of sentences. As Paul Helm argues, literal meaning—the ordinary use of a sentence in a group of language users—will be the standard by which we judge any deviation ("The Role of Logic in Biblical Interpretation," 849).

[38] William Irwin, "Authorial Declaration and Extreme Actual Intentionalism: Is Dumbledore Gay?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 73 (2015): 144.

speaker meant broccoli by cauliflower? Hence, the speaker cannot mean broccoli by *cauliflower*. It would follow from allowing irrational expectations that a set of random sounds could mean anything the speaker wants as long as he has the (irrational) expectation to be understood. But surely garbled sounds do not mean anything no matter what the speaker intends.[39]

One response is to deny that anyone could have such a belief. *I* could not speak gibberish to a class and genuinely believe that they could understand me. Nonetheless, there are (either imaginary or real) cases that produce scenarios in which such a belief is possible. Suppose I have undergone brain surgery. I am left unable to speak in a recognizable way. Nonetheless, from my point of view, I am speaking exactly as I did prior to surgery. From my perspective, I am using my words according to the way most others do. Consequently, I expect to be understood. Suppose whenever I utter cauliflower, I believe I am talking about broccoli. It follows that if I genuinely expect to be understood, then those sounds have the meaning I intend even though as a matter of fact no one could understand me.

Of course, one cannot intend someone else to do something if one also believes that that person cannot do it. I cannot intend my son to fly across the lake. Why? Because I believe he is not a flyer. Such a constraint generalizes to all intentions: one cannot intend an occurrence one believes cannot occur. Hence, I cannot intend to tell you anything by my utterances if I believe no one could possibly understand them.

In sum, when authors intend to mean something by what they write, they must not have the belief that they cannot be understood by anyone.[40] Hence, as Donald Davidson points out, "you can change the meaning

[39] Irwin embraces irrational beliefs as sufficient for forming an intention. Stock does not. Stock implies that a work cannot be produced by rationally impaired authors. In so doing, she makes space for the kind of text that does not constitute a work (or utterance) (*Only Imagine,* 42). This is the kind of category deployed by less extreme intentionalists for more cases of apparent misspeaking. For example, Iseminger argues that when there is no compatibility between what a sentence ordinarily means and what an author intends it to mean, we "do not have an utterance (or a work)." As such what we have is a text with no correct meaning as one might find in "sound-play, computer generated texts, 'automatic' writing" ("Actual Intentionalism vs. Hypothetical Intentionalism," 322).

[40] It might be pointed out that a writer may use a language known only to himself. In such a case an author can form an intention because he can believe that he, the reader, will be able to understand what he, the author, has written (cf. Stock, *Only Imagine,* 39).

provided you believe (and perhaps are justified in believing) that the interpreter has adequate clues for the new interpretation."[41]

By supplying a condition on intentions, intentionalists can reply that if Humpty Dumpty does not intend to tell Alice what he means by the term, "glory," and consequently believes that Alice could not understand what he means, he cannot fix the meaning of what he says.[42] Similarly, I cannot intend my son to fly across the lake if I believe that he is not able to do it. As Keith Donnellan writes,

> Humpty Dumpty thinks that he invests a word with meaning simply by using it with the intention that it shall mean that. But then it seems that it should be irrelevant to him *what* word he uses. I think this line of reasoning contains a mistake. No such consequence really follows.… [T]he intention cannot be fulfilled.… [T]hey are essentially connected with expectations. Ask someone to flap his arms with the intention of flying. In response he can certainly wave his arms up and down.… But this is not to do it with the intention of flying.… I cannot credit [Humpty Dumpty] with that intention any more than I could credit a seemingly rational adult with the intention to fly when I see him flapping his arms up and down.[43]

In cases in which an author does not believe that an interpreter will understand, an intention cannot be formed.

No Malapropisms?

Robert Stecker argues that on the extreme intentionalist view, there are no malapropisms. A malapropism occurs when there is a "divergence between intended meaning and utterance meaning."[44] In contrast, Stecker argues that misspeaking involves a failure of utterance. Even if an interpreter can come to understand a misspeaker, such a phenomenon "does not imply that the speaker has said what she intends to say or that her utterance means what she intends to communicate."[45]

Suppose a speaker uses *cauliflower* to mean *broccoli*. Nonetheless, the

[41] Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *Truth and Interpretation: The Philosophy of Donald Davidson,* ed. Ernest LaPore (Blackwell, 1986), 258.

[42] William Irwin, "Authorial Declaration," 144.

[43] Keith Donnellan, "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again," *The Philosophical Review* 77 (1968): 211–13. See also Stock, *Only Imagine,* 88.

[44] Sherri Irvin "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," *Philosophy Compass* 2 (2006): 116.

[45] Robert Stecker, *Interpretation and Construction: Art, Speech, and the Law* (Blackwell, 2003), 13.

speaker's interpreters recognize the speaker's intention for them to understand the speaker to be talking about broccoli. Perhaps the speaker points at the dish of broccoli when he says *cauliflower*. In such cases, the *accidental successful misspeaker* misspeaks but successfully communicates his intended meaning.[46]

Suppose, someone says, "oh, you mean broccoli." In such a case a speaker will likely accept that he has misspoken but will probably deny that he cannot expect anyone to understand. He would likely say, "well, I know I misspoke, but everyone understood what I meant." Stecker's point is that such a response by the speaker is mistaken if extreme intentionalists are correct. There can be no misspeaking on such a view.

The intentionalist can reply that, in such a case, misspeaking boils down to *could have said it better,* but it does not entail *failure to communicate.*[47] Strictly speaking, misspeaking, in this case, amounts to *would have said it better if I could say it again,* but it does not amount to a failure to utter what one means.[48] Hence, a speaker's admission of misspeaking is not an admission of failing to say what is meant, but failing to use the most effective words. As Davidson points out, it is not clear that the interpreter has not given the word used all the powers ordinarily (according to convention) given to another. The interpreter gives *cauliflower* all the powers ordinarily

[46] Such a phenomenon is ubiquitous. We all get by with misspeaking and mostly understand others when they use incorrect words. Almost always is it the case that interpreters are given enough clues from the context to interpret correctly. But the correct interpretation comes down to recognizing the author's intended meaning.

[47] Irvin claims that there is still a failure of utterance even if communication is successful. Analogously, an intention of a pole vaulter to vault a pole does not guarantee success even when the audience recognizes the vaulter's intention. "Even if the vaulter's intention to mount the bar is perfectly obvious, this does not make the vault successful" (Irvin, "Authors, Intentions and Literary Meaning," 116–17). At this point, the analogy does not hold. For someone to recognize what a speaker meant by what he has uttered is to successfully communicate. When the reader recognizes the intention of the speaker, the speaker has succeeded in "vaulting the pole." The analogy would be better if the vaulter used a shovel instead of a pole but managed to get over the bar anyway. A speaker who accidentally uses the wrong words (according to their statistically regular use) can still somehow manage to get over the bar. For example, a speaker with severely limited vocabulary and syntax may still manage to succeed in communicating what he means to say.

[48] Stock, *Only Imagine,* 89.

bestowed on the word *broccoli*.[49]

Further, consider an *intentional successful misspeaker*. A poet or writer of considerable literary skill can use language in a novel way to get across what she means. She can intentionally misspeak. But when she does so, we do not think of her as actually *mis*speaking, failing to say what she intends to say. Instead, her creative use of words and phrases are considered literarily meritorious. What this case shows is that we are really talking about understanding, not utterance. In the case of an accidental misspeaker who gets away with it, we do not have a case of a failure to mean anything. We have a case of making it less likely to be understood.[50] But in neither case do we have a failure to utter. Hence, Stecker's objection fails.[51]

Suppose, however, neither the speaker nor the interpreter recognizes that the speaker has used *cauliflower* to mean broccoli. That is to say, the speaker accidentally says cauliflower when he meant broccoli, and the interpreter does not recognize the speaker's intention to communicate broccoli and thinks the speaker meant cauliflower by saying cauliflower. Call this the *accidental unsuccessful misspeaker*. Neither the speaker nor the interpreter recognizes what has occurred. In such a case, communication has failed.

The question is: could the speaker possess the belief that he will be

[49] "Someone who grasps the fact that Mrs. Malaprop means 'epithet' when she says 'epitaph' must give 'epithet' all the powers 'epitaph' has for many other people" (Davidson, "A Nice Derangement," 262).

[50] "The speaker may or may not … know that he has got away with anything; the interpreter may or may not know that the speaker intended to get away with anything. What is common to the cases is that the speaker expects to be, and is, interpreted as the speaker intended although the interpreter did not have a correct theory in advance.… There is not word or construction that cannot be converted to a new use by an ingenious or ignorant speaker" (Davidson, "A Nice Derangement," 258, 259).

[51] Davidson appeals to an analogy. A person may break the rules of etiquette at a formal dinner, using the wrong silverware for the wrong course, but he succeeds in eating alright. Hence, failure to meet an expectation is not a failure to say what one means, to *utter* correctly. The only thing making it worse is the use of a word that is not usually used that way. The speaker is likely going to be more confident that he has been understood when he uses words the way most people do than if he uses them in a novel way. But that does not amount to saying that *whenever he uses them in a novel way, he fails to utter what he means*. The risk of failing to communicate gets higher the more he deviates from normal use, but it does not entail that utterances are failures to say what one means (Donald Davidson, "The Social Aspect of Language," in *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett*, ed. Brian McGuinness and Gianluigi Oliveri [Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994], 9).

understood by what he said? It seems that he can. Many misspeakings are caught. We hear the wrong word but understand what is meant. On some occasions, it is likely that a word-use does not matter for the overall meaning of what is said. Consequently, no one—neither speaker nor hearer—spots the deviation from convention. However, the speaker has the belief that he will be understood by what he has said. The belief condition does not entail that a speaker will have thought through the words and sentences and then considered whether an interpreter would be able to understand them.[52] It only entails that the speaker believe that he will be understood by whatever he ends up saying. Since, in this case, the speaker has such a belief, he can mean broccoli by saying *cauliflower* even if no one notices. The fact that no one notices does not count against intentionalism.[53] Presumably, if someone had noticed, there would be a recognition of the intention to mean broccoli by cauliflower, but the mere fact that no one noticed does not undermine intentionalism.

Conclusion

I have argued that there are positive reasons to accept the view that the intentions of authors are necessary to fix their works. I have also argued that the Humpty Dumpty objection against authors' intentions being sufficient to fix the meanings of their works fails. Since that objection is the most forceful of the lot, rebutting it goes a long way towards making extreme intentionalism a palatable and defensible view.

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[52] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 337.
[53] Stock, *Only Imagine,* 90.

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The Greatest Possible Story Theodicy: *O Felix Culpa* and a Tolkien-Stump Response to Diller and Adams

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Abstract: *Plantinga's* O Felix Culpa (OFC) *posits that God aims to create a world that rises to a certain magnificent level of value. According to his value assumption, each possible world that contains Incarnation-and-Atonement is exceedingly better that every possible world that lacks Incarnation-and-Atonement; however, Incarnation-and-Atonement worlds are worlds that must include the fall, sin, and the consequences of sin—evil and suffering. In response, Diller and Adams have raised three significant objections: (O1) Incarnation-and-Atonement are logically independent of one another; (O2) Plantinga mis-identifies the relative value of a proper relationship with God in comparison with a demonstration of God's love (atonement); and (O3) OFC lacks the agent-centered restriction. In response, I offer a Tolkien-Stump response to Diller and Adams's critiques to supplement OFC. I will argue that the greatest possible worlds contain the greatest possible stories—stories that are not merely moral but beautiful, including conflict and resolution, dissonance and harmony. These are elements necessary in creating characters and stories that are significant and meaningful. Lastly, I respond to two additional problems: (1) the problem of the unredeemed, and (2) the problem of a conflict-free heaven.*

Key Words: *aesthetics, Alvin Plantinga, Eleonore Stump, felix culpa theodicy, J. R. R. Tolkien, Kevin Diller, Marilyn McCord Adams, philosophy of story, problem of evil*

Alvin Plantinga's *O Felix Culpa* (Lat. "O Happy Fault") posits that God aims to create a world that rises to a certain magnificent level of value.[1] According to his value assumption, each possible world that contains Incarnation-and-Atonement is exceedingly better than every possible world

[1] Robert M. Adams argues: "God does not have an obligation to the creatures in the best of all possible worlds to create them. If God has chosen to create a world less excellent than the best possible, He has not thereby wronged any creatures whom He has chosen not to create. He has not even been unkind to them. If any creatures are wronged, or treated unkindly, by such a choice of the creator, they can only be creatures that exist in the world He has created" ("Must God Create the Best?," in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson [University of Notre Dame Press, 2011], 416).

that lacks Incarnation-and-Atonement.[2] However, Incarnation-and-Atonement worlds are worlds that must include the fall, sin, and the consequences of sin—evil and suffering.[3] In response, Kevin Diller and Marilyn McCord Adams have raised three significant objections:[4]

> (O1) the Incarnation and the Atonement are logically independent of one another; that is, we can have the Incarnation without the need for the Atonement (and, perhaps, even absent of all suffering).
>
> (O2) Plantinga misidentifies the relative value of a proper relationship with God in comparison with a demonstration of God's love insofar as the theodicy maintains sacrificing the former (for everyone a while and for some forever) is an appropriate price to pay for the latter communicated by the Atonement.
>
> (O3) *O Felix Culpa* lacks the agent-centered restriction.

This essay will present a modified account of a *Felix Culpa* through the utilization of elements from the perennial writings of Tolkien and Eleonore Stump's use of narratives to respond to Diller and Adams's critiques. I will argue that the greatest possible worlds contain the greatest possible stories—stories that are not merely moral but beautiful (i.e., there is an aesthetic element to consider). God's grand narrative serves the purpose of allowing for the final consummation of rational and moral agents who freely choose to love God and abhor evil. This essay will survey (1) the

[2] "I believe that any world with incarnation and atonement is a better world than any without it—or at any rate better than any world in which God does nothing comparable to incarnation and atonement … the great goodness of this state of affairs, like that of the divine existence itself, makes its value incommensurable with the value of states of affairs involving creaturely good and bad. Thus the value of incarnation and atonement cannot be matched by any aggregate of creaturely good" (Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson [University of Notre Dame Press, 2011], 371).

[3] "From the present perspective there is an answer: highly eligible possible worlds, those whose value exceeds level L, also contain creaturely suffering, suffering on the part of victims and perpetrators of sin. This suffering is a necessary condition of the goodness of the world in question. In suffering, we creatures can be like Christ.… All of these worlds contain atonement; so they all contain divine suffering; but they also all contain creaturely suffering" (Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," 375).

[4] These objections have been succinctly recorded in Hud Hudson, "The Argument from Evil: Felix Culpa!," in *Two Dozen (Or So) Arguments for God*, ed. Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty (Oxford University Press, 2018).

importance and use of stories, (2) the concepts of beauty and fittingness, as well as its effects, and (3) the qualities necessary for a good and beautiful story. Once this foundation is set, I will then present a modified *Felix Culpa* account followed by rejoinders to Diller and Adams's objections and two additional problems: the problem of the unredeemed and the problem of a conflict-free heaven.

The Importance and Use of Stories

According to Eleonore Stump, "The problem of suffering can be considered best in the context of narratives."[5] Stories are able to depict what words can merely describe.[6] Narratives convey information by representing people, actions, objects, and events while emphasizing the causal and temporal connections between them, particularly focusing on agents and their roles.[7] According to Gregory Currie,

> [Narrative], with its emphasis on the particularity of causal histories and temporal relations, certainly makes it especially apt *for the representation of experience, decision, and action, and their effects on the wider world*. We make sense of people's actions by embedding an account of them within a wider narrative that emphasizes prior, rationalizing causes which look forward to intended, and often actual, effects.[8]

Stump claims that:

> [A story] takes a real or imagined set of second-person experiences,[9] of one sort or another, and makes it available to a wider audience to share … by making it possible … for a person to experience some of what he would have experienced if he had been an onlooker in the second-person experience represented in the story. That is, a story gives a person some of what he would have had if he had had unmediated personal interactions with the characters in the story while they were conscious and interacting with each other, without actually making him a part of the story itself.[10]

[5] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Clarendon Press, 2013), xviii.

[6] Kurt Bruner, *The Divine Drama* (Tyndale House, 2001), 17.

[7] Gregory Currie, *Narratives and Narrators: A Philosophy of Stories* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 5, 219.

[8] Currie, *Narratives and Narrators*, 187.

[9] "It is necessary for a second-person experience … that you interact consciously and directly with another person who is conscious and present to you as a person, in one way or another" (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 77).

[10] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 78.

In addition, stories can incarnate philosophy. Whereas recondite philosophical concepts are grasped by the conscious and calculating part of the mind, with a great story, the unconscious and contemplative part of the mind can be accessed, which has more power to persuade and move the reader.[11] C. S. Lewis likewise said: "[Stories do] what no theorem can quite do. It may not be like 'real life' in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like."[12] Or, as Tolkien believed, myths, fantasies, and stories can open the heart's back door when the front door is locked.[13] Stories, especially true stories well told, cause us to wonder at the shape of reality, to recall to ourselves what an exciting world we live in.[14] Stories can teach us facts about the world, influence our moral logic, and mark us with fears, hopes, and anxieties that alter our behavior, and perhaps even our personalities.[15] Stories engage our imagination and help us understand the meaning of concepts and propositions. This suggests, perhaps, that the human mind was shaped *for* a story so that it could be shaped *by* a story.[16] As Alasdair MacIntyre claimed, "Man is essentially a story-telling animal."[17] It is because we all live out narratives through our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others.[18]

Beauty and Fittingness

Beauty is an intrinsic quality of things which, when perceived, pleases the mind by displaying a certain kind of fittingness. Though the objectivity

[11] Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings* (Ignatius Press, 2005), 23.

[12] C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (Harcourt, 1982), 15.

[13] Kurt Bruner and Jim Ware, *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings* (Tyndale House, 2006), x. Tolkien writes, "I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth,' and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode."

[14] John-Mark L. Miravalle, *Beauty: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Sophia Institute Press, 2019), 96.

[15] Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Houghton Mifflin, 2013), 148.

[16] Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 56.

[17] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 216.

[18] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212.

of beauty will not be argued for in the scope of this work,[19] it will be maintained in accordance with Jonathan King that,

> Beauty is discerned via objective properties such as proportion, unity, symmetry, harmony, intricacy, delicacy, or simplicity … therefore, beauty has objective criteria, yet the apperception of the quality of beauty depends on the percipience of the mind (the mental faculty of perceiving), since it is the mind that renders relation of aesthetic properties as something perceived.[20]

In addition, the idea of "fittingness [also] functions as an overarching term expressive of the full range of aesthetic properties that identify any and all objective characteristics of beauty."[21]

Attributing fittingness or aesthetic qualities to the universe—that is, the idea of the universe as a *harmonious* entity, whose outworking mirrors its orderly structure, created by God—is an extremely ancient and pervasive concept with Pythagorean roots.[22] For example, Augustine made appeals to the beauty of the cosmic order (as well as to the beauty of God). Gottfried Leibniz leads with the aesthetic when he commends maximum variety with maximum simplicity as criteria for the *best* of all possible worlds. Likewise, Jonathan Edwards contends that beauty is the principal attribute, not only of God, but of *being* generally.[23] Marilyn McCord Adams has even argued "objective aesthetic properties" of the created order, with its structural properties and regularities along with the human cognitive capacity to recognize these features, is instrumentally required for human survival.[24]

[19] An engaging argument for the objectivity of beauty can be found in Frances J. Kovach, *Philosophy of Beauty* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

[20] Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Lexham, 2018), 9.

[21] King, *The Beauty of the Lord*, 9–10.

[22] Chiara Bertoglio, "Dissonant Harmonies: Tolkien's Musical Theodicy," *Tolkien Studies* 15 (2018): 100. Later, Bertoglio states: "Everything in creation is part of a harmonious and orderly structure: while no created being can encompass its governing logic (and thus fully understand the reason behind some puzzling aspects of the world), the *existence* of such a logic can be compellingly "felt" by those who are in communion with God" (p. 105).

[23] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Aesthetic Goodness as a Solution to the Problem of Evil," in *God, Truth and Reality: Essays in Honour of John Hick*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Palgrave, 2001), 48.

[24] "Human survival *instrumentally* requires a world whose structural properties and regularities can be modelled well enough by human cognitive capacities to enable human beings to make reliable predictions … my point is that such structural properties as the world really has are *aesthetic* properties.… Consequently, God's producing a world whose 'objective' aesthetic properties can be fruitfully modelled by human beings in terms of aesthetic goods, is one way God has of benefiting and hence of being *good to* human beings" (Adams, "Aesthetic Goodness," 51).

Furthermore, attributing beauty to God and fittingness to his activities is also common.[25] What is often postulated is that everything God does is beautifully God-glorifying. That is, everything the beautiful God does is perfectly fitting—and hence, beautiful—specifically, his plan of redemption. As King encapsulates: "God's 'beautiful self-showing' … through the beauty of the person of Christ, the beauty of the work of Christ (*redemption accomplished*), and the beauty of Christ's ongoing work through the Holy Spirit (*redemption applied*) [is] according to the redemptive-eschatological fulfillment of His original creational purpose."[26]

Why is beauty and fittingness appropriate for this discussion? According to the longstanding medieval tradition, beauty, as one of the transcendentals, is closely connected to both goodness and truth. For example, Aquinas postulated that "beauty and goodness in a thing are fundamentally identical," and it is the same with truth.[27] If Aquinas is correct, perhaps there is an evidential power to beauty, which can be found in beauty's connection to the true and the good and beauty's ability to convince people of the true and the good. One example comes from Anselm, who attributed fittingness as a defining characteristic of the aesthetic aspect of redemption, seen in the evident symmetry entailed in its outworking, which pointed to its truth.[28] Likewise, John Mark Miravalle argues,

[25] The concept of "Theological Fittingness" has been defined by Gilbert Narcisse as that which "displays the significance of the chosen mean among alternative possibilities, and the reasons according to which God, in His wisdom, has effectively realized and revealed, gratuitously and through His love, the mystery of the salvation and glorification of humanity" (quoted in Adams, "Aesthetic Goodness," 11).

[26] Adams, "Aesthetic Goodness," xi, 16.

[27] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 5, art. 4, ad. 1 (quoted in Miravalle, *Beauty*, 38). This also implied: beauty is as objective as truth and goodness. Consequently, if we believe in objective standards of truth and objective standards of goodness and morality, we should believe in objective standards of beauty. In other words, beauty is not just a matter of preference (p. 39).

[28] "And it was fitting that the devil, who through the tasting of a tree defeated the human being whom he persuaded, should be defeated by a human being through the suffering on a tree that he inflicted. And there are many other things

"People don't just have an emotional attraction to beauty; they have an *intellectual* attraction to beauty. Beauty is how we help convince them [of the truth]."[29] In other words, if the medieval tradition is correct, it can be argued that beauty can help us perceive spiritual truth, as well as goodness, through sense images and our imaginations, which can inspire and motivate a passion for the true and the good.[30]

What Makes a Good and Beautiful Story?

Good stories contain and explain the essence of human experience. So, what makes a story "good" and, thus, "beautiful?" I shall posit, at a minimum, three elements are necessary for a good story: (1) the story's conflict, (2) the fittingness of the resolution, and (3) the story's "happy ending" and its ability to "awaken *desire*."

Concerning conflict, in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, Christopher Vogler argues that "all great stories adhere to the same basic structure. When that structure is followed, a story will inspire its readers. When it is ignored, the story will bore them. These common structural elements are found universally in myths, fairy tales, fables, novels, and movies."[31] Succinctly stated by Jonathan Gottschall, a "[Good] Story = Character + Predicament + Attempted Extrication."[32] It is the conflict between good and evil, hero and villain, that creates the drama and, without a conflict, there can be no quest, risk, victory, growth, or intrigue.[33] As Gottschall claims, "[That] this is story's master formula … is intensely strange. There are a lot of different ways stories *could* be structured … but while characters frequently do live happily ever after in fiction, they must always earn their good fortune by flirting with disaster. [That is] the thornier the predicament faced by the hero, the more we like the story."[34]

Tolkien, "a storyteller at heart," felt that "stories need conflict, just as

that, if carefully considered, demonstrate the indescribable beauty that belongs to our redemption, accomplished in this way" (Anselm, "Cur Deus Homo," in *Basic Writings* [Hackett, 1997], 248).

[29] Miravalle, *Beauty*, 45–46. An argument that connects the beauty with goodness can be found in John Navone who argues true beauty is "the attractiveness of the truly good [which] motivates human life and development in that intellectual, moral, and religious self-transcendence that constitutes human authenticity or excellence" (*Enjoying God's Beauty* [Liturgical Press, 1999], 9).

[30] Miravalle, *Beauty*, 16.

[31] Mentioned in Bruner, *The Divine Drama*, 4–5.

[32] Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 52.

[33] Bruner, *The Divine Drama*, 55.

[34] Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 52.

humanity does. So, the creation of dissonance is necessary," as it enables "humans to learn from their mistakes and to grow.[35] Every story must have conflict; without conflict, the actions of agents would be inconsequential and uninspiring. For example, imagine experiencing a story where each character exists in a state of perfect flourishing. Over the course of the story, we see these characters going on with their daily lives without any conflict—there are neither lapses in right judgments nor moral dilemmas nor evils nor vices the characters must confront. Frankly, this would be quite a boring story. Furthermore, Robert McKee in *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting* refers to a certain "Law of Conflict"—namely, "nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict."[36] This "Law of Conflict" is not merely a principle of a story, but "the very soul of story."[37]

In addition to conflict, however, there must be a fitting resolution. The fittingness is judged in terms of how things cohere—involving unity, harmony, simplicity, symmetry and the like—and in terms of the believability in the total outworking of the narrative.[38] Good stories play out in a manner that endows meaning to the actions of characters—meaningful in moral and rational practice and development—and endows meaning to the narrative as a whole.

However, the most important characteristic of a good story, as Tolkien judged, is the effectiveness or "success" of the story to "awaken desire."[39] The fairy story—which, when properly presented is the best kind of story—preeminently offers "the joy of the happy ending," and it is in this respect that stories awaken desire. "The joy of the happy ending" is, for Tolkien, the pinnacle of a fairy story. Calling it the "eucatastrophe" (or "good" catastrophe), this event is the reversal of a seemingly inevitable catastrophe. The eucatastrophe "denies … universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of

[35] Keith W. Jenson, "Dissonance in the Divine Theme: The Issue of Free Will in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*," in *Middle-Earth Minstrel: Essays on Music in Tolkien*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Olms, 1978), 103 (quoted in Bertoglio, "Dissonant Harmonies," 109).

[36] Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screen Writing* (Regan, 1997), 210.

[37] McKee, *Story*, 211.

[38] Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 80.

[39] "Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded" (J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* [First Ballantine, 1966], 63).

the world, poignant as grief." The good fairy story, by means of its eucatastrophe, gives the reader "a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears," for in the eucatastrophe the reader gets "a piercing glimpse of joy, and heart's desire … rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through."[40] According to Tolkien, "The *eucatastrophe* tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories … [is] the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn."[41] Furthermore, Tolkien continues:

> God redeemed the corrupt making-creatures, men, in a way fitting to this aspect, as to others, of their strange nature. The Gospel contains a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—particularly artistic, beautiful, and moving: "mythical" in their perfect, self-contained significance.… But this story has entered History and the primary world.… The Birth of Christ [or Incarnation] is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.[42]

The gospel is the ultimate fairy-story, Tolkien concludes, because it contains "the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe … [and] there is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many skeptical men have accepted as true on its own merits."[43]

In Tolkien's thought, "the beauty of a story" is associated with the metaphysical truth embedded in the narrative, for one "is meant to draw nourishment from the beauty as well as the truth."[44] Furthermore, the value of narrative beauty was deep, complex, and far-reaching; not only did Tolkien believe that the beauty of a story could gesture to divine truth, but he believed that the moral imagination of the culture could be reshaped through the beauty of narratives.[45] As Lisa Coutras states, "The beauties of a story may reveal truths about reality which have otherwise

[40] R. J. Reilly, "Tolkien and the Fairy Story," in *Understanding The Lord of the Rings: The Best of Tolkien Criticism*, ed. Rose A. Zimbardo and Neil D. Isaacs (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 102.

[41] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 85–86.

[42] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 88–89.

[43] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Monster and the Critics" and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin, 1996), 156 (quoted in Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel According to Tolkien: Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-Earth* [Westminster John Knox, 2003], 8).

[44] Lisa Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle Earth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10.

[45] Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty*, 12.

been lost from view."[46] Coutras continues: "The mythical aspects of the Christian story testify not to falsehood, but to beauty, and the beauty of the story is key to communicating its reality; that is, Christianity integrates mythical beauty with goodness and truth to convey pure reality in the primary world."[47]

The Greatest Possible Story Theodicy

The Greatest Possible Story, briefly stated, argues that God aims to create a world that rises to a certain magnificent level of value, which is encapsulated by a good, true, and beautiful story. Great stories contain conflicts, fitting resolutions, and a desire *awakening* Eucatastrophe—a Eucatastrophe preeminently found in the Incarnation and Atonement. However, each possible world and each possible story which includes the Eucatastrophe of the Incarnation and Atonement must also include the fall, sin, and the consequences of sin—evil and suffering—enabling the "joyous turn" of the Christian story. However, a question arises: why is God wanting to write a great *story*? Stories have the ability to communicate truths that may not be able to be fully communicated by mere propositions. Stories, especially good, true, and beautiful stories, have the ability to persuade and motivate actions. Additionally, as Stump has argued, the second-personal experiences that stories allow us to encounter give us a new perspective on life and states of affairs. As humans experience the Christian story and the beauty of the Eucatastrophe, God's aim is to noncoercively draw them into an everlasting love and union with him.[48]

In this way, my account of the *Felix Culpa* slightly differs from Plantinga's in that I argue the fall, sin, and the consequences of sin were necessary, not only for the writing of the greatest possible story, but this was God's chosen means of ensuring the kind of relationship he was after—a non-coercive relationship involving genuinely free, moral, and relational agents who freely choose to love God and abhor evil.

How is God to create genuinely free agents who will freely choose to love God unwaveringly? This could never have come about without first allowing for a context that allowed for moral and rational agents to experience and develop through conflict. Through conflict, human beings develop "hard-won" and lasting dispositions along with memorial beliefs,

[46] Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty*, 32.

[47] Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty*, 11.

[48] "The ultimate proper object of love is God.… [L]ove is primarily the love of persons.… The *end* of the love of persons… is union with God shared in the union with other human beings.… [T]he ultimate home of real love is in such shared union" (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness,* 91).

dispositions and beliefs that will carry on after death. Life-after-death is an essential element in the Christian narrative and essential to allow for a state of affairs where free individuals choose to love God and abhor evil freely.[49] I posit two eschatological theses: (1) the beatific vision, the face-to-face vision of God, beauty itself, which is itself an incommensurate good that will surely guarantee, for any cooperative person who has it, that the balance of goods over evils will be overwhelmingly favorable;[50] and (2) the retention of memorial beliefs. Following the beatific vision, all of our memories of pain and suffering will be overshadowed by the beauty of the Lord. Furthermore, following the beatific vision, we will see sin and evil for the wickedness they are, remember the devastation and the havoc sin and evil caused in our lives and the lives of others, and, as a result, we will freely choose to avoid and never sin again. The dispositions that we worked towards will come to their final consummation, and we will be in a state where free beings choose to love God and avoid sin.

In my account, human beings are characters in two stories: human beings are sub-characters in God's grand meta-story, but they are also primary characters in their personal life stories. The grand meta-story—which includes sin and the incarnation, crucifixion, atonement and the resurrection of Christ—is God's means of awaking our *desires* for hope and union with God, which is accomplished by believing in the grand narrative and through faith in Jesus Christ. This grand narrative allows for the restoration and redemption of a fallen person in a non-coercive way, drawing them via the instrument of the beautiful Gospel story to establish true union with God. As beauty draws us, the beauty of the gospel story draws our souls.

However, God is also active in our personal life stories as the pains, struggles, toils, and challenges of our lives are used as *potential* means to direct us toward our flourishing in our union with God. Since the greatest

[49] "But if God could, without logical contradiction, have created humans as wholly good free beings, why did he not do so? … virtues which have been formed within the agent as a hard-won deposit of his own right decisions in situations of challenge and temptation, are intrinsically more valuable than virtues created within him ready made and without any effort on his own part … a basic value-judgment, which cannot be established by argument but which one can only present, in the hope that it will be as morally plausible, and indeed compelling, to others as to oneself" (John Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy," in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson [University of Notre Dame Press, 2011], 268–69).

[50] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Redemptive Suffering as a Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil," in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 226.

good for human persons would be to experience the beatific vision and attain union with God, it may be that God uses our pain and suffering as a means to draw us to himself. As C. S. Lewis noted, "Pain is not only immediately recognizable, but evil impossible to ignore."[51] Lewis continues, "[W]e can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."[52] Evil may be used by God to awaken us to the fallenness of the world so that we turn to him as our source of peace and salvation, which will open the door to the greatest human good—the beatific vision. Or, perhaps, the hardships of the world are used to train or correct believers so that they can continue to flourish in their union with God. Hardships can allow for soul-building, perseverance, character development, and a deepening in one's trust in God as they seek Him in the midst of their trials (cf. Rom. 5:3–5). Or, perhaps, hardships come in the form of the consequences of our actions in order to bring correction, or are used as means of discipline to correct sinful patterns of thought and behavior, for the Scriptures reveal God disciplines those he loves (cf. Heb 12:6).

However, as noted above, all of this is a *potentiality*, because what effect any particular case of suffering has in the life of a particular person can be determined by that person's freely willed reaction to that suffering. Thus, it is possible for a sufferer to freely reject the benefits that may follow (i.e., deeper intimacy with God that comes through identification with Christ's suffering, or growth in conflict-resultant virtues such as endurance, courage, compassion and the like) and become hardened in heart and bitter towards God. Consequently, growth and solidity of disposition are not guaranteed to be successful without the cooperation of the sufferer.[53]

In sum, in the context of the problem of evil, God has morally sufficient reasons to allow suffering. First, he allows suffering in his grand meta-story, which is to establish the eucatastrophe of the great gospel story—the vehicle to awaken a desire for union with God, which is the greatest (or incommensurate) good. Second, he has morally sufficient reason to allow suffering in our person life stories, which are used to direct our attention to God and allow for our continued flourishing in our union with God.

[51] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (HarperOne, 2001), 90.

[52] Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 90–91.

[53] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 404.

Rejoinder to O1: The Fittingness of Incarnation-and-Atonement

Kevin Diller asks why Plantinga takes the value of the Incarnation-and-Atonement to be so high and finds in his theodicy this answer: Because Incarnation-and-Atonement yield both the stupendous good of significantly increased intimacy with God and also the exceedingly good display of God's self-sacrificing love for those creatures who have rebelled against him. To this answer, Diller raises a philosophical objection: The incarnation-and-Atonement are logically independent of one another; we could have incarnation without atonement (perhaps even absent suffering of any kind), and (although it is a considerably more controversial claim) we might even have atonement without incarnation.[54] Diller's point is not novel, however, as many medieval theologians also recognized that Incarnation-and-Atonement are logically independent. That is, it would have been metaphysically and logically possible for God to become incarnate, even if creatures never sinned, and the incarnation without atonement would still have been cosmic-excellence enhancing allowing for the stupendous good of intimacy with God.[55]

However, given my account, it is important to ask: what is it that makes the incarnation beautiful, and, as Tolkien claimed, "the eucatastrophe of Man's history"? It is not merely his coming that is fitting or surprising. Had there been no sin, how different would Christ's incarnation be from God's "walking in the garden in cool of the day" with the first couple (Gen 3:8)? Surely, the depiction of God in the garden before the fall also entailed a great intimacy with God.

Rather, the surprising, good catastrophe found in the incarnation is the fact that our God came down from heaven and took human form, not to enjoy the pleasures of human life, but to undergo its horrors—in the wake of sin and evil, Christ's humanity was in the form of a slave which was most befitting for him to take in accordance with his role as the Messiah.[56] The person and role of Christ in the grand story is fitting and restoratively harmonious (e.g., whereas the first Adam failed to obey,

[54] "Atonement implies that there is sin that needs atoning for. But if we consider the incarnation alone, it is not clear that evil is a prerequisite … it may be argued that incarnation is a necessary part of God's taking *human* suffering on himself, but it is not clear that incarnation requires suffering, not is it clear that God's purposes in becoming human were exhausted by those which involve suffering" (Kevin Diller, "Are Sin and Evil Necessary for a Really Good World?," in *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael L. Peterson (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 395.

[55] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Plantinga on 'Felix Culpa': Analysis and Critique," *Faith and Philosophy* 25.2 (2008): 131.

[56] King, *Beauty of the Lord*, 165.

Christ, the last Adam, obeyed unto death; and, although man was to be God's image-bearer but lost it through sin, by faith in "*the* image of the invisible God" the full status of image-bearer is restored).[57] The beauty of God's self-giving love in the person of Jesus Christ enables Christians to affirm that God is love and loves us. God the Father sent his Son as the promised Messiah to unite mankind in universal fellowship under the sovereignty of his love.[58] Thus, the incarnation alone does not count as an eucatastrophe. The incarnation in the form of a servant befitting of the Messiah along with the Eucatastrophe of the atonement and resurrection gives the world a radically self-sacrificing display of God's love for creatures that have rejected him.[59] The Incarnation-and-Atonement allows for the potential for deeper intimacy with God that comes through suffering or through the experience of being rescued. In his humiliating death on the cross, the glory of God's actions in Christ reveals in the most theodramatic way the divine love that expresses itself in unreserved self-giving for the sake of others.[60] The beauty-glory of Christ, therefore, is not rooted in his physical incarnation or appearance, but in his self-sacrificial love, which passes through the ugliness of the cross. It is a beauty which not only embraced the brokenness and pain of this world but which enables us to see the glory of God through it.[61]

Rejoinder to O2: The Relationship God Desires

Further, Diller raises a theological objection: Plantinga misidentifies the relative value of a proper relationship with God in comparison with a demonstration of God's love insofar as the theodicy maintains sacrificing

[57] Perhaps, it can also be pointed out that: (1) The Son's fittingness in the states of his humiliation and exaltation serves to appropriately display his glory; (2) the fittingness of God's retributive judgment meted out upon Christ; and (c) God's reconciling operations through the reign of Christ evince the beautiful nature of his work (King, *Beauty of the Lord*, 212).

[58] John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Liturgical Press, 1996), 61.

[59] Diller, "Are Sin and Evil Necessary for a Really Good World?," 402–3.

[60] King, *Beauty of the Lord*, 206. He later states, "For in the cross of Christ, as in a magnificent theatre, the inestimable goodness of God is displayed before the whole world. In all the creatures, indeed, both high and low, the glory of God shines, but nowhere has it shone more brightly than in the cross, in which there has been an astonishing change of things, the condemnation of all men has been manifested, sin has been blotted out, salvation has been restored to men; and, in short, the whole world has been renewed, and everything restored to good order" (p. 221).

[61] Adrienne Chaplin, "Beauty Transfigured," in *It Was Good: Making Art to the Glory of God*, ed. Ned Bustard (Square Halo, 2006), 42.

the former (for everyone a while and for some forever) is an appropriate price to pay for the latter communicated by the atonement. In the opening pages of Genesis, it appears man and woman already have some form of relationship with their Creator. So, why sacrifice that relationship for a display of love, which, for some peculiar reason, can only be communicated by way of atonement.[62] In Diller's own words,

> Relationship with God appears to be undervalued, such that it is worth severing the relationship so that God can act out in love to restore it.… If God's purpose in atonement is to restore relationship with us, then it is proper to think that close relationship with creation is to God of greater value than the cost of the atonement.… [However, given *Felix Culpa*] the value of the sacrifice of atonement is considered worth the cost of breaking relationship with creation.[63]

Accordingly, it can be argued that the Bible understands man's highest good to be relational; that is, man is created *for* relationship with God. Thus, *relationship* is the towering good. In Plantinga's *Felix Culpa*, however, "the towering good" in view is God's display of unmatched love brought about by the Incarnation-and-Atonement, not the redemption that is accomplished by these acts.

However, on my account, "the towering good" *is* a relationship, but it is a relationship of a certain kind which can only be obtained in a certain way. The relationship involves moral and relational creatures freely choosing to love God and freely choosing to abstain from evil for all eternity, and that relationship is obtained through an encounter with the supreme love of God as displayed in the great story of the gospel. Perhaps, the love of God could not be fully communicated in mere propositions. That is, it would not have sufficed for God to merely say in propositional form, "I love you," to his people. Instead, as the apostle Paul tells us, "God *demonstrates* his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8, emphasis added).[64] In the Gospel of John, a verse well-known, Jesus says, "For God loved the world *in this way*: He gave his one and only son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, emphasis added). The public display of love on the cross, embedded in the gospel story, is the instrument by which fallen humans freely choose to love God. The peak of sacrificial love as displayed in the atonement, through the physical and spiritual suffering

[62] Hudson, "The Argument from Evil," 282.
[63] Diller, "Are Sin and Evil Necessary for a Really Good World?," 398.
[64] All Scripture quotations are from the CSB.

of Jesus Christ on behalf of his enemies, is the eucatastrophe of the beautiful Christian story that draws sinners to himself as they freely choose to love him in return.

Rejoinder to O3: Our Personal Narratives

Adams added the third concern of an agent-centered restriction: in short, Adams charges Plantinga's theodicy with having an "insufficient appreciation of the category of horrors"—evils so ruinous to a person, that any greater good produced thereby would have to be personally compensating in a way that restores individual meaning and value to the life of the horror-participant.[65] Or, as Stump articulates,

> If God perfectly loves his creatures, he would not require one of them to suffer in order to advance an end or aim that wasn't directly connected with that agent's own welfare. God wouldn't require me to suffer in order to benefit someone else; He wouldn't even require me to suffer in order to actualize an extremely good world; He wouldn't require me to suffer, unless that suffering was necessary for some good for me myself.[66]

In response, we can note that every good story has a beginning, middle and an end, and it is the end of the story that retroactively restores meaning and purpose to all that came before. For all we know, perhaps it is from an eschatological vantage point that our participation in suffering can be understood. In Adams' own words, it may be that,

> Retrospectively, from the vantage point of the beatific vision, the one who suffered will not wish them away from his life history—and this, not because he sees them as the source of some other resultant good, but inasmuch as he will recognize them as times of sure identification with and the vision into the inner life of his creator.[67]

Since the Divine identified with us in horror participation, our horror participation can be taken up into the overall—on the whole and in the end—beatific relationship with God.[68]

Or perhaps we can respond by positing, toward the end of guiding our personal life stories to form virtuous dispositions, God places us in environments that are conducive to risk, danger, and disappointment for these

[65] Hudson, "The Argument from Evil," 282.
[66] Quoted in Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," 384. Plantinga does not cite the source of Stump's citation.
[67] Adams, "Redemptive Suffering," 230.
[68] Adams, "Plantinga on 'Felix Culpa'," 137.

are necessary for soul formation.[69] Perhaps, some suffering is given in order to chastise and correct a person for wrongful patterns of life while some are given not to correct past wrongs but to prevent future ones. Or it may even be the case that the suffering has no other purpose than to lead a person to love God more ardently and as a result discover true peace and freedom.[70] All things considered, it may be the case that God does not allow us to suffer evils that could not have, with our cooperation, a redemptive, soul-forming aspect.[71]

Ultimately, God wants to tell a story through our lives and, in the best stories, the main character is required to confront dangers he would never willingly seek. As Kurt Bruner observed, Frodo and Sam knew living out a story from the inside feels very different from viewing it from the outside, and the stories that we remember often involve characters overcoming dangers or hardships to inspire us.[72] As Sam tells Frodo:

> The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the story went out and looked for, because they wanted them.… But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually…. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had,

[69] According to Hick, "In a world devoid of both of dangers to be avoided and rewards to be won we may assume that there would have been virtually no development of the human intellect and imagination, and hence of either the sciences or the arts, and hence of human civilization or culture" (John Hick, "Soul-Making Theodicy," 272).

[70] Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (Penguin, 2016, 47). "Three additional benefits may be: First, people who endure and get through suffering become more resilient… Second, it strengthens relationships, usually bonding the sufferer permanently into a set of deeper friendships or family ties that serve to nurture and strengthen for years. But the third benefit is perhaps the most significant—suffering changes priorities and philosophies" (p. 165).

[71] Adams, "Redemptive Suffering," 217. In Leibniz's words, "The apparent disorder is like certain chords in music which seem awkward when they are heard by themselves, but which a knowledgeable composer inserts in the piece because, *in joining them with other chords*, he enhances the music and makes the harmony more beautiful. And since what we now see is only a very small portion of the infinite universe, and because our present life is only a little portion of what will happen to us, we should not be astonished if all the beauty of things does not reveal itself at first sight" (*GP* VII: 545, translation in Courdert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah* [131]; quoted in Chiara Bertoglio, "Dissonant Harmonies: Tolkien's Musical Theodicy," *Tolkien Studies* 15 [2018]: 110).

[72] Bruner, *Finding God in the Lord of the Rings*, 77–79.

> we shouldn't known, because they'd be forgotten.[73]

As Sam noted, when it comes to the story of our life, we find ourselves having just "landed in" them, not yet knowing how the tale will end or how our part in this unfolding drama fits into the larger story being told.[74] You and I are actors in the larger story of God. Its scenes are not ours to write or alter. We serve the drama; it does not serve us. We may not even understand how our part fits into the bigger picture. As C. S. Lewis wrote:

> We do not know the play. We do not even know whether we are in Act I or Act V. We do not know who are the major and who the minor characters. The Author knows. The audience, if there is an audience (if angels and archangels and all the company of heaven fill the pit and the stalls), may have an inkling. But we, never seeing the play from outside, never meeting any characters except the tiny minority who are "on" in the same scene as ourselves, are wholly ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past.[75]

However, perhaps, one day when the whole story is told from beginning to end, we will know how our actions contributed to God's story.[76]

Additional Objections: The Problem of the Unredeemed and a Conflict Free Heaven

There are two additional objections that may need to be addressed. The first is the problem of the unredeemed. How could God permit someone to suffer *eternally* if he is after writing the best life story? This seems to violate the notion of "agent-centered restriction."

In response, perhaps it can be shown that God is still good and desires the best for the damned. In Stump's account of God's dealing with Satan, she notes:

> Satan is at enmity with God.… Satan's repentance and moral regeneration, his internal integration and return to harmony with God, are ruled out.… [But] it is possible that God's care for Satan might keep Satan from getting worse, even if it were inefficacious

[73] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1966), 696–97.

[74] For all we know, "Suffering may be an integral to the process of producing closeness with God that constitutes the flourishing of the protagonist at the end of their story; and it could be hard to imagine that it could have been gotten in some easier way, without suffering" (Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 474).

[75] C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian* (Touchstone, 1996), 71.

[76] Bruner, *Divine Drama,* 145.

> to make Satan better.… [W]hy suppose that real love, divine love, stops when it meets an irrevocably hostile response?[77]

Stump believes that "God succeeds in providing loving care for Satan, which would draw Satan closer to God if Satan were to accept it."[78] The theism under discussion takes God to respect the free will of human beings. And in these cases, Alston believes,

> No strategy consistent with that can guarantee that all, or perhaps any, creatures will respond in the way intended. Whether they do is ultimately up to them. Hence we cannot argue from the fact that such tactics often don't succeed to the conclusion that God wouldn't employ them. When dealing with free creatures God must, because of self-imposed limitations, use means that have some considerable likelihood of success, not means that cannot fail.[79]

The second additional objection may be the problem of a conflict-free

[77] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 205. Stump later writes: "On my reading of Satan's interaction with God, however, God has not given up loving Satan. On the contrary, God is doing things designed to bring Satan as close to God as Satan is willing to go, or at least to try to keep Satan from migrating even further away. So when God says that Satan incited him to move against Job, God is not only pointing out to Satan that he, rather than Satan, was in full control of the evil that befell Job, but he is also pushing Satan to acknowledge that God acted as he did for Satan's sake" (p. 213).

[78] Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 226. It should be noted, however: "Love is permanently rejected.… Satan is one of the sons of God, however this group is to be understood; but he is an alienated member of the group … to the extent to which God loves Satan and wants to be united with him, then, in the story there is something that God, at least in his antecedent will, cannot have—for that period of time, as the story portrays it, or ever, as Aquinas understands it.… *But, in the story, when God cares for Satan in this way, God is not heartbroken by Satan's rejection of him. God's care for Satan, God's love for Satan, arise from within God's participation in shared union with all those other persons who are united to God in love*" (p. 459). Likewise, Gollum's salvation is never achieved and Tolkien has shared some of his personal thoughts about Gollum's salvation in his letters—Tolkien would refer to Gollum's failure to come into his cure as "the most tragic moment in the Tale".… he was "most moved" by "the tragedy of Gollum who at that moment came within a hair of repentance—but for one rough word from Sam" (*Letters*, 110). In short, it is not only Gandalf who seeks and hopes for salvation, but Tolkien himself (Matthew T. Dickerson, *Following Gandalf: Epic Battles and Moral Victory in the Lord of the Rings* [Brazos, 2003], 153, 157).

[79] William Alston, "The Inductive Argument From Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Indiana University Press, 1996), 105.

heaven. Recall the previously stated example of the need for conflict to combat boredom. If heaven is a state where each character exists in a state of perfect flourishing and over the course of everlasting events, we see these characters going on with their daily lives without any conflict—no lapses in judgments nor moral dilemmas nor evils nor vices the characters must confront—wouldn't this be quite a boring state of affairs? Will heaven be boring? In response, though there will be no conflicts in heaven, I believe we will still be able to experience them through the stories we share. Stories provide a person with some of the experiences they would have had through direct personal interactions with the characters, without actually placing them within the story itself. Well, if man is a story-telling animal, perhaps a great part of the activities of heaven will involve stories being told and retold of the adventures we faced, the trials we endured, the sufferings we overcame—stories as a means to remember the work of God in our lives and a means to glorify God forever. There will be, as Sam said, a jovial recollection:

> "Let's hear about Frodo and the Ring!" And they'll say: "Yes, that's one of my favorite stories. Frodo was very brave, wasn't he, dad?" "Yes, my boy, the famousest of the hobbits, and that's saying a lot." "It's saying a lot too much," said Frodo, and he laughed a long clear laugh from his heart.[80]

[80] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 2nd ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 321–22 (quoted in Wood, *Gospel According to Tolkien*, 107).

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The Aesthetics of Contemporary Worship Music: A Defense of Simplicity

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Abstract: *Christian contemporary worship music, when compared to other genres of music, will not sound as innovative, technical, or impressive. This music will strike one as rather simple. One might conclude that this music has a comparable lack of both aesthetic value and musicianship. This essay is an exploration and defense of the aesthetic value, artistic phenomenology, and ethical significance of Christian contemporary worship music. After laying out the function of Christian contemporary worship music, I draw out three norms of Christian contemporary worship music—simplicity, predictability, and user-friendly keys. I then argue not only that contemporary worship music is aesthetically valuable in virtue of these features, but that it also comes with a unique kind of artistic agency. Furthermore, the music itself helps cultivate a specific Christian virtue: simplicity.*

Key Words: *aesthetics, artistic agency, Christian contemporary music, ethicism, moderate moralism, religious music, simplicity, worship*

Christian contemporary worship music, modern praise and worship music with rock band instrumentation, when compared to other genres of music, will not sound as innovative, technical, or impressive. This music will strike one as rather simple. One might conclude that this music has a comparable lack of both aesthetic value and musicianship. This essay is an exploration of the aesthetic value, artistic phenomenology, and ethical significance of Christian contemporary music. I argue not only that contemporary worship music is aesthetically valuable, but that it also comes with a unique kind of artistic agency. Furthermore, the music itself helps cultivate a specific Christian virtue: simplicity.

This essay is structured as follows: I first illustrate some varieties of religious music, and then I lay out the concept and purpose of Christian worship music in section two. Section three describes the subsequent norms and features of worship music. I then argue that these features constitute aesthetic merits in section four. I then turn to artistic agency in section five and argue that there is a unique kind of artistic agency exemplified by performing worship musicians that is surprisingly complex and

difficult. Lastly, I consider the ethical implications of contemporary worship music and its connection to the Christian virtue of simplicity.

The History, Criticisms, and Concept of Worship Music

Religions, and their distinct denominations, have held various attitudes towards the use of music. Some even take a negative view of music. Certain early forms of Buddhism which focus on the permanent nature of the transcendent devalue the fleeting physical world with its changes. This focus away from the changing physical world discouraged engaging in artistic enhancement, including musical enhancement, of meditation in favor of quietness and solitude.[1] Some Muslim groups, following their interpretation of the Qur'an, have banned music altogether.[2]

Of the religions that do incorporate music, the functions that the music play vary tremendously depending on the context. Buddhist monks have used choral chanting as a way of preserving teachings, and some scholars have even cited instances of these monks making corrections to written texts on the basis of such chants.[3] Chinese Buddhists use music as a funeral ritual to consecrate food as an offering to ensure the dead will cease suffering and experience rebirth in Buddhist heavens.[4] Even in settings where religious music is meant for audience participation, there are different functions and subsequent intended experiences. Tibetan Buddhist monks participate in mass choirs that can involve up to ten thousand participants at annual ceremonies.[5] The function of such large audience participation in music is to dissolve one's sense of self into the larger religious body. This, in turn, is meant to alter one's state of consciousness, causing one to rise above the "profane phenomenal world"[6] into a sort of trance state.

Although Christian worship settings also involve audience participation, we will see that the purpose is very different from the aforementioned practices. Of course, Christian worship settings and music also vary widely across denominations. Though the function of such music largely remains the same across denominations, not all will lack artistic innovation and technicality. Lay persons and scholars acknowledge that

[1] Ian. W. Mabbett, "Buddhism and Music," *Asian Music* 25.1 (1993): 9–28.

[2] Guy Beck, "Religious and Devotional Music: Northern Area," in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 5, ed. A. Arnold (Routledge, 2000), 246–58.

[3] Francesca Tarocco, "Buddhist Music," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

[4] Tarocco, "Buddhist Music," 6.

[5] Mabbett, "Buddhism and Music," 23.

[6] Mabbett, "Buddhism and Music," 24.

there are great works of music with Christian themes and written for performance within a liturgical context, such as the variations of "Ave Maria" and the religious works of famous composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach. I will not be dealing with these classic works in this article. Nor is my focus on modern liturgical styles of worship consisting of a pipe organ and choir singing, although some of what I say will also apply to this style. My focus is on contemporary praise and worship music, with instrumentation including electric guitar, drums, bass, piano, keyboard, and vocals. This music is used most frequently in Protestant denominations, and especially the Evangelical church.

This movement has two different roots.[7] One is in the Latter Rain movement of the Pentecostal denomination in the 1940s. The central tenet of the Latter Rain movement is a restoration of a particular kind of worship which focuses on praise, hence the often-heard phrase "praise and worship." Reg Layzell, a Pentecostal pastor, was the forerunner sparking this emphasis on praise. The other, and more scattered, root originated in the United States and focused on evangelism. This focus on evangelism led to a desire for a specific music style to bring the Christian message in a modern form. Appropriating the popular music style and instrumentation of the time appealed to a broader and younger audience. The Jesus People movement of the West Coast of the U.S. stationed largely at Calvary Chapel constituted one prominent branch of this root. Through the 1960's and 1970's, they began writing Christian music intended to be played both in large public performances and in church settings with pop and rock instrumentation. In 1971, Marantha! Music released its first album from this church and heavily influenced contemporary worship music.[8] Both of these movements culminated in what is known as Contemporary Praise and Worship music. Bands and musicians from the 1980's and 90's include Delirious?, Michael W. Smith, Hillsong United,[9] and Sonicflood. Modern artists include Kari Jobe, Lauren Daigle, and Matt Redman.

Upon first listening, such music will not immediately strike one as impressive aesthetically. Both the music and the lyrics might seem insipid.

[7] For a helpful and unique overview of the history of contemporary worship music, see Lim Swee Hong and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Abingdon, 2017). They note that the underlying driving force behind these movements is biblical interpretation and application, not musical style. It would be helpful to also mention Ruth and Lim's book *History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Baker, 2021).

[8] A more concise history is given in Lim and Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus.*

[9] Although many contemporary worship bands are from North America, Hillsong grew out of a Pentecostal church in Australia.

This is even more the case if one is a Christian coming from a denomination with deep historical roots. For instance, contemporary worship music in the Protestant traditions pales in comparison to the rich tradition of art in the Orthodox tradition, including the latter's icons, mosaics, sacerdotal vestments, and stained-glass windows.[10] For the non-religious, the music one encounters while attending a modern Evangelical church service will seem like a watered-down rock or pop concert. Notable Christian artists have even extended this evaluation to a perceived incompetency on the part of Christians as musicians.[11] They are not very good at art, and there is some kind of hindrance to good art-making that comes with being a Christian, or a religious person, in general.

To evaluate these criticisms, let us bring out the implicit expectation of art and the conception of art experiences which grounds it. When one claims that a certain music is boring or bland, they are listening to the music with the expectation of being impressed or deriving a kind of enjoyment from it. This is a widespread expectation from art, and contemporary worship music does not fare as well in this respect.[12] However, this mode of engaging artworks is foreign, and even antithetical, to the nature of Christian worship music.[13] To show why, and to begin constructing an aesthetics of contemporary worship music, we should seek clarity regarding what makes any piece of music "worship" music. What is worship? What kind of role does worship music play? Christian worship takes many forms and some, including simple acts of service or even one's daily occupation, can occur without any occurrent thoughts about God. However, in the context of a Sunday church service, there is a specific form of

[10] For a full theology and history of iconography in the Orthodox Church, see M. Fortounatto M. Cunningham, "Theology of the Icon," in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 136–49.

[11] Michael Gungor, "Michael Gungor on the Problem with the Christian Music Industry," Tov Rose, April 23, 2016, https://www.tovrose.com/2013/12/04/michael-gungor-on-the-problem-with-the-christian-music-industry/. He describes Christian music in general as "disingenuous," "pretending," and "having a blander sheen."

[12] This attitude echoes the enlightenment mindset which culminated in Kant's conception of art that grounds both its status and value in a kind of disinterested pleasure. One is meant to contemplate the artwork for its own sake, disregarding any practical benefit it might provide, with the aim of enjoyment.

[13] Interestingly, Vaishnav devotional musicians also deplore music for its own sake and thus discourage technicality or improvisation. See Beck, "Religious and Devotional Music," 247.

worship that involves deliberate attention to God in the activities. Theologians have given various definitions for this form of worship,[14] but the following given by Wolterstorff captures the essence succinctly:

> … worship of God is a particular mode of Godward acknowledgment of God's unsurpassable greatness.… [I]t is that mode of acknowledgment whose attitudinal stance toward God is awed, reverential, and grateful adoration.[15]

On this conception, worship involves explicit intentional thoughts about God, and two aspects are worth noting. First, by "Godward," Wolterstorff means that one is oriented towards God in the sense that God is the object of one's attention and attitude in worship. Thus, unlike the Tibetan Buddhist choirs, the focus of the singing is not towards a certain kind of trance experience, but an object-oriented emotional expression towards something else, namely God. Second, the specific attitudes one takes towards God are positive ones such as awe, reverence, and gratitude. One who is expressing an attitude of anger, envy, or confusion towards God could not be said to be worshiping him in this sense. Following this conception, we can say that worship music is music which is meant to elicit feelings of awe, reverence, or gratitude towards God.

Furthermore, contemporary worship music is written and performed in the context of *corporate* worship. That is, worship music is meant to elicit worshipful feelings and thoughts in a group of persons simultaneously, and thus meets three conditions central to joint activities.[16] First, everyone's attention is focused on the same object, God. Second, everyone has an awareness of the other members' attention on God. This is accomplished through hearing and participating with others by singing. Lastly,

[14] Famous examples include: "The worship of the church, then, consists of individual, corporate, public, and private service for the Lord which is generated by a reverence for a submission to Him who is totally worthy" (Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Moody, 1999], 428); "Worship is to feel in the heart.… Real worship is, among other things, a feeling about the Lord our God" (A. W. Tozer, *Whatever Happened to Worship?* [Christian, 1985], 82); "Worship is our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is, through our attitudes, actions, thoughts, and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself" (John MacArthur, *The Ultimate Priority* [Moody, 1983], 127); and "Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. [Zondervan, 2020], 1236).

[15] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The God We Worship: An Exploration of Liturgical Theology* (Eerdmans, 2015), 26.

[16] See Nick Zangwill, "Listening to Music Together," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 52 (2012): 379–89; and Margaret Gilbert, "Walking Together: A Paradigmatic Social Phenomenon," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 15 (1990): 1–14.

this group singing is a deliberate intent to cooperate among the individuals. One's singing in this context is meant not only to express and elicit one's own feelings, but also to encourage and reinforce the feelings of the entire group participating in the music.[17] Like the Tibetan Buddhist choirs, one's experience as being part of a group is central. However, unlike the Tibetan practice, one maintains one's sense of self during a Christian worship service; one is aware of oneself among others as a group of separate cooperating individuals.

This purpose of evoking the joint activity of worship stands in contrast to the previously mentioned experiences expected of other artworks. Instead of the music being an end in itself, an external object (God) is the focus. Additionally, the music is not primarily aimed to evoke pleasure or enjoyment but engaged with for the sake of evoking attitudes of admiration, gratitude, and reverence towards God. These latter emotions might be enjoyable, but the enjoyment itself is not aimed at intrinsically.

Norms of Worship Music

With the purpose of worship in mind, certain norms follow and are evident in the current practice of worship music. I will list and describe three.

Simplicity

By simplicity, I mean the quality that describes the lack of complexity in the structure of the object or activity. For music, simplicity denotes a lack of complex timings, chord structures, and melodies. Contemporary worship music usually employs two or three very basic chord patterns with simple structures. This is intentional. The church body sings this music together, and having a simple structure allows everyone, including new congregants and those not musically inclined, to catch on quickly and participate easily. John Dyck has similarly noted that simplicity in country music "is good for building community. Simple melodies are easy to learn, so they can spread faster."[18] The same holds for contemporary worship music.

Additionally, and in accordance with the purpose of worship, simple worship music is designed to *not* be attention grabbing. Since one's focus is meant to pass through the music and onto an external object, simplicity

[17] This is similar to the Hindu Bhajan, one of the most ubiquitous forms of religious music in northern India. For an overview, see Beck, "Religious and Devotional Music," 254.

[18] John Dyck, "The Aesthetics of Country Music," *Philosophy Compass* 16.5 (2021): 6.

in musical arrangement will help avoid attracting one's attention. Simplicity also occurs at the level of individual instruments—any one instrument should not be too grandiose. The worry is that any superbly impressive instrumentation will shift one's focus to the music itself rather than being a conduit for one's focus.[19] Wolterstorff echoes this point regarding liturgical worship music:

> When the music is so powerful, so striking, so novel, or so difficult to sing—or so bad in quality!—that the attention of the people tends to be drawn to itself, then it is no longer a humble servant of the liturgy ….[20]

For instance, one will rarely find anything like a sweep arpeggio, shred picking, or complex hammer-on pattern on any lead guitar part for a worship song. This does not mean that there are no instrumental sections; many worship songs have instrumental breaks. However, even in these instances the instrumental parts blend in with the rest of the chord changes so as not to stick out. They will follow the chord progression in a complementary manner, with the goal of evoking the intended emotions. Often, the instrumental part will mimic the melody, such as the instrumental breaks in "Reckless Love" by Cory Asbury.

Predictability

A song can be simple without being predictable. Think of Claude Debussy's "Claire De Lune." For a piano piece, this work is relatively simple, but it is not predictable. The piece seems to meander and wander aimlessly from section to section. Predictability is a crucial quality for contemporary worship music in its setting for many of the same reasons simplicity is. As opposed to singing out of a hymnal, contemporary worship is usually not accompanied by sheet music indicating where the melody will go. Usually, only the lyrics are displayed on overhead screens. If the melody is not predictable, it will be hard to join in if one is unfamiliar with the particular song. This is not too problematic if the song is played often, but if any church body wants variety in their music, then predictable songs will lighten the load cognitively for the worshipping community. After hearing the verse or chorus a couple of times, the melody sticks in one's

[19] This simplicity is not unique to the practice of worship music. Some electronic music makers have recently been creating music specifically designed to be listened to while studying or working. Because the music is meant to help one focus on an external activity, the best "work" music will also have a simplicity allowing one to hear without focusing on. For this same reason, such music will rarely have lyrical content at all since the sung words will tend to shift one's focus.

[20] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Eerdmans, 1980), 185.

memory.

Additionally, not all people will have a familiarity with worship music in general or the current songs played at a specific church gathering. Some persons might have recently started coming to church or come from a different culture with radically different religious music. To accommodate this fact, and ensure ease of group participation, the sung melodies and chord progressions need to be predictable. This allows any new person and those not musically inclined to join in quickly and effortlessly. Anyone who has attempted to join in singing an unfamiliar worship song will know how easy it is to catch on to the melody.

Like simplicity, predictability also ensures that one's attention does not shift to the music itself instead of God. Unpredictable melodies, although potentially more aesthetically exciting, draw one's attention to the tones themselves and invite one to listen closer to the music. This invites an observing, rather than a participatory stance to the music and goes against the focusing aspect of worship: one is supposed to look *through* the music towards the divine.

User Friendly Keys

Given the focus on producing *corporate* worship, most worship music is written to be covered and played by groups of musicians other than the original artists. These local musicians within a church will vary widely in terms of experience and skill level. Many musicians at smaller churches will be volunteer, not professional, musicians. This creates a norm that concerns the musical performance given the actual structure of instruments: most worship songs should be played in keys with chords and melodies easy for most musicians. For some instruments the key will not matter much. Guitar players can simply place a capo on the fretboard to allow the player to move the open notes to any desired key, and they can play open chord finger patterns in obscure keys rather easily. With other instruments, such as the piano, the finger pattern changes completely with different keys, so playing in common keys like C, G, and D is more accessible for beginner players.

Vocal parts are especially important when determining keys. For while the music played on instruments involves only the band, the lyrics are meant to be sung by *all* members in a worshipping context. This means that skilled singers should shy away from notes and keys that hit impressive high notes because the vocal register of an average person will not be able to hit them. Furthermore, the average register will differ greatly across persons. This means that worship artists should cater to the narrow range of notes that are comfortable for all persons to sing in. Booming lows or impressive highs will hinder persons whose natural range leans

the opposite way. Most male singers will perform at the top end of their full voice register. This is the range at which females can sing comfortably full voice and males can sing an octave lower.

The Aesthetic Value of Contemporary Worship Music

Given the purpose and norms of worship music, it is not surprising that this genre is sometimes unappealing to listen to for its own sake. The simple and predictable nature of the music will not impress or thrill. The instruments are not novel or technical. The vocals will not showcase the singer's abilities, and the music will never venture into odd chord changes or movements. But this music was never designed for any of these purposes. As Jesse Prinz has pointed out, it is just as big of a mistake to listen to punk music for technical prowess or musical innovation because this is antithetical to the amateurish rebellious nature of punk music.[21] Similarly, trying to listen to worship music for entertainment or groundbreaking artistic novelty is like trying to use a hammer as a doorstop. It is not the best at doing this job, and there are better alternatives out there because the hammer was never meant to keep doors open.

However, the fact that contemporary Christian worship music is fit for its function does not establish that it is aesthetically valuable. Even if worship music is suited to fulfilling its purpose of evoking gratitude, awe, and adoration to God, one might worry that I have demonstrated it does this *despite its aesthetic flaws*. At best, one might think, I have been conflating values here. The fact that music encourages a fitting attitude to God, although valuable, does not make it better *qua* music. That is, the ethical value of contemporary worship music does not necessarily improve its aesthetic value.

There are two separate thoughts here which deserve attention: one is that mere fitness for a function is not an aesthetic merit, and the second is that although the specific worship function has ethical value, this does not entail aesthetic value. To combat these objections and bridge the gap, the fitness for function or the ethical value must somehow translate into aesthetic value, and I will now argue that both do.

While it is controversial to claim that seeming fit for a function counts as an aesthetic merit in itself, this is not the only way that seeming fit for a function can increase aesthetic merit. For once we see an object as falling under a certain category, this knowledge allows us to perceive various qualities as standard, variable, and contra-standard with respect to that category. Roughly, standard properties for a given category C are ones

[21] Jesse Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock: Punk Music Aesthetics Identity Taste," *Philosophy Compass* 9.9 (2014): 583–93.

whose absence tends to disqualify the object from belonging to C, variable ones are ones that make no difference whether the object belongs to C, and non-standard ones are those whose presence tends to disqualify the object from C.[22] Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson illustrate how this perceptual shift of focusing on an object's fit for a function can lead to aesthetic effects in one's phenomenological experience of the object as follows:

> … this happens when the functional category used to perceive the object causes it to appear as having few contra-standard or variable features, but only standard ones …. [C]onsider an elegant-looking stove, perhaps a sleek stainless-steel model. Its elegance can be said to "emerge" out of its function, in the sense that it is elegant insofar as its visible features (for example, a glass door, a set of burners) are all standard for the functional category in which we perceive it.[23]

If one were to look at the same object as a safe, it would lose its appearance of elegance and sleekness because certain features would go from being seen as standard to contra-standard. The burners would stick out and make the object appear clunky and awkward. This same categorial perceptual shift occurs with worship music. When we listen to, and participate in, contemporary worship music for what it is, certain features become standard and can be aesthetically appreciated in light of their function. The simple and predictable instrumental parts, vocal melodies, etc. take on a sound of elegance, subtlety, and delicacy that would make the same music bland if it were heard as a rock opera or ballad. Similarly, other features that would normally be merits become flaws. A technical guitar solo would strike one as distracting, garish, or gaudy. Thus, worship music's ability to perform the function, although not necessarily an aesthetic merit in itself, shifts our perception of the music's features so that they become aesthetic merits.

The second objection shifts to the function itself and claims that while there might be ethical value in contemporary worship music, this does not make the work aesthetically better. This objection assumes that the ethical qualities of artworks are completely independent of the aesthetic value, but there are good reasons to deny this. There are two prominent views regarding the relation between aesthetic and ethical values. Defenders of

[22] This terminology is taken from Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," *The Philosophical Review* 79.3 (1970): 334–67, https://doi.org/10.2307/ 2183933.

[23] Glenn Parsons, *Functional Beauty Glenn Parsons and Allen Carlson* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 97–98.

the ethicist and moderate moralist position[24] argue that some ethical merits of artworks, qua *ethical* merits, are pro tanto (to that extent) aesthetic merits and vice versa for ethical flaws. One argument for this position starts from the idea that all artworks aim at a certain response in the audience, and when an artwork attempts to evoke a response that is not merited by the represented object, this is an aesthetic failure of the artwork. Thus, when an immoral response is prescribed, it is unmerited and constitutes an aesthetic flaw. Berys Gaut writes:

> the ethical assessment of attitudes manifested by works of art is a legitimate aspect of the aesthetic evaluation of those works, such that, if a work manifests ethically reprehensible attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically defective, and if a work manifests ethically commendable attitudes, it is to that extent aesthetically meritorious.[25]

His argument is roughly that artworks, especially literature, prescribe certain attitudes towards objects. To the extent that an artwork prescribes an attitude towards an object that it does not merit, the artwork is aesthetically flawed. For instance, if a horror movie were to prescribe fear towards a monster that is not dangerous or scary, it would to this extent fail as an artwork. To take an ethical example, a tragedy that prescribed pity towards a protagonist that was unlikeable and hard to sympathize with would fail as a tragedy. This merit condition holds for positive attitudes as well. *Schindler's List* is a great movie partly because of the way it portrays, and thus prescribes admiration for, Oskar Schindler. If an artwork prescribes a pro-attitude towards something immoral, such as the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*, it is to that extent aesthetically flawed because it prescribes an attitude that is not merited, much like the horror movie that prescribes fear towards a harmless villain.

The other popular view called moderate autonomism claims that while ethical merits or demerits might have an aesthetic impact on an artwork, it is never in virtue of their ethical qualities *as such* that do this work.[26] The moderate autonomist would not deny the effects of ethical aspects of artworks, but if a thriller failed to thrill, or a horror movie failed to evoke fear, because of an ethical flaw, it would not be the ethical dimension

[24] See Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36.3 (1996): 223–38, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/36.3.223.

[25] Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, rev. ed., ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 182–203.

[26] For a defense of this position, see J. C. Anderson and J. T. Dean, "Moderate Autonomism," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 38.2 (1998): 150–66.

doing the work, but just the fact that the movie fails to elicit the intended reaction. Only a radical autonomist, who denies any connection between ethical and aesthetic values, would be committed to denying these effects.

Despite this disagreement, both main camps agree that sometimes ethical merits or demerits affect the aesthetic value of an artwork, and it is this plausible thesis that is necessary to argue that Christian contemporary worship music is aesthetically meritorious to the extent that the emotions evoked are fitting responses to God. Most worship songs manifest adoration of God because of his ethically admirable characteristics: sacrificial love, forgiving nature, desire for justice, etc. Since the adoration, gratitude, and reverence are responses to God's ethical perfection, the corresponding attitudes which contribute to the aesthetic merit of Christian contemporary worship music are ethically commendable, and thus improve the songs aesthetically. This is better brought out when contrasted with a worship song that manifests an immoral attitude, and thus fails as a worship song. Consider the lyrics of the Hymn of General Kim Jong-un, which was ordered before every social event in North Korea in 2023. The translated lyrics are as follows:

> Our General is the wisest of 10 million
>
> Our General cultivates the best paradise
>
> With the power of love for our everlasting happiness
>
> His name is General Kim Jong-un.[27]

This hymn is a worship song in praise of the North Korean dictator. It is meant to be sung in a group and to evoke feelings of gratitude and admiration for Kim Jong-un. However, those who know the oppressed state of North Korean citizens will feel a resistance to participating in this hymn. Even if successful in singing along, one will most likely feel a strong internal tension. The hymn fails to evoke admiration because Kim Jong-un is a ruthless dictator and the prescribed attitudes of the hymn are unfitting. This failure to evoke the appropriate attitudes makes this hymn worse *as a worship song*, and thus less aesthetically meritorious than the Christian counterparts in this regard. Since the Christian conception of God is an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent being, Christian worship songs are better suited to evoking appropriate attitudes and are thus better worship songs than the Hymn of General Kim Jong-un.

Nevertheless, these ethically meritorious aspects are just pro tanto contributions. There might be countervailing aesthetic demerits which make a particular song overall aesthetically bad, but the presence of these

[27] For translation, see https://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/song-11152023155401.tml.

aspects will make the artwork less bad than it would have been. One could take the argument further and add that the *most* ethically commendable attitudes are the ones manifested by worship music to God. If one thinks that the degree of aesthetic value tracks how ethically commendable the attitudes manifested by the work are, one might conclude that contemporary worship music is among the most aesthetically valuable artworks, but pursuing this would take us too far off track.

To conclude this section, the features of contemporary worship music I listed make it both fit for its purpose and manifest ethically meritorious attitudes. If what I have argued in this section is correct, then these features contribute to the music's aesthetic value by playing both of these roles, and the worries about my defense of contemporary worship music are misplaced. Christian contemporary music's simplicity, predictability, and playability contribute to its aesthetic value.

Worship and Agency

We are now in a position to explore the practical ramifications of this conception of worship music for musicians. Contrary to what one might think given the norms described in the previous sections, playing worship music demands a unique kind of agency from the musician. This is because playing worship music comes with a particular mode of playing, namely playing *worshipfully*. Far from being easy, playing worshipfully is a difficult task because it is complex. Although what I say will apply to all musicians, I will illustrate this by exploring the agency of a worship lead guitarist phenomenologically as this is the role I have the most experience with from playing in worship bands.

First, a brief word on difficulty, complexity, and their relation. What makes an activity difficult is very simply, that it requires a lot of effort.[28] Which aspect requires effort, however, will vary. Running a marathon is difficult because of the physical effort required. One aspect that can make an activity difficult is its complexity. Building a computer, performing brain surgery, or understanding the economic system of Europe are all difficult *because* they are complex. Still, complexity is neither necessary nor sufficient for difficulty. Marathon running is difficult, but not complex. Communicating in the English language is complex but not difficult, at least for typical English-speaking adults. My claim in this section is that playing worship music, and more specifically playing such music worshipfully, is more difficult than playing non-worshipfully because the *mode* of playing from an agential perspective is more complex.

[28] For a defense of this account, see Gwen Bradford, *Achievement* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

Let us contrast the agency of a worship musician with a non-worshipping musician from the first-person phenomenology. Consider jazz musicians playing in a bar or classical musicians playing in a concert. Their goal in these performance settings is to entertain people and provide enjoyment. Of course, this would be a hard goal to *directly* aim at in playing an instrument. Rather, the musician's agency is focused on a more basic action, playing the music well, with the ultimate goal of entertaining others. What "playing music well" amounts to varies according to the performance setting. If one is following a score, then what the musician is trying to do, at a very basic level, is play the notes with the appropriate touch and timing. Jazz musicians improvising will focus on their playing and attempt to enter a flow state while keeping awareness of the other musicians and the chord changes at play.

This goal of entertainment contrasts with the goal of worship musicians. Drawing on the previous sections, we can derive norms for the worship musicians from the purpose of the music. If the aim of worship music is evoking awe and gratitude to God, then one's goal as a musician is to *not* be the focus of attention. Rather, the stage in a worship setting is meant to inspire worship both auditorily through the music and visually through the performers' bodily stance and expression. The audience is invited into worshipping by seeing the musicians as exemplars of embodied worship to be imitated and joined with. Musicians play the music and worship, which comes through in their bodily expressions. Of course, the goal for the musician is not simply to feign all these outward appearances of worship, but to actually lead authentically by feeling and expressing worshipful emotions in the hopes of worshipping alongside the church body.

This is where the musical agency becomes more complex. Returning to the conditions for a joint activity, the worshipping musician, if she is to worship along with the congregation, must direct her attention to God, be aware of other members' attention, and have an intent to cooperate with them. One might think the task is to worship *while* playing. This is already more complex than the goal of a normal performing musician, as one's agency is bifurcated. Let us take the lead guitar player as an example. She could worship by listening to the lyrics or even singing along while playing her part. If successful, she would be playing and worshipping at the same time. This is more difficult than simply playing the music because one must now perform two tasks at once. One must play the instrument and pay enough attention to the lyrics to evoke certain feelings through them.

Notice, however, this agential process is bifurcated into one of worshipping through the lyrics and playing one's instrument. Although this

accomplishes the task of worshiping jointly with others, it leaves one's playing as peripheral to, and perhaps distracting from, one's act of worship. This is akin to a juggler who performs while simultaneously balancing a rod on his nose. One is performing two tasks which detract from each other and split one's focus. To see why this is less than optimal, we can consider singing as the ideal mode of the kind of worship under consideration. When the audience or performers sing, they worship *through* their singing. As a worship musician, it would similarly be ideal if one's worship was somehow accomplished through one's playing.

There is thus a further ideal for a worship musician: to worship *through* one's playing, and this kind of unified agential experience as a musician is challenging. Once one's focus is shifted onto one's playing, the notes become forefront and one's focus is shifted to trying to "get it right" for the sake of others. And how is one to keep an awareness and cooperate with others in worshipping through this process? As to the first task of attention, one way for a lead guitarist, although not necessarily the only one, is to utilize the power of one's imagination. Our imagination allows us to see and hear things *as other things*,[29] as when child imagines a clump of mud as a pie. Our recognitional capacities depend upon this capacity: I recognize a friend I have not seen in years when I imagine this face I currently see as the old one I knew. Through imagination, a lead guitarist can imagine the notes played *as words being sung*. This imbibes them with a meaning and allows one's attention to pass through them to God, as if one is speaking through one's playing.

To take a specific example. The lead guitar part in the chorus of the song "The Stand" by Hillsong Worship consists of a series of two notes played between lyrics. Guitar players can imagine those notes as words interwoven with the lyrics as follows (guitar notes in italics):

> What can I say (*Lord…Oh Lord…Oh Lord…Oh Lord*) What can I do (*Lord…Oh Lord…Oh Lord…Oh Lord*) But offer this heart oh God (*Lord…Oh Lord…Oh Lord…Oh Lord*) Completely to You.

By imagining the notes as words, an agential unification is made between guitar playing and worshiping through one's playing. The musician is now playing *worshipfully*. One's thoughts are directed to God, and the notes come to express one's awe and reverence through the semantic content of the imagined words. This allows one's focus to pass through the notes to God. The notes, like the sung words for a congregation, become a conduit for one's attention to pass through and the proper emotions are

[29] For a discussion on imagination's capabilities, see P. F. Strawson, "Imagination and Perception," in *Experience and Theory*, ed. L. Foster and J. W. Swanson (University of Massachusetts Press, 1970), 31–54.

evoked.

What about the task of keeping awareness of, and cooperating with, others? When ideally done, these notes-imagined-as-words one plays complement the sung lyrics, as in the above example. The guitar player's worship experience is not like saying a private monologue simultaneously while others are singing their own song to God. Rather, the notes-imagined-as-words echo and complement the lyrics of the song so that the thoughts associated with the guitar notes are not just *my* thoughts, but *our* thoughts expressing a group's adoration, reverence, and gratitude. One's playing will then be heard as words coordinated and involved with the singing of everyone in the church body.

Although I have exemplified what this kind of worship artistic agency looks like for lead guitar players, this task of playing worshipfully confronts all musicians performing worship music. Far from being simple and easy, this kind of artistic agency is difficult, partly because one must come up with *ways* to do it. I described one way a lead guitarist might achieve worshipping through one's playing, but it will not be practical for a percussionist. They would have to imagine drums and cymbals as having lyrical content, but this seems implausible. Rather percussionists can imbibe their bodily movements with meaning: to think of them akin to dance movements expressing their adoration and gratitude. How would a pipe organist, who utilizes both hands and legs, achieve the aim of worshipping through their playing? The sheer difficulty of utilizing all limbs usually demands all of one's agential capacity.

Playing worshipfully is thus difficult due to its complexity, but the complexity takes a particular form. When one merely plays and worships at the same time through sung lyrics, a musician's agency is directed towards two different actions at once. However, playing *worshipfully* is difficult because one must develop a higher order of agency with respect to the same action. One must be able to perform the action on the first level (play the music) with sufficient skill in order to form intentions at the second order (worship). This is analogous to developing higher orders of agency with respect to driving a car. At the first level, one drives a car by operating the gas, brakes, steering wheel, etc. to move a vehicle from one place to another. However, once one is sufficiently skilled in driving at this first level, one can develop higher order agency and intend to, say, drive *aggressively*. One does this by cutting others off, speeding, rolling through stop signs, etc. These actions are done by doing the first level acts in a certain manner. The same higher order of agency must be developed to play worshipfully. One must master the instrument well enough to begin to do other things with one's playing.

One might push back by pointing out that worship musicians, when

experienced, perform at this higher level without much effort, and their performance is thus not difficult. I have two responses. First, we must keep in mind that difficulty is a relative notion.[30] Heifetz, the violin virtuoso, can play Paganini caprices effortlessly, but this is still a difficult task because these pieces are difficult for average violin players. Similarly, seasoned worship musicians perform a difficult task easily because of their experience. Second, my claim here is only that playing worshipfully is more difficult than playing non-worshipfully. Playing worshipfully takes on an entirely different goal and the agency that comes with it is unique among performing musicians. Normal musicians only have to focus on their playing. Worshipping musicians must take their playing and develop a higher order level of agency. This raises the level of complexity and subsequently, the skill required to succeed.

Of course, there are many instances of playing an instrument non-worshipfully that will be more complex and difficult than many instances of worship playing. My claim here is a comparison about the mode of playing with respect to the same piece of music. If the goal was simply to play the part correctly, even doing so operating at the limit of one's skill would be successful. In contrast, to play worshipfully, one must have enough skill to be able to play the part comfortably enough for one's thoughts to be directed elsewhere while keeping awareness of one's participation with a group. It is not *what* is played that is more difficult, but *how* it is played.

The Virtue of Simplicity

Part of describing the aesthetics of any art practice is to explicate the values shared by that particular art community which are manifested through the art. I have already laid out some of the attitudes towards God that Christians value explicitly evoked in worship music. To complete the aesthetics of contemporary worship music, I will describe one other value of the Christian faith embodied by such music, having a character of simplicity. There are two ways this character trait manifests, in lifestyle and as an attitude when approaching God. Worship music embodies and encourages both.

The general character of simplicity is a gentle, humble kind of contentment. This character manifests itself in different manners. It is most clear in the realm of material goods: simplicity manifests as the virtue to live modestly in content. The vices on either end of this virtue are extravagance and asceticism. Simplicity is best seen when contrasted with the

[30] For a discussion on the relativity of difficulty, see Bradford, *Achievement*, 27.

former. When one lives extravagantly, one regularly partakes of fine dining, wears expensive clothes, and generally has a taste for the exquisite things in life. The extravagant person's contentment in life depends upon such luxuries. A simple person, although able to appreciate these things, generally chooses to just enjoy the basic provisions of life. This difference is not a matter of being able to afford different lifestyles, but rather a matter of what it takes for one to be content. A simple person is just happy to have the standard things of life. Someone living the same way as a simple person, but yearning for finer things they cannot attain, is still extravagant in this sense I am speaking because their happiness depends on luxury, or perhaps the status that comes with it.

The contentment resulting from simplicity, as manifested in the Christian faith, is unique in one respect. It is grounded in one's satisfaction from knowing God. It is because one finds contentment in something other than the niceties of life that one is able to be content with little. This is not an explicit value judgment, comparing everything else to the value of knowing God. Instead, the knowledge, including relational knowledge, of God intensifies the satisfaction of simple things in life: food, friends, clothing, etc. Part of the satisfaction comes from a perspectival shift; one sees these things as gifts from God.

In addition to being manifested in one's lifestyle, this character of simplicity is reflected in one's attitude towards God. The French theologian and Archbishop Francois Fenelon writes:

> God would behold in you a simplicity which will contain so much the more of his wisdom as it contains less of your own; He desires to see you lowly in your own eyes, and as docile in his hands as a babe. He desires to create in your heart that child-like disposition so distasteful to the spirit of man, but so agreeable to the spirit of the Gospel, in spite of the infection of a scornful and contemptuous world.[31]

Just as we do not need extravagant things to be content, nor do we need elaborate arguments or complex thoughts to be in relation with God. Indeed, Fenelon's warning is that such expectations come with a reliance on one's own intellect rather than God. At worst, such a need for "deep understandings" is a desire to flaunt one's wisdom for outward status, much like extravagant clothing. One will then slip into assuming that one somehow knows God better because of superior theoretical knowledge. This

[31] Francois Fenelon and Madame Guyon, *Spiritual Progress, Or, Instructions in the Divine Life of the Soul: Intended for Such as Are Desirous to Count All Things But Loss That They May Win Christ*, ed. James W. Metcalf (Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1853), 108.

is not the humility with which Christians are called to approach God.

Simplicity is thus reflected both in one's lifestyle and attitude when approaching God, and contemporary worship music exemplifies both aspects. Sometimes, the contentment is explicit in the lyrics, such as the chorus of and title of Hillsong United's "Christ is Enough":

> Christ is enough for me
> Christ is enough for me
> Everything I need is in You
> Everything I need

Here the expression of contentment in God is explicit. Additionally, the humble attitudinal stance with which one is supposed to approach God is embodied in the form of the music. The lyrics themselves are simple and straightforward. No complex metaphors or similes are employed. The musical form is also elementary. Only four chords are utilized in the entire song in a straightforward rhythm. Yet through these basic provisions, one is prescribed to express adoration, gratitude, and reverence *joyfully*. This invitation to engage with such music joyfully presumes the expression of the same contentment which is manifest in the modest lifestyle of the simple person. There is no need for Armani suits or Michelin star meals to be joyous. There is no need for complex arguments or theological acumen to know God, and there is no need for stunning musicianship, profound chord changes, or fanciful rhythms to be aesthetically content.

This music's cultivation of virtue is another ethical aspect that enhances the artform's aesthetic merit. Since this stance of simplicity prescribed by the work comprises ethically commendable attitudes, such a prescription constitutes a further aesthetic merit of worship music. Simplicity is not itself the attitude one is to take towards God. Rather, simplicity is constituted by other attitudinal states which are themselves ethically commendable. For instance, in a simple posture, one has humility towards oneself by seeing oneself as dependent on God. Correlatively, simplicity is also constituted by contentment in God. Both attitudes are ethically meritorious and thus make the worship music which prescribes them pro tanto aesthetically meritorious.

Conclusion

I have attempted to illuminate the nature of worship music, what its norms are, how such norms affect the artistic agency of worship musicians, and this music's ethical value. If what I have argued is correct, there is an agential and ethical richness that comes with contemporary Christian worship music. The agential issue is an instance of an underexplored topic in aesthetics. Philosophers working in ethics explore the ramifications of

ethical theories in agential issues such as praiseworthiness of actions, first person deliberation, weakness of will, and other issues. Such a discussion in aesthetics regarding aesthetic agency from the artist's point of view is surprisingly lacking. How do norms and art practices affect the agency of the artists involved? How do aesthetic virtues and vices manifest themselves in various artforms and practices? This article is partly an attempt to shift towards such a perspective in philosophical aesthetics.

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The Use of Fiction in Apologetics

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Abstract: *Apologetics is the practice of providing a logical defense for Christian beliefs. At first glance, it might seem that creative arts, like fiction, have little to offer this endeavor. Typically, stories are not considered arguments, and arguments are the backbone of any rational defense. However, in this essay, we propose that imaginative storytelling does have a meaningful role in apologetics. In the first section, we will examine how fiction impacts its audience and explain how those effects can support the goals of apologetics. In the second section, we will argue that, although imaginative narratives are valuable, their role is limited: they must enhance an argument, not stand in its place.*

Key Words: *aesthetics, apologetics, barriers to belief, epistemology, narrative apologetics, philosophy of literature*

> It was Dr. Ransom who first saw that our only chance was to publish in the form of fiction what would certainly not be listened to as fact.[1]
>
> ~C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*

In the above epigraph, Lewis suggests fiction has the power to overcome a barrier to belief that mere statement of fact does not. In this essay, we will argue that fictional narratives can help to overcome what we call psychological barriers to considering the truth of Christianity, even if those narratives are unable to justify the truth of Christianity's claims. First, we will distinguish between epistemic and psychological barriers to belief. Second, in line with several prominent apologists, we will defend a legitimate use of fiction in apologetics. Finally, we will argue that providing good reasons to believe that Christian beliefs are true is the primary aim of the apologetic task. Hence, fiction cannot *replace* the traditional task of presenting good reasons to believe to anyone willing to hear.

[1] C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (HarperCollins, 1938), 160.

Epistemic and Psychological Barriers to Belief

There are at least two causes for resisting Christianity. Epistemic barriers to Christianity's claims arise when a non-believer possesses either one of two types of defeaters. A non-believer may have an undercutting defeater that challenges the reliability or justification for the claim. Or, a non-believer may have a rebutting defeater in which they directly challenge the truth of a claim. If someone objects to the rationality of Christianity, or the existence of God, or provides an argument against any claim of Christianity, these would be rightly called epistemic barriers. A Christian should try to overcome these epistemic barriers with rational arguments such as arguments for the existence of God or the reliability of the Bible or by showing that the epistemic barrier is flawed. In addition to epistemic barriers, we should also recognize barriers to belief that are not epistemic. Other psychological barriers to belief arise in the non-believer as a result of experience, emotions, or desires. As John Feinberg writes,

> Though it is possible for a feeling or conviction that something is true to be based on the objective certainty with which that belief has been confirmed, this does not always happen. Perhaps … there are psychological factors that make it difficult for [a person] to evaluate as sufficient a case you make for a given belief. This is not unusual. For example, someone presented with a case for the resurrection of Christ which, by rules of reason and argument, makes that belief 95 percent objectively certain, may have a family member or friend who has experienced significant tragedy. As a result, he finds it hard to believe in God or anything else related to religion. Though he understands all the arguments and evidence you have presented, he will never be subjectively persuaded that you have proved Christ's resurrection. Moreover, because of his ill feelings toward God, he can't bring himself to grant that … you have made a case for the resurrection that makes it even 70 percent objectively certain.[2]

Overcoming psychological barriers sometimes requires tremendous effort. For example, the pressure of familial obligation that is often described by people converting from Islam or Mormonism may cause an overwhelming fear of abandoning long-held beliefs. For some, it is difficult to imagine how one can look to God as a loving father when one has only experienced an absent or abusive earthly father. For others, there is no reason to look forward to a heavenly kingdom if this world is "as good

[2] John Feinberg, *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Crossway, 2013), 87.

as it gets."

The Role of Fiction

Belief, disbelief, and withholding of judgment are all examples of propositional attitudes. If we believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, we think that the proposition, *Jesus Christ rose from the dead* is true. When one disbelieves a proposition, one believes that the proposition is false. If one neither believes nor disbelieves a proposition, one withholds judgment. What these attitudes have in common is that they are aimed at getting to the truth. Primarily, apologetics is concerned with offering good reasons to believe that propositions such as *God exists* or *Jesus Christ rose from the dead* are true.

In addition to truth-aimed attitudes, we also have other kinds of attitudes to propositions. We may believe that Jesus will return for his people. But in addition, we may *hope* that he will return. We believe that we will die one day, but we also *fear* that we will die. Alternatively, we may believe that it is raining but *wish* it wasn't. These latter kinds of attitudes are not truth-aimed. Rather, they are satisfaction-aimed, aimed at having the truth or falsehood of a proposition satisfy a desire.

Some recent work in apologetics suggests that we should contend both for the truth of the Christian faith and its satisfying content. For example, Paul Gould, Keith Loftin, and Travis Dickenson define apologetics as "an attempt to remove obstacles or doubts to, as well as offer positive reasons for, believing that Christianity is *true and satisfying*." [3] They claim that apologetics is not only a rational defense of Christianity, but an attempt to show that it is satisfies a particular set of human desires. Similarly, Douglas Groothuis defines apologetics as giving answers to both "Is the Christian worldview true and rational?" and "Is it worth believing and living out?"[4] Groothuis contends that, in addition to offering a compelling case for Christianity, the apologist should present the Christian worldview as "subjectively engaging."[5]

One way to make Christianity psychologically compelling is to use imaginative narratives. Alister McGrath describes *narrative* apologetics as "an approach to affirming, defending, and explaining the Christian faith by

[3] Paul M. Gould, Travis Dickinson, and R. Keith Loftin, *Stand Firm: Apologetics and the Brilliance of the Gospel* (B&H Academic, 2018), 3 (emphasis added).

[4] Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (IVP Academic, 2011), 23.

[5] Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 10.

telling stories."[6] McGrath argues that by telling a story to convey the gospel, one is communicating "the vitality of the Christian gospel faithfully and effectively to our culture."[7] Similarly, Holly Ordway says that apologetics should demonstrate the "power, and beauty of Christianity" in addition to its truth.[8] The aim of the use of imaginative stories is to enable people to consider the truth. Sometimes people will not even listen to an argument until one has cleared a way for them to listen by getting them to think what one says is of significant value. Ordway asks, "why should people listen to us?" The answer is that people need, "some sort of imaginative engagement with the idea, or at least the possibility, that there might be something worth seeing."[9]

For these apologists, a defense of the Christian faith involves both giving rational arguments and demonstrating that Christianity is satisfying and worth believing, elements of the apologetic task which are not primarily epistemic in nature, nor a traditional component of an apologetics curriculum.

The Effects of Fiction

How does fiction serve to overcome psychological barriers? Catherine Elgin argues that the arts in general have the capacity to change peoples' perspective. She writes, "If the arts effect and enable valuable reconfigurations and reconceptions, they *enhance understanding* whether or not they disclose new facts."[10] Though fiction is not aimed at describing the real world—although it cannot fail to do so to some degree—it does aid us to understand it better. Suppose a child experiences constant tension and conflict in her home. A fictional story could help her reconceive the idea of a family as people who love one another. A fiction can describe situations in which siblings work together, and parents teach and love their children with gentleness. In so doing, the fiction could aid someone with negative attitudes toward family to consider a more positive version. As Martha Nussbaum suggests, by imagining ourselves as someone else or in another situation, we can come to see something not immediately evident to our senses. She writes,

[6] Alistair McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith* (Baker, 2019), 7.

[7] McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 17.

[8] Holly Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2017), 11.

[9] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination,* 4.

[10] Catherine Z. Elgin, "Art in the Advancement of Understanding," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39.1 (Jan 2002): 2 (emphasis added).

> When we examine our own lives, we have so many obstacles to correct vision, so many motives to blindness and stupidity.… A novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life.[11]

The advantage of the use of fiction is that it allows a reader (or listener) to entertain propositions about states of affairs in the safety of an alternative world. Entertaining an alternative state of affairs gives the reader the opportunity to evaluate and deliberate over whether the state of affairs in the possible world has any potential application in the actual world. And they can do that without the weight of the propositional attitudes that hinder them in the actual world.

Christians who write fictional stories can give their readers ways to imagine what it would be like to live under the rule of a good and loving king. People living under a tyrant may have no experience of a good authority figure. Tolkien's story of Aragorn rising to the throne, overcoming evil, and caring for his people with love and charity can introduce to a good king previously unconsidered. Someone unfamiliar with the concept of self-sacrifice may not understanding why one would allow themselves to be killed in the place of another, especially someone who betrayed them. But Lewis's story of Aslan's death for Edmond could display the grace that such an action could require. A new believer might not have any concept for what it means to fight temptation, but John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* might image the determination of someone pushing toward a higher good than the immediate pleasure of sin. Fictional stories cannot give evidence that there actually was a man named Jesus who took God's punishment in the place of all humanity, but they can give new perspectives to a reader that might help them better understand the message of the gospel.

The Limits of Fiction

Although fiction may have a powerful role in apologetics to affect the removal of psychological barriers to belief, its use is not unlimited. Although fiction may have a role in an argument, it cannot replace an argument.

Giving reasons for the truth and rationality of Christianity is part of our obligations to the Lord (1 Pet 3:15). Argument is *essential* to apologetics. Providing reasons for our hope is also the means by which we serve

[11] Martha Nassbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 162.

those who are interested in the truth. As Greg Welty argues,

> Useful Christian apologetics is incompatible with two kinds of people: the fearful and the over-confident. The fearful are too afraid to lay their cards on the table, while the over-confident engage in sleight of hand to effect a quick outcome when no one is looking. Both approaches hide the truth, though for different reasons, and so neither approach really makes a case. But anxious secrecy and cynical manipulation have a habit of disappointing people who are really interested in the truth. Make a case! Have faith that you can do it …, plan to be persistent in doing it …, think hard about how to do it …, and then do your best, being open to correction by others.[12]

As Welty suggests, since making a case for our Christian beliefs is essential to supporting their truth, we ought not abandon case-making and replace arguments with telling imaginative narratives. To do so would be to fail the very people we are seeking to reach.

Although an imaginative narrative has a kind of persuasive force, it is not an argument. As Holly Ordway states, "narrative is not *in itself* an argument—and much of the difficulty of modern apologetics engagement … stems from the confusion between the two."[13] Any confusion between narrative and argument will likely result in an argument-free apologetic, but this is to leave out what is essential. As Ordway urges, "The imaginative approach must be paired with argument. It cannot stand alone."[14]

Ordway's point is not that a fictional story cannot be *part* of a case. Her point is that fictional stories are not themselves arguments. Consider the use of an imaginative story given by Nathan, the prophet, to David in 2 Sam 12:1–15. From Nathan's case against him, David learns that he is guilty of immoral actions (the affair with Bathsheba and murder of her husband). Nathan tells a story in which a wealthy man cannot bear to kill one of his own animals for a guest, so he takes the only animal a poor man owns and uses that instead. Provoking anger in the king over such an immoral act, David calls for the wealthy man to be punished. Nathan then tells David that his actions are of the same kind as the wealthy man in the story. The story has played a role in Nathan's case against David, but the story itself isn't an argument. Nathan could have made the case without the story. He could have pointed out that adultery and murder are immoral actions and that David had done both. But the story could

[12] Greg Welty, "Richard Swinburne," in *The History of Apologetics*, ed. Benjamin Forrest, Joshua Chatraw, and Alister McGrath (Zondervan, 2020), 728–29.

[13] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 156.

[14] Ordway, *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination*, 149.

not replace the argument. Nathan is explicit in his use of the story as an analogy for what David has done. If David is rightly indignant about the wealthy man in the story, then he ought to be at least as provoked by his own actions. But the story itself does not contain these premises.[15]

In addition to the story serving a role in an argument, its force provokes a felt reaction in the king. About the incident, Gordon Graham writes, "[David's] own immoral conduct with respect to Uriah and Bathsheba is being brought in evidence against him. Nathan's imaginary story … compels David to see the reality of what he, David, has done."[16] The story brings about a strong reaction in David. He is angered by the actions of the wealthy man in the story. When he realizes that the anger he has toward the wealthy man in the story should be directed at himself, his grief over his own sin follows. It is the story that makes the difference.

In the same way, fictional narratives serve a powerful role in a Christian apologetic. They can help unbelievers to see Christianity's beauty and goodness and even appreciate the gravity of their own sin. Nonetheless, removing epistemic barriers will require presenting good arguments.

Conclusion

We have argued that fictional narratives can help to overcome psychological barriers to belief in Christianity. Hence, they have a role to play in Christian apologetics. However, apologetics is essentially an activity of producing, evaluating, and rebutting arguments. Therefore, attempting to replace argument with narrative would fail to give a reason for our hope.

[15] It might be the case that David could have supplied the additional premises to the argument without any additional comment from Nathan. But that still requires the story to be put to a use in an argument rather than replacing the argument entirely.

[16] Gordan Graham, *Philosophy, Art, and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 100.

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My Pulitzer Project: A Personal Reflection on the Benefits of Reading Fiction for Ministry Leaders

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Introduction to the Pulitzer Project

These days I love to read fiction, but it hasn't always been that way.

Like many pastors and theological educators, for many years my bookshelf was filled primarily with non-fiction books. Shelves in my home and office were lined with exactly what you'd expect to find: commentaries, biographies, monographs, and other scholarly books related to philosophy of religion (my area of specialization). It saddens me to admit that for many years I didn't see the value of fiction. I read only what had been required in the genre during high school and college, and thought that fiction was (quite frankly) a waste of time.

I'm not sure when my thinking began to change, but at some point, it dawned on me that I should read more works of fiction. Reading fiction initially was a means to talk with people in my California community, most of whom were not reading about theology, ministry, and philosophy. As my kids got older, I wanted to be a good example of someone with a balanced diet of reading. If I was going to encourage my kids to read fiction and engage them in conversation about the genre, I was going to need to develop a taste for it.

Once committed, I faced an initial obstacle: Where to start? Walking into a bookstore and choosing a work of fiction is daunting. It's usually the largest section in the store. Since you're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, I didn't have much to go on. But then I noticed that on certain book covers was a gold star indicating that the book had won the Pulitzer Prize. Literary experts had already judged the book to be worthy of reading!

And that's how it started.

For the past ten years, I have been reading every book awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. I don't read the winners chronologically but vary books by theme, author (there are a few repeat winners), and page length. Candidly, some of these books are very, very long. Unlike other awards,

a Pulitzer is not given every year. The Pulitzer is only given to a work of fiction believed to meet the standards of the award.

In this way the Pulitzer Award is unlike the Oscar for Best Picture. The best film on any given year gets the Oscar. It might not be a great film, but if it's the best film *that year*, it gets the Oscar. The Pulitzer doesn't get awarded if no book is believed to meet the prize standards by the judges. As a result, reading Pulitzer winners for fiction has been a reliable guide to great books. Not all winners are equally enjoyable and in very rare cases you celebrate when the book ends. But on balance I find the gold star a better indicator of artistic excellence than say Oscar, or Tony, or even MTV's Space Man.

My Pulitzer project is a work in progress, but its far enough along that I'm convinced that ministry leaders should read more (good) fiction. In this essay, I hope to expound upon the value of fiction, its role in spiritual formation, and practical benefits for ministry leaders. Many readers will have discovered the joys and benefits of reading fiction. Others may possess my earlier skepticism of the genre and be persuaded to find a gold star on the cover at their local bookstore. I am shamelessly hopeful that other ministry leaders will join me on the Pulitzer project and fulfill my initial goal in reading fiction, which was good conversation with good people about good books.

The Value of Fiction

In the Broadway Musical Hadestown, the poet Orpheus toasts the goddess Persephone saying, "to the world we dream about, and to the world in which we live."[1] My view is that fiction serves to bridge these worlds. In fiction there is a blend of reality to which the reader can relate and ideal to which the reader can aspire, both of which are hidden in complex characters, varying levels of description, and surprising plot developments.

As Christians, we can approach fiction through the lens of *imago Dei*. Human beings are created in God's image and because of his image we create. The creation of fiction is the creation of worlds on paper. Our make-believe worlds invariably follow the patterns of our Creator. Stories of fiction can be understood as an artistic attempt to make sense of the greater human story; to connect the dots of human experience. Reading fiction by authors of different backgrounds and lived experiences reminds the Christian reader of our common origin and image. Fiction resonates because it relates. All stories wrestle with similar themes of brokenness

[1] Anaïs Mitchell, *Working on a Song: The Lyrics of* Hadestown (Penguin, 2020), 61, 66.

and invite the reader to long or reach for understanding and redemption.

To question the value of fiction is to ask what specifically fiction does for the Christian. I would answer that question by saying good fiction affirms the basic metaphysical, epistemological, and moral construct of reality as understood by Christians. The world of great fiction is generally comprised of the kinds and categories of things we understand to exist. It mirrors reality. It is not abstract or chaotic. It is intentional, purposeful, and ordered.

Just as God has created a world in which humans can possess knowledge but never possess knowledge exhaustively, human authors create paper worlds where some things are revealed and others are hidden. The reader is given enough information to understand, to navigate, and to follow. The reader only knows what the author reveals, either in direct prose or narration or by description.

The moral world of fiction is similarly structured. Human authors who often take every opportunity to dismiss the idea of God inevitably end up mirroring his image in their paper worlds. There are no stories without sin, without judgment, and without pain and suffering. The Christian reader will recognize the stain of original sin and of total depravity in every single work of fiction.

The Bible inherently affirms the value of fiction. Jesus tells stories in parables. The parables of Jesus contain fictional people and places by which some truth is communicated. When Nathan confronts Daniel, he does so by telling a story.

Christian opposition to fiction has tended to misunderstand the nature of fiction. The fundamentalist backlash over Harry Potter, for instance, misunderstood stories about fictional magic to be an endorsement of real magic of the kind prohibited by Scripture rather than an elaboration of the themes presented in Scripture such as love, sacrifice, moral duty, and friendship.

The Role of Fiction in Spiritual Formation

Reading fiction is of great value simply for the appreciation and enjoyment of literature as art. Beyond that, however, it is a window into the worldview of a culture and a reflection of biblical truth by authors who usually do not acknowledge the truth of the Bible. Much like the apostle Paul observed an altar to an unknown god in Athens, fiction is a window into the worship and belief of a culture.

American Pastoral by Tim Roth, for instance, chronicles the dissolution of post-World War American idealism and the cultural dissonance resulting from disenchantment with conformism, materialism, and hypocrisy. Much like Salinger in *Catcher in the Rye*, Roth is exposing the phoniness

and incoherence of modern life. These books provide readers with texture to the themes of angst and generational isolation evident in popular culture of Generation X in the 1980s and resurgence of nihilism in the '90s.

Pulitzer winning books such as those in the *Rabbit* series by John Updike are an exploration of what would become terms decades later as the crisis of masculinity or toxic masculinity. The books protagonist, Harry Angstrom, is an average middle-class American stuck and miserable in the modern secular life. Updike's novels read like an illustration of Solomon's declaration that life for life's sake is vanity.

In my opinion, the greatest Pulitzer novel is *Lonesome Dove*, published in 1985 by author Larry McMurtry. This book represents respite from the existential crisis of mid to late twentieth century fiction to more traditional themes of friendship and resilience set in the late nineteenth century. To think that Americans in 1985—amidst neon spandex, cola wars, and hair metal—would gravitate towards more simple times and more traditional themes, perhaps foreshadows the more recent trends of tiny houses, van life, and homesteading.

So how do these examples serve the purpose of spiritual formation? As with Peter in John 6 ("to whom else shall we go?") spiritual formation is often a matter of contentment in Christ and thanksgiving for a life built upon the rock. Pulitzer novels often reveal the alternative; life built upon sand in a thunderstorm. In the words of Pulitzer winning Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*.

Many characters in Pulitzer winners read like cautionary tales of obsession (Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*), mortality (Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*), and avoidance (Andrew Sean Greer's *Less*). Others remind us that no sin is common to man, as with slavery and brutality in *The Known World*. Modern fiction seems like parables in two ways: they can point to moral truths agreed upon by all regardless of the reader's worldview (*Tinkers*); or they can challenge the norms and values that are generally agreed upon (*The Road*).

Part of the spiritual formation of reading Pulitzer fiction is found in the simple fact that reading well-written books just makes you a better reader, writer, and overall communicator. A person may appreciate Taco Bell until they've eaten more elevated Latin cuisine or McDonald's until they've had In-N-Out Burger in California. Once elevated, tastes refine in regard not only to what you enjoy but also what you produce. My contention is that reading good fiction will make you a better Bible reader, Bible teacher, and Bible follower.

Practical Benefits for Ministry Leaders

Donald Whitney reminds us in *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* of the value of Christian conversation in which we seek truth and see truth as truth and lies as lies. Pulitzer fiction is a wonderful source of Christian conversation where truth and lies are artistically illustrated and philosophically elucidated. Moral courage, human resilience, and the vast consequences of evil against the backdrop of slavery are evident in *The Underground Railroad* and *Beloved*.

Pulitzer reading in fiction expands your horizons to the literary world and, therefore, the real world. Reading a book on the identity crisis of Jewish immigrants in *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Klay* or about the life of a modern homosexual man in *Less* helps ministry leaders to understand the very people they're seeking to reach—a kind of understanding which results in empathy without compromise. Remember the well where Jesus interacted with the Samaritan women in order to call her to repentance and faith? I see good fiction as a kind of well where we meet characters that help us to understand the hopes, fears, sins, and struggles of real people.

The books I've mentioned above are not likely to have been widely read in your circle of friends. That is certainly the case for me. However, one of the ways we function as salt and light is to point people to what is better and, ultimately, to what is best in Christ. It is generally a loving thing to point someone to something that is better. Saying to someone "you should try X" where X is better for them than whatever they are currently consuming or enjoying is a loving thing to do. The project of evangelism and apologetics is often a matter of advocacy and awareness of that which is better.

Pulitzer winning fiction, I would argue, is better than whatever most people are reading in the space of fiction. Asking someone to read a better work of fiction *with* you will invite observations about the beauty of writing as an artform, the themes of good and evil in the book, and the truths found therein.

Sermon and other teaching illustrations benefit from references to good fiction. A speaker can, with ease, introduce the context needed to illustrate a point. In doing so, you direct your audience to a source of quality and depth. Like Paul referencing the unnamed Athenian poet in Acts 17:28, a speaker can bridge the truth of God to a culture by referencing a regarded work of art from within that culture.

For instance, take the 2014 Pulitzer prize winning *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. The book details the flight of a young blind girl from Nazi invasion. On her journey, the famished young heroine comes across a kindly couple on a farm that feed the girl scrambled eggs. Doerr

describes the scrambled eggs as tasting to the hungry girl like "clouds" and "spun gold"—a moving illustration of common things taken for granted.

Paul commends in Philippians 4:8 whatever is right, pure, lovely, and admirable. Pulitzer fiction is an elevated artform containing the very things of which we are to think. Flannery O'Connor says in *Mystery and Manners* that "fiction is about everything human."[2] To grow in your love of fiction is to grow in your love of others, and that in itself is worthy of our pursuit.

[2] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 68.

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Book Reviews

Ruth A. Clements, Russell E. Fuller, Armin Lange, and Paul D. Mandel, eds. *The Textual History of the Bible from the Dead Sea Scrolls to the Biblical Manuscripts of the Vienna Papyrus Collection.* Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 137. Leiden: Brill, 2023. xxvi + 668 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-9004504622. $198.00

This volume is one of the latest contributions to the impressive series Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah. It provides a textual history of the Bible from our earliest manuscripts to medieval manuscripts of the Vienna Papyrus Collection—which most likely originated from the Cairo Genizah. The work's title is like that of the monumental series Textual History of the Bible (THB), and it often complements those works. THB, however, provides a more thorough overview of the textual history of the Hebrew Bible. The volume under review is much more selective in its presentation but provides groundbreaking analysis in some key areas of the discipline.

The Textual History of the Bible is divided chronologically into three parts in addition to an introduction to the textual history of the Hebrew Bible. The book's first part focuses on the Jewish Scriptures of the Second Temple period. Russell E. Fuller begins by surveying how two important books—Isaiah and the Twelve—were used in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sira, and the Septuagint (pp. 25–42). Armin Lange's contribution to this section on the history of Jeremiah is impressive (pp. 43–154). He builds on his earlier work and draws several important conclusions on the history of this book, including the claim that MT-Jeremiah was the dominant text since at least the third century BCE (p. 127). Other important contributions in this section include Pablo A. Torijano Morales's investigation into the relevance of the Old Latin Text for textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible (pp. 155–82). David Frankel, then, investigates Gen 9:6 to illustrate the common notion that textual and literary criticism overlap (pp. 183–218). Guy Darshan attempts to show how 1 Kings 6–8 in the MT tradition evidences a free approach to copying (pp. 219–40). Alexander Rofé discusses midrashic elements in the biblical texts as he has helpfully done in other works (pp. 241–52), while Jonathan Ben-Dov explores the witnesses to the book of Deuteronomy and the degree to which these texts refer to angels and demons (pp. 253–84).

The second part of the book surveys the history of the Hebrew Bible

from the Jewish Wars to the early Masoretic codices. In this section, Noah Hacham and Armin Lange helpfully outline criteria to distinguish between Christian and Jewish Greek biblical papyri (pp. 288–301). Emmanuel Tov surveys how scribes copied the divine name in Greek biblical manuscripts (pp. 302–15). Nancy Benovitz's fascinating chapter discusses the text, date, provenance, and function of a silver armband inscribed with the text of Psalm 91(90):1 in Greek (pp. 316–43). Shamma Friedman's essay concerns the Aramaic demonstrative pronoun דיכי, and more specifically, its five uses preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Targums, and the Babylonian Talmud (pp. 344–62). Geoffrey Khan concludes this section by discussing the Karaites' central role in preserving and developing the Masoretic tradition (pp. 363–95).

The third and final section of the book investigates issues related to the Vienna Papyrus Collection. This section begins with a helpful table listing the Vienna Papyri that preserve Hebrew text. Most of these are biblical texts but some are Masoretic notes (pp. 399–400). Next, Bernhard Palme provides an accessible and helpful introduction to these texts. He outlines their discovery, and how they were donated to the library (pp. 401–10). The remaining chapters all seek to introduce the reader to various manuscripts in this collection and to show their importance to understanding the textual history of the Hebrew Bible. Yosef Ofer discusses H 133 and notes several important details such as its orthographic profile (pp. 411–55). Although this differs from the MT, it was corrected towards it (p. 412). Next, Ursula Schattner-Rieser situates the paragraphing system and text of biblical fragments of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers and concludes that the paragraphing system often corresponds to that of the DSS and that the variants (though few) often evidence differences in the reading tradition (pp. 456–511). Leeor Gottlieb, then, surveys H 12, a haftarah book with fascinating scribal features such as abbreviations of the divine name and ligatures (p. 516). The former prophets of the Vienna Collection are surveyed next by Viktor Golinets. He provides a helpful description of the manuscripts along with their scribal features and text (pp. 526–67). Josef M. Oesch discusses the fragments preserving portions of the Writings (pp. 568–93). The book concludes with an overview of the Masoretic lists and scribal exercises preserved in the Vienna Collection (pp. 594–615).

This collection of essays provides several ground-breaking discussions pertinent to the textual history of the Hebrew Bible. For me, Armin Lange's discussion of the text of Jeremiah and the collection of essays regarding the Vienna Papyrus Collection stand out. Anyone researching

in these areas will need to consult these monumental chapters.

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John Bergsma and Jeffrey L. Morrow. *Murmuring Against Moses: The Contentious History and Contested Future of Pentateuchal Studies*. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023. xiii + 308. Hardback. ISBN 978-1645851493. $39.95.

John Bergsma and Jeffrey L. Morrow (B&M) are important leaders of the St. Paul Center. They are also theology professors at the Franciscan University of Steubenville and Seton Hall University respectively. Their three-part *Murmuring Against Moses* has a two-part thesis: first, to "challenge the hegemony" of source-critical approaches and the classic documentary hypothesis to the Pentateuch and second, to "highlight new evidence for the Pentateuch's antiquity … prior to the Babylonian exile" (p. x).

Part 1 (chapters 1–3) offers a well-selected survey of modern scholarship that challenges the documentary hypothesis. Particularly relevant are Kenneth Kitchen and Edwin Yamauchi's work comparing the ancient Near East and the Old Testament (Chapter 2, pp. 39–54). Also, Isaac Kikawada's, Arthur Quinn's, Gary Rendsburg's, and Joshua Berman's explorations of ancient literary style indeed undermine many so-called surface inconsistencies that source-critical scholars emphasize (Chapter 3).

Part 2 (chapters 4–6) addresses the second part of the authors' thesis by offering a fresh argument for the Pentateuch's pre-exilic origins. First, they argue that if Ezekiel and Jeremiah are exilic, then their Pentateuchal sources (P, H, and D) must be pre-exilic (Chapter 4). Second, in Chapter 5—perhaps the book's strongest—B&M find it unlikely that post-exilic Judean priests would have embraced the Pentateuch as it now stands. The Pentateuch does not mention Jerusalem (unlike post-exilic *Jubilees* and Chronicles [pp.138–48]), celebrates patriarchal religion that later legal material considers deviant, and emphasizes northern Israel. The latter emphasis includes Abraham's altar at Shechem (Gen 12:6–7), Joseph's ascendancy (Gen 37–50), half-breed Judahites (Gen 38), Judah's terse kingly prophecy (Gen 49:8–10), and Joshua's covenant renewal at Shechem (Josh 24). Most importantly, Moses commands Israel to ratify the covenant on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal (Deut 11:29–31; 27:4–26), which are key locations for the northern Samaritans. These factors cause B&M to question whether post-exilic Judean priests zealous for Jerusalem would embrace a (recently compiled) Pentateuch that fails to mention Jerusalem

but validates their rivals', the Samaritans, claims. The authors conclude that the Pentateuch is pre-exilic, which is earlier than typically assumed in recent scholarship.

Part 3 (chapters 7–9)—perhaps the book's weakest section—summarizes Pentateuchal criticism from antiquity to Julius Wellhausen. In general, B&M argue that source criticism has been motivated by an "anti-church theology at the service of increasingly secular modern nation states" (p. 253).

To evaluate, B&M's survey in Part 1 thoughtfully assembles scholarship that opposes the classical documentary hypothesis. Part 2 compellingly presents why a post-exilic Pentateuch should emphasize Jerusalem more than our current Pentateuch does. The authors' examination uses biblical studies' tool of ideological criticism to demonstrate why it is unlikely for a post-exilic Pentateuch to disregard the "Zion theology" that was so dominant in the post-exilic period. The Pentateuch's glaring lack of such theology suggests it must have originated before the exile. This analysis is elegant and strong.

Nonetheless, I offer a few brief criticisms. First, fewer quotations and more summaries of the secondary literature would have made a smoother read. Although direct quotations are often helpful, occasionally I felt I was reading nothing more than a collage of other works (e.g., pp. 182–94).

Second, Part 3 strongly implies that the documentary hypothesis's alleged political affiliations weaken its validity (pp. 194, 198, 213–14, 223, 225, 249–53). One could easily argue that B&M's religious affiliations weaken their conclusions in the same way. Regardless, the motivations for an inquiry are largely irrelevant; the explanatory power of an inquiry's results matters most.

Third, B&M ended their survey of the documentary hypothesis with Wellhausen, which misses an opportunity to interact with the neo-documentary hypothesis. This is the most recent iteration of that hypothesis, offered most strongly by Joel Baden. Like B&M, I often find source-critical analyses inadequate, but even Baden—like B&M—acknowledges that source-critical analyses relying on stylistic features are flawed. Baden instead relies on "narrative inconsistencies and contradictions" to determine the Pentateuch's putative sources.[1] Some arguments presented in Part 1 (e.g., Berman's and Rendsburg's) along with other key works left uncited (such as Molly Zahn's *Genres of Rewriting* and David Carr's *The*

[1] Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (Yale University Press, 2012), 26–33, 30.

Formation of the Hebrew Bible)[2] could have been leveraged against the neo-documentary hypothesis to create a more current (and forceful) argument.

To summarize, despite a few concerns, *Murmuring Against Moses* is enjoyable, clear, and informative. B&M offer thorough surveys and a provocative case for the Pentateuch's pre-exilic origins.

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Mark Allan Powell. *Matthew*. Interpretation Bible Commentary 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023. xii + 326 pp. Hardback. 978-0664264291. $22.95.

This is the inaugural volume in the new Interpretation Bible Commentary (IBC), designed to "extend and reframe" the original Interpretation series (p. xi). Aiming to serve pastors and teachers, the IBC stresses "both sound critical exegesis and strong theological sensibilities" (p. xi). The first commentary's author, Mark Allan Powell, is a leading New Testament scholar and a recognized expert in the Gospel of Matthew (GM), now retired from Trinity Lutheran Seminary.

In his 36-page introduction, Powell opens with a minimal (one-page) discussion of standard introductory issues and then summarizes what the GM "offers" both its "original readers" and "readers today" (pp. 2–3). Regarding the former, most significantly, he assumes Matthew's use of Mark and posits that Matthew wrote a "replacement Gospel" for his readers because he found Mark "inadequate," since it lacks an "effective doctrine for the church" (p. 3). Summarizing Matthew's offering for today's readers, he deems the GM "the most important book in the Bible for Christian ethics," largely due to its "sustained hermeneutic of 'binding and loosing,' by which faith communities might interpret Scripture to discern the will of God in diverse circumstances and ever-changing contexts" (p. 3). Next, he offers an overview on reading the GM (pp. 4–6), briefly outlining his primary concern to guide readers in understanding "how Matthew's readers would be expected to understand the Gospel" (p. 5) and the implications of the GM's nature as story. Finally, he concludes his introduction with a summary of seventeen key themes in the GM. These include commonly-discussed topics like God's presence and reign and

[2] Molly M. Zahn, *Genres of Rewriting in Second Temple Judaism: Scribal Composition and Transmission* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 88–94; David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 456–86.

others like "binding-and-loosing commandments" (pp. 16–19) and Jesus's "critique of power, wealth, and wisdom" (pp. 31–34). He rightly clarifies that "binding" and "loosing" language appears in rabbinic legal debates, and thus, in Matthew it relates not to forgiveness of sins, but the church's prerogative to exercise "moral discernment" in "determining what kind of behavior constitutes sin" (pp. 189–90). In the remaining pages, he comments on the GM in a passage-by-passage manner, focusing on final form (cf. p. 2).

Powell's commentary is full of literary and theological insights and analysis. A potentially useful guide for students and pastors, its utility is enabled by five key strengths. First, while the author notes where Matthew departs from Mark, he focuses on Matthew's finished story, enabling his readers to better understand the GM for their preaching and teaching. Second, his expertise in literary analysis offers key insights into the GM's characters. For instance, he notes that "religious leaders" in the GM are "flat characters," whose "literary function" is "never to present a realistic depiction of people who exist … in the world outside the story," but "to provide personification of values" (p. 28). Such nuanced literary analysis prevents misreading Matthew's intentions. Third, his account of the GM's main themes is succinct and clear, offering readers a useful overview of the GM and a framework for understanding key texts. Fourth, he includes nine valuable excursuses addressing significant topics. Finally, his commitment to disclose Matthew's intentions delivers outstanding descriptions of the GM's theology. These include (but are not limited to) Matthew's scriptural intentions (pp. 2, 23), Jesus as a new Moses (pp. 19–20), the Sermon on the Mount as a new Torah (pp. 20, 74), and the parallels between the Great Commission and Joshua's commissioning (Josh 1:1–9, p. 20).

However, in at least three areas Powell's commentary displays weaknesses that inhibit its usefulness for his target audience. The first is the brevity of his introduction. Its discussion of critical issues is astonishingly brief at approximately one page, and he asserts a false consensus that "modern scholars" reject traditional authorship (p. 1). Additionally, though the GM's structure remains debated, Powell's introduction does not discuss it or justify his six-part outline. Such an explanation would be especially useful for pastors preaching on Matthew. The second weakness is his minimal evidence of engagement with scholarship. He cites only twelve scholarly works other than his own. In contrast, he tends to summarize a perceived consensus, using phrases like "modern scholars" (p. 1), "widely recognized" (p. 16), or "we now know" (p. 189), without citation. Although some examples appear accurate, a comparison of recent

commentaries reveals that Powell overstates the consensus regarding authorship (p. 1). Likewise, he only presents one side of the debate on Matthew's intention to replace (pp. 2–3) or endorse Mark's authority, again without documentation. Further citation throughout would strengthen his case and earn his readers' trust. Since this is the inaugural volume of the IBC series, perhaps Powell is following a new standard set by its editors. However, when compared to volumes in the predecessor series, the absence of discussion on the book's structure, one-page treatment of critical issues, and minimal interaction with other scholarship remains notable.

Finally, Powell's comments on the GM reveal an unfortunate attitude toward Matthew himself. While he rightly criticizes ways the GM has been (ab)used (pp. 4, 29), he extends his critique to Matthew himself, explicitly stating that Matthew is worthy of blame for how he tells his story (p. 29). The series' target audience (pastors) will likely include evangelicals who will deem such criticism of Scripture inappropriate.

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Michael Parker. *Through Middle Eastern Eyes: A Life of Kenneth E. Bailey*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024. x + 372 pp. Paperback. ISBN 979-8385207794. $29.00.

Western Christians exposed to Kenneth Bailey's work are challenged to see the New Testament differently. Perhaps best known for his cultural insights on the parable of Luke 15 (the lost sheep, lost coin, and two lost sons), his singular achievement was showcasing Jesus as the NT's preeminent theologian, once he is properly seen within his Middle Eastern context.

Michael Parker, a missionary scholar with significant Middle East experience, has now produced a meticulously researched but eminently readable life of Bailey (1930–2016), *Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. Playing on the title of one of Bailey's bestselling and much translated books, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (2008), this biography is a superb introduction to a great but humble man and his groundbreaking work.

Parker accomplishes several things as he traces Bailey's life and legacy. He introduces the reader to a history of missions in the twentieth-century Middle East. He investigates the origin and development of Bailey's significant scholarly contributions. He illumines the challenges facing a missionary family in multiple war zones. And once he has done this, readers

leave the book feeling they know the Baileys personally.

The son of Presbyterian missionaries, Bailey and his wife, "Mickey," spent four decades ministering in Egypt, Beirut, Jerusalem, and Cyprus. They were forced to leave Egypt in 1965 when two church leaders complained about him to the secret police. These leaders were humiliated by their synod when their earlier attempt to dispense with his services was resoundingly defeated, and they responded maliciously (p. 118). This was an exception to the rule that "Few decisions were ever made at synod meetings because the losers would feel that their honor had been impugned" (p. 105). Honor is not to be sniffed at!

Significantly though, the insight which changed Bailey's life was thanks to an Egyptian preacher, Adib Qaldis. Speaking on John 4, the story of the woman at the well, in colloquial Arabic, he elicited a unanimous response from the village women present that she had to be a "bad woman" since none of them would ever go alone to the Nile to draw water. As Bailey realized, "there is a layer of meaning in the stories from and about Jesus that can only be unlocked by a more precise awareness of the Middle Eastern culture that informs the text" (p. 69). This perception led to his extremely thorough NT doctoral dissertation (published in 1976 as *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*) and other influential writings.

As Parker notes, Bailey's contributions were mostly well received, exemplified by Al Mohler's inclusion of *The Cross and the Prodigal* as one of the best books for preachers in *Preaching Magazine* in 2006 (p. 301), while "*Christianity Today* recognized *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes* as the outstanding book of the year in Biblical Studies for 2011" (p. 323). Naysayers typically disparaged the text of Scripture itself, disliking Bailey's emphasis on its unity and coherence: His "work required New Testament scholars who embraced form and redaction criticism to question their premises. Unwilling to do this, they concluded that Bailey's work was ultimately inadequate" (p. 207). On the contrary, it is those glued to their narrow preconceptions whose work proves inadequate. In Bailey's own discerning words, he sought "to demonstrate that the deepest level of understanding of the cross is available in the dramatic actions and teachings of Jesus, and that Paul's theology comes then as an enriching supplement, not as a first-time explanation of an unknown mystery" (p. 228).

Bailey's work stands on its own merits, of course, even when one does not agree with all his assertions. And Parker's fine biography captures key elements of his scholarship for newcomers and seasoned fans alike. The latter will encounter many surprises though—since Bailey never made much of himself. It is an eye-opener to realize he suffered from dyslexia and often had leg trouble to the extent he needed crutches. He and his

wife also took special care of their (adopted) daughter, Sara, who had chronic fatigue syndrome (and other ailments) for decades. It was later discovered this was caused by heavy metals and poisons in her body from "exposure to spent ordnance in Lebanon during the civil war" (p. 282). Tragically, they also lost their (natural) son, David, to cancer at age 44.

Through it all, Bailey faithfully followed the Good Shepherd. It is perhaps no surprise that his final book (which he saw as his best) is titled *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (2014), published soon before his death from an aggressive form of leukemia (pp. 333, 338–39). I would recommend anything Bailey has written, but an excellent place to enhance those works is Parker's *Through Middle Eastern Eyes*.

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G. K. Beale. *Union with the Resurrected Christ: Eschatological New Creation and New Testament Biblical Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. xviii + 576 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1540960429. $50.00.

Although Christians rightly confess the doctrine of the resurrection, how often is Christ's resurrection connected to other primary New Testament themes, such as justification, adoption, sanctification, return from exile, and the new creational kingdom? G. K. Beale addresses this connection in his *Union with the Resurrected Christ*, a "sequel" to his influential 2011 work, *New Testament Biblical Theology*.

Beale focuses primarily on the believer's union with the resurrected Christ as the beginning of the eschatological new-creational kingdom *and* on the aspects of the resurrected Christ attributed to those who come into union with him (p. 14). Although many books have recently been published on the theme of union with Christ, Beale's goal is to discuss union directly as it relates to the resurrected Christ and the believer's link to some facet of the resurrected Christ (pp. 14–15).

Part 1 (chapters 1–2) lays the book's foundation. In Chapter 1, Beale reviews the biblical-theological storyline of the Bible. His understanding of the Old Testament storyline includes God's progressive re-establishment of his eschatological new-creational kingdom (p. 62). It is foundational for his proposed storyline of the NT:

> Jesus's life, trials, death for sinners, and especially resurrection by the Spirit have launched the fulfillment of the eschatological already-not yet new-creational reign, bestowed by grace through faith and resulting in a worldwide commission to the faithful to advance this new-creational reign and resulting in judgment for the unbelieving, unto the triune God's glory. (pp. 62–63)

Chapter 2 deals with the theme of resurrection throughout the NT. He argues that the resurrection is the climax of each Gospel, but also demonstrates that the resurrection is at the heart of Pauline theology, which can be traced to the apostle's encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Beale admits it is an enormous claim to say that most of Paul's doctrines derive from his continuing reflection on Christ's resurrection and ascension. Still, he makes a strong case in showing that the resurrection is not a "center" but an organic generative influence (p. 97).

In Part 2 (chapters 3–17), Beale depicts the relationship between Christ's resurrection and the believer's union with Christ as facets of a diamond. These facets "are specific eschatological realities that Christ became and that also accrue and are attributed to believers in union with the resurrected Christ" (p. 100). He identifies them as return from exile, true Israel, last Adam, regeneration, righteousness, wisdom, justification, missiology, ecclesiology, glorification, sanctification, king-priest, tribulation, redemption, resurrection, pneumatology, temple, image of God, and sonship.

Beale notes that chapters 3–17 may be read in any order, which allows the book to be used more easily in teaching or even devotionally. Space does not permit an overview of each chapter, but some of the most significant material is highlighted here. In Chapter 3, he argues that Christ's resurrection is essential to Jesus's status as the last Adam, the Son of God, and true Israel. As believers are united to Christ, they become adopted sons and enjoy Christ's status as the true Israel. Chapter 5 also deals with Christ as the true Israel, but here the focus is more on the *ekklēsia* of God as the fulfillment of the assembly of Israel in the OT. Chapter 6 connects Christ's resurrection to our justification, sanctification, and redemption, with 1 Cor 1:30 and Rom 6 as foundational texts. Chapters 9 and 10 are the strongest in the book. Beale argues that just as Christ was transformed by the Spirit at his ascension, so believers are transformed because of their identification with the Spirit-resurrected Christ (p. 270). He also demonstrates the significance of the baptism of the Spirit in bringing believers into union with Christ's death and resurrection (pp. 306–9).

Readers may disagree with some exegetical conclusions in Chapter 8, which deals with Christ as the mission-oriented returnee from exile. Indeed, return from exile is a pervasive theme in the NT, and Beale successfully demonstrates that reconciliation is related to restoration from exile. However, he uses Col 1:24 as a foundational passage, arguing that Paul's sufferings brought Christ's sufferings to definitive completion. Further,

the connection between Paul's supposed partial fulfillment of Isa 49:3 and believers' union with Christ is somewhat confusing. That said, the overall argument of his book is not affected though.

Union with the Resurrected Christ is the fruit of a lifetime of biblical-theological scholarship. Beale demonstrates deep and substantive exegetical work, masterfully dealing with complex NT allusions to the OT. Although he references a fair amount of previous material, he has freshly examined and reworked it in light of the relationship between Christ's resurrection and the believer's union with him in his resurrection. In sum, Beale has served the Christian reader well, and I highly recommend this book to any serious student of the Bible.

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Andreas Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell. *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. xxxi + 981 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1433569692. $64.99.

Evangelical Biblical Theology [BT] as a discipline differs from Systematic Theology in that it focuses on what the Scriptures said in the context when it was given rather than what Scripture teaches about certain cardinal topics and what that means for the church today. Even in BT there are differing approaches. Some works limit the study to a book or section of Scripture, seeking to synthesize its content and limiting its wording to its ancient context, a sort of "what did it say/mean." Another BT might seek a *Mitte* or center/hub concept that unifies a book, section, or Testament. Others trace several key themes through one or both Testaments or highlight a single theme that runs through the OT, NT, or both. There is no one correct BT approach. All are biblical theologies and contribute to understanding God's revelation. Seldom, however, is there an attempt to present a more integrated approach. This is what makes the canonical, thematic, and ethical approach of Gregory Goswell (OT) and Andreas Köstenberger (NT) unique. It goes beyond a one-dimensional BT. It traces the themes, ethics, and storyline contribution for each biblical book and then the larger sections of Scripture.

The authors outline their method in a 64-page introduction. Rather than a broad tracing of BT history and approaches generally, it features primarily on the nature and method of BT in evangelical studies, especially for the most recent half century. This provides a good updating of Gerhard Hasel's works *Old Testament Biblical Theology*, 4th ed. (Eerdmans, 1991) and *New Testament Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1978). Also included are

brief discussions of the ordering of the canonical books and the relation of BT to ethics.

The major portion of the work discusses the OT along the traditional canonical ordering of the Masoretic Text—Law, Prophets, and Writings. The NT discussion reflects the English ordering for the books. Each Testament begins with a discussion of book order, and the NT material also briefly describes the relationship of the Testaments, including the use of the OT in the NT.

For larger units (e.g., Law or Gospels), the authors overview each book, describe its major themes, the ethics presented, and the contribution to the storyline of the Bible. The overview to a book briefly traces introductory matters, e.g., authorship, the present scholarly discussion, etc. Then the authors trace three to five prominent words or concepts. Ethics discussions center on the conduct expected toward God and others—unsurprising given Matt 22:37–40. In broad strokes the storyline traces a book's themes through Scripture. At the end of these larger units is a summary following the same structure. The OT covers 236 pp. and the NT 338 pp. A synthesis of 76 pages completes the work, followed by 125 pp. of bibliography and 90 pp. for indexes. A detailed page count is unusual in a review, but in this case, it demonstrates that this is a comprehensive and significant resource for anyone teaching or preaching the Bible, or for those who want an authoritative overview of the biblical message.

This work is a treasure trove for the discussion of the biblical text. Of course, no reader will agree with every interpretation given, but where there might be disagreement, the authors usually footnote resources and discussions to direct further study. At times there is more material in the footnotes than in the text of the page.

Regarding the term "canonical," some works, particularly in OT studies, use it to refer to the time-tested practice of interpreting Scripture with [especially NT] Scripture. This work relies on a differing form of canonical interpretation that draws exegetical significance from the positions of the biblical book relative to those before and after, or books within a group, particularly The Twelve [Minor Prophets], a favorite among canonically inclined scholars. And so, e.g., Joel and Obadiah, presumed to be from the time of the Babylonian threat or later (see pp. 230, 236), are compiled earlier in The Twelve. Also, Jonah is said to come from an even later period but placed earlier (see p. 753). According to this form of canonical interpretation, these out of sequence books are fitted into the present order by The Twelve's compilers and provide exegetical insights when read with adjacent books. The other major sections (e.g., the Law

or the Pauline corpus) also receive canonical discussion, but with less rigor. Space does not permit a fuller discussion of the benefits or critiques of this form of the canonical method. It is not embraced by all Evangelical scholars.

That observation aside, this is a major work contributing to an understanding of the Bible in part and in whole. It is a must have for the serious study of Scripture. The footnotes and bibliography alone are worth the price of the book. The authors provide a model of outstanding scholarship.

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W. Edward Glenny and Darian R. Lockett, eds. *Canon Formation: Tracing the Role of Sub-Collections in the Biblical Canon.* London: T&T Clark, 2023. 331 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-0567692085. $135.00.

Many studies address the formation of the biblical canon. This body of essays stands out in showing the reader how canonical context affects biblical interpretation. The authors examine the role of canonical development in hermeneutics by considering the Bible's major canonical sub-collections.

The first major sub-collections are, obviously, the Old and New Testaments. These two sub-collections have their own canonical shape. In the case of the OT, those shapes differ in the Hebrew (Stephen Dempster) and Greek (John Meade) forms. The OT is further sub-divided into the Pentateuch (Stephen Chapman), the Psalms (Nancy deClaissé-Walford), Wisdom Literature (Craig Bartholomew), the *Megilloth* (Timothy Stone), the *Nebi'im* (Christopher Seitz), the "Twelve" (Don Collett), and the Twelve in the Septuagint (Edward Glenny). The NT is sub-divided into the Fourfold Gospel (Gregory Lanier), the *Corpus Apostolicum* (Darian Lockett), the Pauline Corpus (Randolph Richards), and the book of Revelation (Külli Tõniste). The work concludes with Ched Spellman's seminal essay, "Hermeneutical Reflections on Canonical Sub-Collections."

Canon studies, covering either canon formation or the role of canonical criticism in hermeneutics, is an exciting field of study. Lee Martin McDonald, a key scholar of canon development, concludes his foreword to the volume with a substantial, but not exhaustive, list of questions still being asked and answered. How the writings of Scripture came to be collected as the Bible, by which people might know God, his work, and his will, remains important for scholarship. But the question is important for the church as well.

Each chapter contributes separately to scholarship. Describing the formation of the sub-collections that comprise the Christian Bible is an immense input both to Scripture studies and to hermeneutics. The editors have done the discipline and the church a great service. However, Spellman's concluding chapter, demonstrating the value of a canonical approach to Scripture, is worth the price of admission, offering readers an insight into the importance of "canonical context" for biblical interpretation.

As Spellman explains, this collection of essays "asks several critical questions about the scope of the historical-critical project and concludes that it is not sufficient as a comprehensive program" (p. 312). This is not to deny the importance of the historical investigation into the canon's development, but to insist that such inquiry is inadequate to interpret the text of Scripture. That insistence is particularly important when considering the "pre-history" of the text, which should be relegated to the "preliminary phase of investigation" (p. 313). Spellman then demonstrates significant inter-biblical reflections between various sub-collections in Scripture, which has key hermeneutical implications: Intertextuality is vital to the *meaning* of the texts themselves. As he points out, reading the sub-collections of the Bible (or the books individually) in isolation from the remainder of Scripture limits the range of possible interpretations.

Spellman also notes that individual biblical texts are received into the canon as they relate to other texts. Seeing the Bible as a "collection of collections" is important to canonical analysis, since the texts are not merely individual writings collected alongside other writings. Instead, the writings are joined together because an organic relationship between and among the texts is recognized. It is claimed that these sub-collections circulated together because they inherently associate with one another in meaning. Readers who consistently grouped writings together understood the individual texts in relation to the other texts in the grouping.

The canonical approach to reading Scripture, as envisioned in the essays, repositions the individual texts of Scripture from their mere historical context to their canonical context. The history of canon formation, by which texts become associated with each other and then those collections in turn become associated with one another into a greater collection, guides the interpreter to the "ordering principle or associative logic at work in the formation and function of the collection" (p. 316). For example, the Law at the beginning of the OT establishes it as foundational to reading later texts. Thus, the ordering of biblical sub-collections shapes interpretation.

But the significant "ordering" is not simply of individual texts, but of sub-collections of texts. Spellman appeals to the metaphor of the solar

system to help. Within the solar system there are planets which all revolve around the sun, forming a single solar system because of the gravitational pull of the single sun. Those planets also have moons that revolve around them, being drawn gravitationally to the planet. Similarly, sub-collections are comprised of texts that were drawn together in their reception, but those sub-collections have their own gravitational pull to form a single canon. Reading the text of Scripture in the light of these associations, both within sub-collections and as a larger collection, guides the reader in interpretation.

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Brant Pitre. *Jesus and Divine Christology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. viii + 408 pp. Hardback. ISBN: 978-0802875129. $31.62.

In *Jesus and Divine Christology*, Brant Pitre addresses the divergence between the conclusions of the quest for the historical Jesus (Jesus did not claim divinity) and recent trends in early Christological research (Jesus's early disciples regarded him as God). Pitre argues, "the best explanation for why the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus believed he was divine shortly after his death is because Jesus himself spoke and acted as if he were divine during his lifetime." Further, "Jesus … did so in a very Jewish way—using riddles, questions and allusions to Jewish Scripture to both reveal and conceal the apocalyptic secret of his divinity" (p. 12).

To prove this hypothesis, Pitre explores twelve pericopes across four main chapters (sandwiched between chapters stating the problem and drawing implications). For each pericope, he concerns himself with the *substantia verborum Jesu*, the basic substance of what Jesus said and did, and follows E. P. Sanders's Triple-Context Approach, which evaluates the historicity of each pericope according to its plausibility within a first-century Jewish context, its coherence with other instances of Jesus's thought, and its capacity to explain the Christology of the early church. In each instance Pitre argues convincingly that what is said of Jesus's identity in the text originates with Jesus himself.

In his chapter on epiphanic miracles, Pitre examines Jesus's stilling of the storm (Matt 8:23–27), walking on the sea (Matt 14:22–27), and transfiguration (Matt 17:1–9). He provides substantial evidence that these events not only affirm Jesus's divine self-identity but have historical support. Certainly, some readers will reject the authenticity of miracles; yet his case is not dependent on such authenticity. Regardless of one's presuppositions, Pitre provides a compelling case for the historicity of Jesus's

claims.

The subsequent chapter concerns Jesus's *meshalim*, "riddles, puzzling sayings, and/or questions that were deliberately intended to be both ambiguous and thought-provoking" (p. 111). Pitre examines Jesus's command to love him more than one's parents (Matt 10:37–39), his claim that no one is good except God (Matt 19:16–22), and his riddle about David's Lord (Matt 22:41–46). His identification of the "no one is good" discourse as a *meshal* is particularly helpful for the church, since opponents of Christianity often use the passage as evidence against Jesus's divinity. For this difficult passage, Pitre offers a considerable case to the contrary.

In Chapter 4, Pitre considers Jesus's use of apocalyptic language to identify as divine. Pitre investigates the healing of the paralytic (Matt 9:2–7), John the Baptist's inquiry about the "one to come" (Matt 11:2–6), and the revelation of the Father and the Son (Matt 11:25–27). Discussing the first passage, he notably refutes the assertion that priests had the authority to forgive sins. He rightly argues that Qumran's 4QPrNab ar frags. 1–3, lines 2–5 and Josephus's *Ant.* 6:92 do not demand priestly pardon, which removes a significant obstacle to Jesus's divinity. Pitre's inclusion of Philo's neglected words, "God could sooner change into a human than a human into God" (*Embassy*, 114–18), is likewise welcome evidence against the inconceivability that God could become human in a Jewish context.

In his fifth chapter Pitre argues convincingly that blasphemy for divine claims is the ultimate reason for Jesus's execution. He offers multiple instances where the crowds consider Jesus a blasphemer: the healing of the paralytic (Matt 9:2–7), Jesus's teaching during Tabernacles (John 8:58–59), the accusation of blasphemy during Hanukkah (John 10:31–33), and Jesus's Sanhedrin trial (Matt 26:63–66). While some scholars argue against the historicity of Jesus's trial because of later rabbinic prohibition during festivals, Pitre provides evidence that capital cases were a mandated exception to the rule.

In the final chapter, Pitre offers implications from the study and encourages readers to abandon the idea that Jesus never claimed to be divine "as the outdated relic that it is" (p. 329). The standard answers for how Jesus lived as a Jew but also began a movement which diverged from Judaism and declared him divine (due to his resurrection and revelatory experiences) cannot fully explain the historical events. Jesus's divine self-identification, however, does. Further, the complications entailed by Jesus's method of identification—riddles, allusions to Scripture, claiming oneness yet distinction, inferences to a dual nature—explain the significant time gap between him and the Nicaean Creed.

Overall, Pitre brilliantly succeeds in defending his case. While some

readers will object to his inclusion of John's Gospel, his case stands without John's episodes. However, the most significant aspect of his work is the comparison of his arguments with explanations from historical Jesus research. He illuminates the prevalent presuppositional bias and circular reasoning against divine identity and shows his case to be substantially preferable. As such, this work serves as a significant challenge to the status quo and merits serious consideration. Further, since arguments against Jesus's divine self-identity have reached the popular level, the work offers the church an accessible and competent case to the contrary.

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James K. Dew Jr. and Ronnie P. Campbell Jr., eds. *Natural Theology: Five Views*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024. vi + 289 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1540960443. $26.99.

One positive result of the decline of Christianity in America is that more people in the church are talking about natural theology. Since natural theology is "as old as philosophy itself," an introduction to the current state of scholarship is needed (p. 2). Providing this, editors James Dew and Ronnie Campbell bring together five contributors who advocate for or critique versions of natural theology. The book provides readers with a helpful introduction to the current state of scholarly conversations about natural theology.

The editors structure the book around three questions. First, what is natural theology? Although the contributors agree on some of the salient features of natural theology, noteworthy discrepancies appear in their definitions. Second, should we do natural theology? Most of the contributors answer this question from a pragmatic perspective. Third, how should we do natural theology? In this final question, the contributors analyze methods for arriving at theological truths.

Charles Taliaferro presents *A Contemporary View* of natural theology. Anyone familiar with the standard arguments of natural theology will be familiar with Taliaferro and the content of his essay. "Natural theology is the philosophical reflection on God based on reasoning that does not rely on revelation" (p. 15). We should do natural theology to establish theism independently of the Bible to substantiate some of the Bible's claims. It is done best by abductive reasoning, comparing competing worldviews for their coherence and explanatory power given the available data (p. 16).

As a discipline, natural theology has been criticized by some for internal problems of coherence. In *A Catholic View* of natural theology, Father

Andrew Pinsent likens the problem for natural theology to a Gettier-type problem whereby one arrives at a correct conclusion by improper means and thus does not have genuine knowledge (p. 61). In the same way, natural human reason alone is not a sufficient means to supernatural truths. The salient point in Pinsent's essay is the purported flow of knowledge in natural theology, moving in one direction from man up to God.

Advocating for *A Classical View*, Alistair McGrath views natural theology as a discipline that explores "the possible connections between the world of nature and a transcendent reality" (p. 112). Central to McGrath's understanding of natural theology is a "bidirectional" flow of knowledge (p. 113). We can reflect on nature and conclude that God exists; in the same way, we can begin with a belief in God and reflect on the natural world considering one's belief in God. For this reason, natural theology can take many forms and resists being defined (p. 113).

In *A Deflationary View*, Paul K. Moser wants to deflate our confidence in natural theology because its arguments do not lead to a morally perfect being; rather, only an imperfect being (p. 154). The ontological argument cannot provide an "existence-guaranteeing" concept of a morally perfect being (p. 155). The teleological and cosmological arguments only require causes commensurate to their effects (p. 157). And the moral argument and argument from consciousness do not logically entail the existence of a morally perfect being (p. 161). We can only arrive at a knowledge of a morally perfect being by supernatural means. According to Moser, *de re* experiential evidence in divine self-manifestation is the jointly necessary and sufficient condition that leads to knowledge of a morally perfect being, not human reason (p. 164).

John C. McDowell defends *A Barthian View*, arguing that natural theology suffers from a fatal flaw. It does not begin with a belief in God and thus does not constitute true theology (p. 211). McDowell's concerns resemble the debate about epistemological particularism versus methodism. It is entirely unnatural for any theology to suspend belief in God until validated by a method of acquiring theological knowledge since the presupposition of all theology, seen here as a necessary condition, is that God exists based on revelation (p. 212). According to McDowell, natural theology is a category mistake that only amounts to self-aggrandizement which leads to idolatry.

Should we do natural theology? One weakness of the book is a lack of conversation about the ethical implications of doing natural theology. Most of the contributors (Taliaferro, Pinsent, McGrath, and Moser) answer that question solely from a pragmatic perspective rather than an ethical perspective. Only McDowell discusses the ethical implications of doing natural theology. Nevertheless, the strengths of the book make up for

any shortcomings. Readers will gain a deeper knowledge of what constitutes natural theology and the various entailments of those definitions on theology proper.

Dew and Campbell have compiled an excellent resource for theologians, philosophers, scholars, students, and laymen to gain a foothold on the current state of scholarly conversations about natural theology. The contributors present their arguments clearly and respond to one another with grace. This book will encourage readers to explore the body of literature devoted to natural theology, both contemporary and historical, with confidence.

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Andrew T. Walker. *Faithful Reason: Natural Law Ethics for God's Glory and Our Good.* Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024. xi + 413 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1087757599. $34.99.

Will natural law become a regular part of evangelical Protestant ethics? Yes, if Andrew T. Walker has anything to say about it. As Western culture decays morally, more evangelical Protestants have begun to see value in natural law theory to arrest that decay. But since the natural law tradition has been dominated by Roman Catholic thinkers, few resources discuss natural law from an evangelical Protestant viewpoint. Walker aims to fill that void by providing a comprehensive account of natural law theory from the latter perspective.

"Christian natural law provides the most consistent, coherent account of morality necessary for the task of personal and social ethics" (p. 17). Walker sufficiently proves this thesis, dividing his work into two parts. The first is theoretical, dealing primarily in metaethics. The second is practical, dealing in applied ethics, centering around life, marriage, and order. Western culture has abandoned both a fixed moral order and human nature, leaving us without a shared moral vision of how we ought to live our lives. However, natural law theory provides a foundation for a shared moral vision by presupposing both, together with a framework to understand the categories of ontology, epistemology, and teleology.

Walker believes that Christian ethics, viewed from the vantage point of natural law theory, is the simultaneous glorification of God by right human actions, and true human flourishing—by those same actions (pp. 29–30). Two implications follow from this claim. (1) Natural law theory is teleological because it presupposes that the rational actions of human beings are end-directed, seeking some good. (2) A fixed moral order and

human nature exist.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism declares that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. If natural law theory aims at the same end, why do evangelical Protestants exclude natural law from their ethics? Because, according to Walker, the natural law tradition has not been sufficiently "Christotelic" (p. 71). However, since natural law theory is teleological, that means we must understand it Christologically, because Christ is our ultimate end. Unfortunately, he does not adequately establish the claim that the natural law tradition is insufficiently Christotelic; rather, he assumes it to be true.

In any event, Walker writes *Faithful Reason* with a certain interlocutor in mind: an evangelical Protestant who contrasts faith and reason, general and special revelation, and glory to God and human flourishing. He wants to collapse those dichotomies. Faith and reason are not opposed to one another; rather, they are "distinct ways of knowing" which emanate from the same source—God (p. 104). General revelation and special revelation do not counter each other; instead, they are distinct mediums of communication which emanate from the same source—God. Finally, glorifying God and true human flourishing are not in confrontation; rather, they are coextensive. Both manifest by the same means—obedience to God's commands. He thus links natural law to reason, general revelation, and true human flourishing.

Additionally, Walker's commitment to *sola scriptura* has certain theoretical implications. Natural law is useful in "articulating the underlying and theoretical reasonableness of biblical ethics" (p. 73). This implies that natural law makes explicit divine positive law (pp. 73, 75, 185, 248, 251–52). However, many in the natural law tradition reverse that paradigm. Because of sin, divine positive law was necessary to make natural law explicit. Those familiar with the natural law tradition may notice tension in Walker's paradigm here.

Overall, the author succeeds in introducing evangelical Protestants to natural law theory. One strength of *Faithful Reason* is his commitment to lead readers through the metaphysical assumptions of natural law theory before dealing with certain applied issues. This approach requires him to spend more time dealing with metaethics than applied ethics. However, a thorough understanding of metaphysical assumptions is invaluable since that is where most moral disagreements begin. A second strength of *Faithful Reason* is his breaking of new ground. He alerts the field to probable neglect of the relationship between Christology and natural law theory. There is tension in his paradigm, alluded to above, but that tension does not detract from the book. Since Walker has broken new ground, he has also paved the way for others to explore how Christology and natural law

theory relate.

This book is an academic one, but that should not discourage readers unfamiliar with natural law theory from buying it. For interested evangelical Protestants, accustomed to strict divine command theories, *Faithful Reason* opens the door to the rich field of teleological ethical theories and the notion of human flourishing. Walker has made a significant contribution to the field of Christian ethics and *Faithful Reason* should be a standard text for teaching it.

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C. Ryan Fields. *Local and Universal: A Free Church Account of Ecclesial Catholicity*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2024. 256 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1514006719. $40.00.

Christians of all communions should confess with the Nicene Fathers the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." The meaning of these attributes, however, has been contested throughout history. Ryan Fields seeks to provide a Free Church understanding of catholicity in constructive dialogue with Scripture, history, and other traditions. He establishes his work, *Local and Universal*, primarily in the narrative of biblical theology and secondly in the contributions of the Great Tradition of the church. Finally, he offers proposals for a concept of catholicity situated in the local church. The book is a compelling case for his aphorism: "no fulsome catholicity without sufficient locality and no fulsome locality without sufficient catholicity" (p. 4). By this, Fields argues that because of their dependence on the apostolic succession of bishops, episcopal church traditions (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox) deny the authenticity of "two or three" gathered under the lordship of Christ. By recognizing the ecclesial nature of all churches, the Free Church account shows a greater capacity for catholicity than the episcopal account.

As an evangelical pastor, it is unsurprising that Fields's strength is his biblical case for catholicity in Chapter 1. The church's universal nature is rooted in God's mission to call all peoples in all places to himself. This chapter is a brilliant synthesis of first-rate scholarship in missiological and biblical studies. It highlights God's desire for unity under the redemptive lordship of Jesus along with the ethnic and geographic diversity of his people. Unity in diversity is the biblical warrant by which we confess the church's catholicity.

Through a brief historical survey in Chapter 2, Fields provides various ways in which catholicity has been understood from the early church to

the present. This historically developed taxonomy is another strength of the work (e.g., p. 65). Fields recognizes the various and even contradictory ways in which catholicity has been used historically, while still gaining key insights from church history. Is connection to an institutionally visible church necessary for catholicity? Is creedal orthodoxy necessary? Does the provincialism of certain traditions negate their claims to catholicity? In answering such questions, Fields shows the richness of interacting critically with the competing claim of church history. This chapter alone will serve as a great resource to future scholars discussing this contested topic.

Chapter 3 interacts with Anglican arguments for catholicity. Fields highlights the failure of consensus within this episcopal tradition on the nature of catholicity. Does the office of bishop belong to the essence of the church or is it simply a historically beneficial administrative position? Because of diverse answers within Anglicanism, Fields claims that the Anglican tradition "leaves room for a Free Church account of catholicity" (p. 127). In this way, he builds common ground between the Anglican and Free Church portrayals.

Fields then sketches the history of the early modern Free Church movement. He draws insights from Anabaptists, English Baptists, and English dissenters. He is careful not to argue that they were all champions of catholicity, but rather that many in these traditions sought catholicity even while proposing radical changes in the nature of the church. He pairs the great confessions of the Baptist tradition (the *Second London* and the *Orthodox Creed*) with the theology of the Congregationalist John Owen to make this case. He maintains that rather than being sectarian, these seventeenth-century sources demonstrate the possibility of Free Church catholicity.

In the last two chapters, Fields offers a constructive account of Free Church catholicity. He relies on Miroslav Volf's interpretation of Matthew 18:20. For Volf and Fields, if two or three are gathered in the name of Christ the catholic church is present. This church has Christological catholicity because the church sits under the Lordship of Christ and orthodox catholicity because this is the Christ of the Creed. In this section, Fields provides a helpful but too brief discussion of the dimensions of the church. The church is militant and triumphant in terms of *time*; visible and invisible in terms of *perspective*; local and universal in terms of *space* (p. 195). Christians long to see the invisible church made visible and experience the eschatological triumph of the militant church. Similarly, Christians await the eschatological union of the universal church, while experiencing it through local manifestation. In making institutional claims regarding catholicity, other traditions often deprive themselves of the richness of locality.

An outstanding work overall, one weakness is its lack of interaction with the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Even in the historical survey, Orthodoxy is largely ignored. It seems that any treatment of catholicity must account in some way for this significant strain of the faith. A second point of critique is the overreliance on Matt 18:20 as a grounding for Free Church ecclesiology. As a Baptist, I am sympathetic to Fields's claim, but it seems that congregational polity needs a firmer exegetical basis than he has offered. Finally, the academic nature of his writing can sometimes obscure his meaning. However, Fields is developing a popular version to bring his insights to a wider audience. This endeavor is promising. So, despite the drawbacks, this work is an exceptional evangelical contribution to the topic of catholicity.

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Dustin Slaton. *Multisite Churches: Biblical Foundations and Practical Answers*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2024. 316 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0825448294. $22.99.

Most of the literature on the multisite church model provides practical applications, but critics of the model raise biblical and theological questions. What is needed is a work giving the "theological underpinning that provides biblical support" and a "fully formed ecclesiology for multisite churches" (p. 32). Dustin Slaton seeks to meet this need. Written originally as a dissertation within a Southern Baptist context, his thesis seeks to challenge the idea that "multisite models are incompatible with congregational polity." Rather, he seeks to "make the case that a form of multisite church exists that is compatible with congregationally led churches" (p. 33).

After 35 pages of introductory matter, the book is composed of three main parts, concluding with an outstanding 36-page bibliography. Part 1 is general background, sketching the many models found in multisite church scholarship, giving a brief history of multisite churches, and stating five "foundational assumptions of the multisite church movement" (p. 89), the most contested being that "multisite is a biblical model" (p. 92).

Part 2 develops a list of eleven characteristics of healthy churches, with a chapter devoted to each one. These chapters give a brief biblical background and historical perspective of the elements under consideration, but the most significant content discusses how the characteristic could be

applied within a multisite context. Roughly half of these are non-controversial in that few of the critiques of multisite churches address them (issues like discipleship, prayer, evangelism and missions, stewardship, and community). Slaton's comments on the other six characteristics (preaching, the ordinances, church membership, discipline, leadership, and corporate worship) acknowledge problems some multisite church models have developing them but also offer methods and practices multisite churches could adopt to counter the challenges.

Part 3 of the book is the author's response to criticisms of multisite churches. He states that apart from *MultiChurch* by Brad House and Gregg Allison, multisite advocates have given little response to these critics. Slaton thus seeks to defend multisite churches from unwarranted criticism and to present a model that is responsive to valid critiques. He devotes one chapter to disavowals of specific multisite models, most directed against the stereotypical multisite church model with a big-name preacher communicating a video feed to thousands of members in widely separated campuses. He accepts that some of these critiques have merit but has a simple response. There are many other multisite models, including the one he will advocate, that are not subject to these judgments.

Chapter 18, which follows, is the longest of the book and the one of greatest value. Here he addresses critiques that apply to virtually all multisite church models, and the evaluations that focus on biblical or theological matters or historical precedent rather than practical issues. He thus clarifies which model he advocates for, though there are hints of it in various chapters of Part 2.

This book has many strengths. He gives an excellent response to the most prominent critic of multisite churches, Jonathan Leeman, who charges that multisite churches are unbiblical, insisting that a valid church must assemble. Rather than seeing congregating as the essence of a local church, Slaton sides with J.D. Greear, Matt Chandler, Gregg Allison, Brad House, and Stanley Grenz that the crux of a church is the covenant commitment the members make to one another. He also includes evidence that the church in Jerusalem met in multiple locations, giving biblical support for multisites.

At the same time, Slaton is stronger than most multisite church advocates by insisting on the importance of periodic whole church gatherings for matters like the celebration of the ordinances and "necessary, nondelegable governing functions of the gathered body" (p. 256). The latter is important for his goal of a multisite model that is truly congregational. This insistence on occasional gathering of the whole body leads him to conclude that a multisite church's campuses must not "extend beyond a

reasonable driving distance" (p. 177, n. 70), which would prohibit occasional whole church gatherings.

Another notable contribution is his demonstration that earlier Baptists allowed for the possibility of one church meeting in multiple locations. He cites material I had not seen mentioned from John Broadus, B. H. Carroll, William Williams and J. B. Reynolds, that specifically contemplate some form of multisite ministry. Here, and throughout the book for that matter, Slaton's research is impeccable.

His work does have a few weaknesses though. His definition of a multisite church says the members "ideally gather together as a whole church occasionally" (p. 279). This is less substantial than his statement earlier that "there must be times when the whole church is gathered together" (p. 177). "Occasionally" is a very elastic word. Greater precision is lacking on just how important assembling is and how frequent such gatherings should be. And he could be clearer on the reason why churches must gather. He mentions unity (p. 176) and the requirements for congregational polity, but are there no stronger reasons?

Still, this is a very valuable resource. It will be my "go-to" book to introduce students and church leaders to the multisite church movement.

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Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou. *Christianity and Critical Race Theory: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. xi + 178 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1540965196. $16.79.

Robert Romero and Jeff Liou's work is a treasure for those who read charitably and with an appreciation for nuance. They prepare both the reader's mind and heart for engaging with the upcoming chapters by beginning their introduction with personal stories of racial injustice and sharing that Critical Race Theory (CRT) has helped them share the gospel with those who would never enter a church. Their thesis is that rather than being "antithetical to the Bible" (p. 19), "the big tenets of CRT line up squarely with the teachings of Jesus and Scripture" (p. 12). Liou denounces the "unfair oversimplifications and false dichotomies" (p. 18) often lobbied against CRT and explains that they "have chosen to hold the tensions and point to ways that biblical theology can help us frame some of the key ideas of CRT" (p. 18).

In the first chapter, Romero discusses CRT's principle of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), which asserts that each ethnic group contains positive cultural wealth. He demonstrates how CCW aligns with John's

declaration that each ethnic group has a cultural treasure or wealth that glorifies God and will be part of eternity (Rev 21:22–27), while also providing a brief history of how America has instead seen other cultures as "deficient."

In the second chapter, Liou argues that "the way Christians understand the scope and nature of sin can be mapped onto one's posture toward CRT" and analyzes the propensity of evangelical doctrines of sin toward individuality rather than including the outcomes of sinful systems and structures (pp. 70–71). Here, Liou addresses Al Mohler's and the Southern Baptist Convention's written stances, stating that their fear that CRT is advancing a "'transcendent ideological framework' that competes with their account of a sinful world" is unfounded since CRT aims to describe the reality of the broken world rather than propose an ideology (p. 74). Liou also offers a helpful list of "nonindividualistic harmartiologies" (p. 76) including those of Tertullian, Ambrose, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin among more contemporary theologians (pp. 76–80) and demonstrates how they are compatible with CRT's assertion that "racism is ordinary" because *sin* is ordinary (p. 63).

In the third chapter, Romero argues that since "one in three American evangelicals is now a person of color" (p. 101), theological institutions would benefit from CRT's Voice of Color Thesis that "people of color are in the best position to understand [their] own racialized experiences in the United States and to craft solutions" (p. 108). Romero notes this theory's consistency with Rom 12:5, Eph 4:13–16, and 1 Cor 12:12–27 and challenges institutional leaders to assess whether they are "truly interested in the perspectives that flow from journeying with Jesus in a different shade of skin" or simply in hiring people of color who will not change their status quo (p. 110). Romero then identifies five barriers to diversifying institutional leadership, using Acts 6 to argue against "Reactionary Color Blindness" which devalues diversity out of a belief that "we are all the same" and that intentionally hiring diverse candidates for positions is its own form of racism (p. 122).

In the fourth chapter, Liou argues that while *worldview* describes idealistic truth, CRT describes lived experiences in a broken world, and thus the two miscommunicate. Although Christians often believe that "the world outside the hard boundaries of the Christian community [is] bereft of the goodness of God" (p. 148), Liou challenges Christians to instead recognize that God is also at work "wherever justice and dignity are being secured" (p. 149). Yet here Liou also makes the book's strongest critique of CRT—the lack of a hopeful eschatology. While CRT often spirals into "rhetorical violence" (p. 153) and "deepening alienation" (p. 158), Christians can provide the eschatological hope of God's kingdom as they work

alongside CRT. Liou ends with an analysis of both parties: Christians rejecting CRT claim that God's justice is mighty yet live placidly as if there is no justice work to be done here on earth; Christians utilizing CRT also claim that God's justice is mighty yet live as though justice relies only on their own knowledge, agency, and vision (p. 164).

Romero and Liou have attempted to conduct a "loving intervention" between Christianity and CRT (p. 170). While Romero's chapters are easily accessible for lay readers, Liou's chapters use more scholarly vocabulary, which may hinder non-academic readers. However, this book would make a great classroom resource leading to riveting discussion. The short glossary provides working definitions of CRT terms to assist readers who may be new to CRT theories or have skewed presuppositions (pp. 179–80). So, for readers aiming to love their neighbors by seeking to understand all forms of racism (p. 21), this book is a welcome resource providing ample evidence that Christians can interact positively with CRT without betraying Scriptural truth.

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Steven Bouma-Prediger. *Creation Care Discipleship: Why Earthkeeping Is an Essential Christian Practice*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. 213 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1540966322. $25.99.

Climate change, population growth, pollution, and deforestation make global headlines. These issues lead some Christians to question how God wants them to care for his creation. Steven Bouma-Prediger writes *Creation Care Discipleship* to explain why the church "should be concerned about caring for the earth because it is integral to what it means to follow Jesus" (p. 3). He helpfully includes practical ways disciples can incorporate creation care into their lives.

From the outset, two terms are essential for his argument: "creation" and "earthkeeping." The former adheres to the orthodox Christian view that everything has been created and is being sustained by God. The latter describes "our calling to care for our home planet" (p. 9). Both terms remove the anthropocentric connotations attached to "stewardship" and mankind's self-serving domination over the earth (pp. 62–63).

The author's method can be broken down into five components, corresponding with each chapter. He begins his biblical warrant for earthkeeping with an exposition of various Bible passages (Chapter 2). He reviews the creation account of Genesis 1, the Sabbath of Leviticus 24, the prophetic literature of Isaiah 40, the eschatology of 1 Thessalonians 4,

and the renewal of heaven and earth in Revelation 21. Each text is designed to show the biblical vision for earthkeeping "so that all people will be drawn to the good news of Jesus and inspired to serve, protect, and restore the earth" (p. 40). This chapter argues that the concept of earthkeeping is present throughout Scripture.

Bouma-Prediger then transitions from the Bible to theology and ethics (Chapter 3). He denies the notion that creation care is a form of "nature worship" (p. 47). Instead, he states that "the earth is sacred ground," and "earthkeeping is an important form of Christian discipleship" (pp. 58–59). He argues that one's eschatology and Christian virtues "shape actions in the present" (p. 69). Therefore, earth's renewal and the virtues of justice, hope, and love require believers to embody the appropriate disposition for earthkeeping.

An overview of contemporary ecumenical teachings about creation care is introduced in Chapter 4. The author reviews the writings of Pope Francis, Patriarch Bartholomew I, H. Paul Santmire, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Randy Woodley. He concludes this chapter with the words from "A Joint Message for the Protection of Creation," an ecumenical statement from the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion.

Bouma-Prediger provides practical ways Christians can become creation care disciples in Chapter 5. He pushes against the grip of materialism and the allure of secular ideologies that embrace overindulgence and maltreatment of the earth. He asserts that "love and justice are at the very center of Christian discipleship" (p. 138). He believes these two attributes contribute to environmental justice and education. Environmental justice is the combination of ecological flourishing and social justice, while education rejects consequentialism and creates systems for the sustainability of future generations—in terms of recycling, commuting, voting, etc. (pp. 144, 157–70).

The Bible's eschatological vision of shalom ends the book (Chapter 6). The author defines shalom as a "packed Hebrew term that strives to portray this world flourishing in all things and praising God in all ways" (p. 181). This future vision causes Christians to become "visionaries who ache for God's good future to be made real" (p. 188). Creation care discipleship connects the future vision of shalom to one's present reality through the means of earthkeeping.

In sum, Bouma-Prediger identifies creation care as an area of neglect in the church, which is one of the book's greatest strengths. Theology and eschatology do impact Christian ethics. Christians should be concerned about caring for the earth as redeemed image-bearers. Earthkeeping is a part of discipleship. It must be taught in the church, embraced by God's

people, and applied to the Christian life. This work challenges Christians to become better at caring for God's creation.

Creation Care Discipleship does contain two weaknesses though. First, the author implies that all facets of life on earth may be facing extinction if Christians do not practice earthkeeping. While humanity may contribute to earth's groaning (Rom 8:22–24), the biblical narrative does not state that humanity will destroy the world. This thinking seems to go outside the bounds of the Bible's teaching, and calls into question God's sovereignty, love, and goodness. The world is finite but is also sustained by an infinite and good Creator.

Second, the lack of engagement with contemporary ecumenical church writings hinders his argument. The necessity of including these writings is not apparent in this work devoted to Christian discipleship. Also, by not interacting with them he could imply that their positions are in line with the Bible's teaching. That may not be the case.

These critiques do not undermine the book's value for the church. Earthkeeping does have biblical warrant. Bouma-Prediger addresses an area often neglected by affluent church cultures. The church does bear responsibility to care for God's creation. *Creation Care Discipleship* is thus a recommended resource for churches, Christians, and scholars who desire to make well-rounded disciples.

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Andrew Walls. *The Missionary Movement from the West: A Biography from Birth to Old Age*. Edited by Brian Stanley. Studies in the History of Christian Missions. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. 271 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-0802848970. $32.99.

The Missionary Movement from the West is an excellent overview of the history of Protestant foreign missions from Europe and America to the majority world. The book is published posthumously, edited by Brian Stanley. It is a collection of lectures Andrew Walls gave at various institutions in Ghana, New York, and New Haven between 2005 and 2008. Divided into four parts, each constitutes a series. Stanley tells the reader that the original form and arrangement is retained, but a fair amount of "reconstructive surgery" was necessary to avoid redundance.

The book is primarily a Protestant narrative and an "Anglophone" one. The lectures were prepared for academic and general Christian audiences and the book thus retains both characteristics. Yet, Walls' primary thesis remains clear. He asserts, "We have not reached the end of the

missionary movement from the West, but it is no longer central to the evangelization of the world … we have [therefore] reached the old age of the missionary movement" (p. 24). Stating it this way, Walls intends to offer a history, not a prophecy. He seeks to look back in retrospection, not forecast what tomorrow might look like. Walls's four parts are divided between the birth and early years of Western missions, the middle age in the nineteenth century, the midlife crisis in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and old age following the Second World War and the opportunity of World Christianity.

Part 1 begins with the historical background of the Western missionary movement. Walls argues that the Christian Faith had always been a global principle since the time of the New Testament but had not become a truly global religion until after the "The Great European Migration." Walls defines this migration simply as that of European peoples for the world beyond Europe, from the beginning of the sixteenth century all the way through the late nineteenth century. "Christendom" also emerged in this background. "Christendom" for Walls means that the Christian Faith was embraced by entire communities, determining their laws and customs. However, the "Missionary" emerged contrary to the "Crusader," demonstrating and explaining the gospel, but never compelling. Against this background, then, Walls argues that the Western missions movement was born. The rest of Part 1 thus unpacks the impact of the Moravians, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, John Eliot, William Carey, George Liele, William Wilberforce, and the Haystack Prayer Meeting as key figures and events. Each of these played a key role in Christian expansion and acted as a catalyzing stimulus for Western missions.

Parts 2–4 unpack the stages of middle age, midlife crisis, and old age. The middle years represented a shift towards eschatology, ecclesiology, race, and culture. Part 2 thus looks at John Wesley, Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn, Thomas Buxton, and Robert Morrison. The midlife crisis years represented major changes, but also adulthood. Walls argues, "In the 1840s, the missionary movement reached maturity" (p. 140). Walls primarily means two things by this statement. First, even though the movement was still relatively small, the 1840s became the decade by which Christian missions was accepted and approved by many. Second, by the mid-nineteenth century the movement was characterized by diversity both theologically and denominationally. Walls points to the range of the holiness movements, Hudson Taylor's mission to China, Arthur Pierson and the Student Volunteer Movement, medical missions, the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, and the Tambaram Meeting. Finally, the major shift to old age in Walls's view is the movement from missions from the West to missions from everywhere to everyone. Walls

points to the major global changes after World War II and the rise of Christianity in places like India, China, and Africa. In retrospect Walls sees the missions movement as primarily Western up until 1945, but since then the central headquarters for foreign missions have shifted to the majority world.

Walls's work is important because readers can be confident they are being led by a trained theologian, historian, and informed participant in global Christianity. Walls has a keen eye for theological development among missiological thinkers and missionaries. He pays careful attention to pietism, conversion, eschatology, ecclesiology, and Christology. Readers might be overwhelmed with the large amount of material covered though, especially if they are not familiar with missions history. And the work is sometimes redundant, despite Stanley's attempt to remove some of it. Moreover, the coverage is still highly selective and thus reveals some omissions. For example, there is no mention of key missionaries such as Adoniram Judson or the Cambridge Seven. Walls also leaves out the missiologists Roland Allen, Robert Speer, and Ralph Winter. And finally, there is a lack of attention to women missionaries such as Amy Carmichael, Helen Roseveare, or Lottie Moon. Overall, though, the work is an excellent overview of God's work of missions from the West, faithfully explaining a chapter in the *Missio Dei* to make his name known among all the nations.

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