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Rediscovering the Office of Elder
The Shepherd Model

by Eric Laverentz

At the center of our name, tradition, identity, and ethos as *Presbyterians* is a term that has lost almost all connection with what it meant to most who have called themselves Presbyterians over the last five centuries. Even to many of our parents and grandparents being a "presbyter" or "elder" meant something quite different than it means to most of us today.

The not too distant past paints a picture of elders vested with spiritual authority who were deeply enmeshed in the lives of people. This is very different from the service rendered in most elder-led churches today. We have seen a total shift in understanding of what it means to be an elder over the last generation or two. The shift is so complete that few of us have any institutional memory of the way it used to be.

A history of First Presbyterian Church of Dayton, Ohio, published in 1880, contains a section on discipline that provides a clear window into their thoughts on the practice. The fact that a section on church discipline was included at all is remarkable by today's standards. What it highlights is even more remarkable. It begins with a lucid and luminous description of elders caring for the congregation and calling them to a closer walk with Christ.

"To err is human," and so long as human nature remains subject to its present infirmities the exercise of discipline will be necessary to good order, both in the church and state. One duty of church sessions is to guard the purity of the church in the lives of its members. In dealing with offenses, the session holds both judiciary and executive authority. But the most important function of elders is to watch over the flock, of which they are under-shepherds, guarding, counseling, comforting, instructing, encouraging, and admonishing, as circumstances require. The penalties imposed on wrongdoers are censure, suspension from the communion of the Church, and excommunication.[1]

As foreign as this description of duties sounds to 21st century ears, it was not the elders of First Presbyterian Church, Dayton, Ohio, in the 1880s who were guarding the purity of their members and exercising discipline that were out of touch with the historical and Biblical vision of elders. It is the elders of the 20th century and beyond who have tended to perceive themselves primarily as corporate managers who are out of step with nearly four millennia of precept and practice.

There was a time not so long ago when elders saw their role primarily as shepherds of the people rather than corporate officers. These are two distinct models. One sees elders as having spiritual authority over the flock and an obligation to help them walk as disciples of Jesus Christ. I call this the "shepherd model." The other sees elders primarily as leaders of a corporation, with a mandate to protect and maintain the institution. I call this the "institutional model." The change in models reflects a massive difference in focus and responsibility

with far-reaching implications for the church—on par with any change impacting the church today.

Elders in the Old Testament

What does our earliest picture of elders suggest about their role and function? The Dutch theologian Hugo Grotius is one of many who have seen a straight line between the governing structure of the synagogue and the early church: "The whole polity or order of the Churches of Christ was conformed to the model of the Jewish Synagogue."[2]

The first reference to elders governing God's people is in Exodus where they played an important role in helping Moses lead the people out of slavery. Moses presented himself to the elders upon his return to Egypt from the wilderness of Midian as God's instrument of redemption and release from slavery. He gathered the elders together to institute the Passover (Ex. 12:21). And, upon the command of the Lord, he relied upon them throughout the Exodus.

However, it was at a place called Taberah, a mere three-day journey from Mount Sinai, where the complaints of the "rabble" of Israel got to Moses. At Taberah, Moses heard "the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent" (Num. 11:10). Overwhelmed by the weight of responsibility of leading the crying and moaning rabble, Moses exclaimed, "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." He cried out to the Lord, "If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness" (Num. 11:14–15).

Nearly every pastor I know has reached a point when the burdens of ministry seemed too great. Most pastors will admit to times when they would have rather done anything else than to step back into the pulpit or get into the car to make another hospital call. Although the statistics vary wildly, there seems to be agreement that ministerial burnout is a growing problem.

Is there any help for it? Even as he asked Him to take his life, the Lord provided a remedy to Moses. God instructed him to appoint elders so he would not have to bear the burden of being a shepherd alone:

> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone (Num. 11:16–17).

And God gave these elders some of the same Spirit that He had given to Moses. The elders, filled with the Holy Spirit, were to reflect the godly character so prevalent in Moses.

> So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it (Num. 11:24–25).

Although their work of prophesying proved intermittent throughout the Old Testament, elders continued to shepherd the people.

> But if anyone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die (Deut. 19:11–12).
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> Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, "I do not wish to take her," then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, "So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house" (Deut. 25:8–9).
>
> Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you (Deut. 32:7).
>
> Say to the people of Israel, "Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the manslayer who strikes any person without intent or unknowingly may flee there. They shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. He shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and explain his case to the elders of that city. Then they shall take him into the city and give him a place, and he shall remain with them" (Josh. 20:2–4)

This is not to say that elders in the Old Testament dealt exclusively with people. The institutional and shepherd models are not a zero-sum game. One need not operate at the expense of the other. The church, like the synagogue, is an institution with authorized leaders, officially prescribed procedures, forms, governance, duties, etc. James Tunstead Burtchaell summarizes the duties of the elders of the synagogue:

> The known prerogatives of the councils of elders were extensive. They continued to honor their own public servants and their gentile patrons and benefactors. They took action on behalf of the community: deciding on resistance or surrender in warfare; sending or receiving embassies between the courts of the great rulers, collecting and transmitting taxes; electing judges and empaneling themselves to give judgment. They were the interpreters of the Law, on matters such as sabbath regulations, calendar, priestly purity and prerogatives, and probate. … There is much evidence that either *en banc* or in panels the elders continued to mete out justice. Local courts were imprisoning robbers, and scourging violators of the law. They also resolved disputes between members.

In sum, elders as a college were expected to be both statesmen and jurists: representatives of the people's interests to outsiders, while maintaining lawful discipline within the community.[3]

Josephus records an example of the shepherd model that demonstrates just how seriously it was taken by the elders and the community. Herod Antipater the new twenty-five-year-old governor of Galilee captured and had executed without trial Hezekiah, the captain of a band of robbers, as well as a number of his men who had been raiding Syria. In what was not an apolitical event, Antipater was hauled before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council consisting of 70 to 72 elders. Upon the advice of another, he brought with him an armed guard, which so intimidated the witnesses and the elders that no one spoke. According to Josephus, "a righteous man" named Sameas finally stood. In this highly unusual, politically charged atmosphere, his words are instructive to us as to how discipline in front of the Sanhedrin usually functioned.

> O you that are assessors with me, and O thou that art our king, I neither have ever myself known such a case, nor do I suppose that any one of you can name its parallel, that one who is called to take his trial by us ever stood in such a manner before us; but every one, whosoever he be, that comes to be tried by this Sanhedrin, presents himself in a submissive manner, and like one that is in fear of himself, and that endeavors to move us to compassion, with his hair disheveled, and in a black and mourning garment: but this admirable man Herod, who is accused of murder, and called to answer so heavy an accusation, stands here clothed in purple, and with the hair of his head finely trimmed, and with his armed men about him, that if we shall condemn him by our law, he may slay us, and by overbearing justice may himself escape death. Yet do not I make this complaint against Herod himself; he is to be sure more concerned for himself than for the laws; but my complaint is against yourselves, and your king, who gave him a license so to do …[4]

Antipater escaped sentencing only because he fled to Damascus. Yet it is worth noting that all who appeared before the Sanhedrin were accustomed to doing so in humility and submission, hoping they might appeal to their compassion. Sameas' rebuke of his fellow elders for their fear in the face of Herod's display reflects the kind of authority they held even over spoiled brat, bloodthirsty would-be kings. Though their authority was spiritual rather than civil, Presbyterian elders also exercised disciplinary authority throughout the 19th century and, in some cases, even the 20th century.

Elders in the New Testament

The New Testament teaches us that the young church utilized elders from almost the very beginning. In Acts 14, we are told that the apostles after delivering the gospel in a city, leaving behind disciples, "appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (v. 23). This was common practice for the apostles and those with whom they worked closely. Titus was also instructed to "appoint elders in every town as I instructed you" (Titus 1:5).

But what was their work? There are two words most closely linked with the work of elders: overseer (*episkopos*) and shepherd (*poimen*).

In Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, he charged them to have oversight and to shepherd God's people whom He purchased at a dear price. "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to *shepherd* the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28, NAS, emphasis added). This instruction we can reckon was well received because the Ephesian elders and Paul wept at his parting.

Peter's First Letter contains the longest New Testament job description of elders. Here oversight and shepherding factor in heavily. In fact, the ability to shepherd and oversee well will earn the elder "an unfading crown of glory":

> So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: *shepherd* the flock of God that is among you, exercising *oversight*, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when

> the chief *Shepherd* appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1–4).

The two words are also joined together in a description of Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd and Overseer: "For you were straying like sheep, but now have returned to the *Shepherd* and *Overseer* of your souls" (1 Pet. 2:25).

In Titus, immediately after the instruction to appoint elders in every town, the word overseer is used interchangeably along the same lines of instruction:

> For an *overseer*, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, holy and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it (Tit. 1:7–9).

First Timothy elaborates similar qualifications for the leaders of the church:

> The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive (1 Tim. 3: 2–4).

The following passage in Timothy goes on to cite the qualifications "likewise" for deacons, clearly inferring yet another commonly recognized church office.

The salutation of the letter to the church at Philippi contains a like joining: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons…" (Phil. 1:1).

Episkopos, of course, is also commonly translated with the word bishop taken from the Middle English word *bissop*, coming from the Old English *bisecop* whose origins are in the Latin word for overseer *episcopus*. The terms elder and overseer were interchangeable for the early Church. Burtchaell calls elder and overseer 'synonyms' in the early church.[5]

Matthew Henry, in his commentary, equates the two:

> It [Philippians] is directed to the ministers, or church-officers—*with the bishops and deacons*, the bishops or elders whose office, in the first place, whose office it was to teach and rule, and the deacons or overseers of the poor, who took care of the outward business of the house of God: the place, the furniture, the maintenance of the ministers, and provision for the poor.[6]

Theodoret, the 4th century Bishop of Cyrrhus, also said there was no difference between the two offices. "He applies the term bishops to presbyters, for at that time they had both names. … And it is clear that he makes this assumption here also. For he joins the deacons to the bishops, making no mention of the presbyters. Furthermore, it was not possible for many bishops to be shepherds to one city. So it is clear that he is calling the presbyters bishops."[7]

Phillip Schaff, the great Reformed church historian, maintained as well that bishop or overseer and elder were interchangeable for the early church:

> The terms presbyter (or elder) and bishop (or overseer, superintendent) denote in the New Testament one and the same office, with this difference only, that the first is borrowed from the synagogue, the second from the Greek communities and that the one signifies the dignity, the other the duty.[8]

Schaff goes on to say that the terms overseer and elder remained interchangeable until the end of the first century and even somewhat into the second.[9] We know that regardless of its name, the early church was governed and led by individuals who were granted authority to speak into the lives of people, to shepherd the flock (*poimnion*) and oversee the lives of women, men, and their children.

Samuel Miller, the 19th century Presbyterian who authored that age's definitive work on elders, stated the matter plainly:

> To whatever Church our attention is directed, in the inspired history, we find in it a plurality of elders; we find the mass of Church members spoken of as under their authority; and while the people are exhorted to submit to their rule, with all readiness and affection; these rulers are commanded, in the name of Christ, to exercise the power vested in them by the great Head of the Church, with firmness, and fidelity, and yet with disinterestedness, and moderation, so as to promote most effectually, the purity and order of the flock.[10]

This authority over the flock, of course, follows the tradition from the synagogue inherited by the nascent church. The idea of the church, at this stage, as an institution in need of maintenance rather than a movement of people in need of spiritual transformation would have been simply incomprehensible to the Christians of the first century. The authority of the

elders or overseers was directed with a laser-like focus on the lives of people:

> Shepherd *the flock of God that is among you*, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly. Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock **(**I Pet. 5:2–3).
>
> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood (Acts 20:28).
>
> Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14).
>
> Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders (1 Pet. 5:5).

At the Jerusalem Council, the apostles and the elders debated whether Gentiles should be circumcised. Their debate, recounted to us in Acts 15, does not read like a discussion over corporate policy or "best practices." It focused on God, His people, and the impact circumcision as law would have on their faith. There is no slippery slope argument. Peter stood up in the assembly and after recounting God's grace asked a question worthy of a shepherd: "'Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.' And all the assembly fell silent" (Acts 15:10–12).

Elders in the Early Church

For the second century church, *The Shepherd of Hermas* leaves no doubt about where the responsibility for the condition of the flock lay. The shepherd bears a tremendous responsibility for not allowing the flock to stray. Beware, however. Any elder (including teaching elder) who complains about the congregation they serve should read these convicting words carefully.

> Lay aside, therefore, the recollection of your offences and bitternesses, and you will be formed in one spirit. And heal and take away from you those wicked schisms, that if the Lord of the flocks come, He may rejoice concerning you. And He will rejoice, if He find all things sound, and none of you shall perish. But if He find any one of these sheep strayed, woe to the shepherds! And if the shepherds themselves have strayed, what answer will they give Him for their flocks? Will they perchance say that they were harassed by their flocks? They will not be believed, for the thing is incredible that a shepherd could suffer from his flock; rather will he be punished on account of his falsehood. And I myself am a shepherd, and I am under a most stringent necessity of rendering an account of you.[11]

Near the close of the first century, Clemens Romanus echoed this dominant idea when he instructed the Church at Corinth: "Let the flock of Christ enjoy peace with the elders that are set over it."[12] Ignatius equated obedience to the Presbytery with obedience of Christ,[13] calling Presbyters the "Sanhedrin of God."[14]

John's disciple Polycarp, who served the church in the second century and was martyred for his confession, also claimed a role for elders that underscored their shepherding and oversight of the people.

> Let the elders be tender and merciful, compassionate toward all, reducing those that are in error, visiting those that are weak, not negligent of the widow and the orphan and him that is poor; but ever providing what is honest in the sight of God and man; abstaining from all worth, respect of persons and unrighteous judgment; being far from covetousness, not hastily believing a report against man, not rigid in judgment, knowing that we are all faulty and subject to condemnation.[15]

Polycarp's disciple Irenaeus, the second century Gallic bishop, did not stray far from his mentor's teaching when he enjoined the church to fight the good fight against heretical teaching: "it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church ... those who … have received the certain gift of truth, according to the Father."[16]

These terms: obedience, oversight, flock, shepherd, subject are not ones that slip easily off the 21st century Western tongue. In the minds of many, they are synonymous with domination, subjugation, patriarchy, and abuse of power. Although the practice of the shepherd model was far from perfect, the record shows that tenderness, mercy, and compassion were abundant. We can be assured that a great many elders faithfully discharged their office as *poimen* and cared for the *poimnion* with uncommon love and compassion.

A quick read of church history shows that during the second century the use of elders began to decline in favor of a more hierarchical structure, featuring a boatload of ecclesial offices: priest, metropolitan, doorkeeper, reader, subdeacon, exorcist, acolyte, tonsure, cantor, psalmist, and bishop, to name a few. The simplicity of the elders and deacons of the early church gave way to a complicated bureaucracy worthy of a subcommittee of the United States Senate. In the

process, the distance between the leadership and the people, the shepherd and the flock, grew exponentially.

The fourth century *Constitution of the Holy Apostles* shows how far the church had come from the relatively simple days of overseers or elders and deacons and the extent to which the church now claimed the Bishop had authority over the lives of the people—bordering on idolatry. "He [the bishop] is your ruler and governor; he is your king and your potentate, next after God, your earthly god, who has a right to be honored by you."[17] While some have celebrated this development, most Reformed Christians have lamented it.

The Reformation's Re-Discovery of Elders

In seeking a biblical understanding of the church, the Protestant Reformers discovered the Bible had a lot to say about elders. Indeed, they discovered the office of elder had been virtually forgotten for a millennium. Two notable exceptions were the Waldensians, founded by Peter Waldo in 1177, and the Moravian Church that grew out of the teachings of John Hus beginning in the late 14th century. The Moravian Church's "Plan of Government and Discipline" placed elders, once again, at the center of the church's leadership, practicing what could easily be labeled the shepherd model.

> Elders are honest, grave, pious men, chosen out of the whole congregation, that they may act as guardians of all the rest. To them authority is given (either alone, or in connexion with the Pastor) to admonish and rebuke those who transgress the prescribed rules, also to reconcile those who are at variance, and to restore to order whatever irregularity they may have noticed. Likewise in secular matters, relating to domestic concerns, the younger men and youths are in the habit of asking their counsel and being faithfully advised by them. From the example and practice of the ancient Church, we believe that this ought to always to be done…[18]

The Moravians were a revelation to Martin Bucer (1491–1551), the great Reformed theologian and pastor of Strasbourg. He learned of their system of elders and lauded their practice, claiming that the Moravians had "preserved in the world the purity of the doctrine, and the vigor of the discipline of Christ … an excellent rule for which we are compelled to give them credit and especially to praise … God."[19]

The Moravian system appealed to Bucer's conviction that it is "the Holy Spirit's ordinance … that each church have a number of elders who are all pastors and bishops, i.e. overseers who provide pastoral care and carry out the pastoral office."[20]

Bucer taught that there were two classes of elders, those who taught and those who had oversight over others. For the teaching elder, the primary task was the proclamation of the Gospel in public, requiring theological and Biblical training. The ruling elder fulfilled a different office in the church. Ruling elders might be pressed into the service of teaching from time to time, but oversight of the flock, not teaching, was their chief responsibility. Bucer maintained some simple yet demanding qualifications for these persons whose job it was to rule the church and keep the sheep from slipping from grace into judgment.

> For to the end that someone may manifest himself to be a good elder it is sufficient that he has a good understanding of the ministry of Christ, can teach others—in so-so fashion perhaps but still faithfully—and is endowed with spiritual wisdom and zeal to rule the Church of Christ and to prevent people from falling away from the grace received.[21]

The primary work of the ruling elder was to exercise pastoral care either to individuals or entire households and, alongside the teaching elder (minister of the Word and Sacrament), to conduct discipline. It was expressly forbidden for formal discipline to be conducted without the presence of the elders.

But what did this pastoral care look like? Bucer's most extensive discussion of the work of teaching and ruling elders is contained in his work, *Concerning the True Care of Souls and Genuine Pastoral Ministry*. By instilling the so-called "discipline of life and manners," the two offices were to function together as a team.

As the title suggests, Bucer emphasized love and care for individual souls. Since the goal was reconciliation (not a tidy church), he knew that church discipline could be messy. But his concern was for individuals—husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, friends, neighbors, etc. And he encouraged them to repent and seek reconciliation. Thus, his vision for the duty of elders was clear:

> Since therefore God ordained this discipline, punishment and penance to be useful and beneficial for people, carrying it out by the agency of all pious fathers, disciplinarians and rulers, and in his church there should be the best discipline and government in order that people might be drawn, led and encouraged from all that is wicked to all that is good …[22]

Though well worn and frequently misunderstood, the dominant analogy Bucer used to describe the pastoral task was that of sheep and shepherd. Bucer outlined five tasks for elders and pastors, most of which fall along the lines of church discipline and oversight.

Once again, the overwhelming focus is on loving and caring for the individual.

> From this it is evident that there are five main tasks required in the pastoral office and true care of souls. First: to lead to Christ our Lord and into his communion those who are still estranged from him, whether through carnal excess or false worship. Secondly: to restore those who had once been brought to Christ and into his church but have been drawn away again through the affairs of the flesh or false doctrine. Thirdly: to assist in the true reformation of those who while remaining in the church of Christ have grievously fallen and sinned. Fourthly: to re-establish in true Christian strength and health those who, while persevering in the fellowship of Christ and not doing anything particularly or grossly wrong, have become somewhat feeble and sick in the Christian life. Fifthly: to protect from all offence and falling away and continually encourage in all good things those who stay with the flock and in Christ's sheep-pen without grievously sinning or becoming weak and sick in their Christian walk.[23]

Bucer's understanding of the work of the elder is holistic—where the care and feeding of the sheep is at least as important as keeping them in the sheepfold and much more important than merely maintaining the sheepfold itself. "The office of shepherd," Bucer said, "involves being concerned and through the word of God providing that Christ's lambs … should be gathered in … and protected … against all temptations and afflictions."[24]

Among these five purposes for the pastoral ministry, the first seems to have an evangelistic thrust. Discipline is the significant role in purposes two and three: correcting both those who have fallen away from the church and those who have fallen but remain in the church. The fourth task, strengthening those whose faith in Christ is "feeble and sick" could also well fit under an expanded, more proactive role conception of discipline seen more in the light of discipleship. The fifth task, protecting from "offence and falling away," also clearly falls along the lines of oversight and discipline. The proper care of the sheep is not a simple matter of protecting them from the weak and the sick. They themselves must first be strengthened and fed. Bucer spells this out:

> … since this Christian and godly life flows entirely from a true and living faith in Christ the Lord, it can be clearly seen that if Christians are to be maintained, guarded and encouraged so that they live in accordance with their calling and the grace they have received, i.e., that they live a truly Christian life, it must above all be ensured that they are healthy in the faith and that all their plans, decisions and actions stem from faith and a living knowledge of Christ, that they always take good account of and consider what Christ has become, done and given for us, and what he will be, do and give for us.[25]

All five purposes fall under the shepherd model. Compassion for the individual as the first task of the shepherd, rather than the preservation of a building, shows that Bucer's understanding of the practice of discipline is more encompassing than the way it is typically understood. It is also more demanding.

We see this again, plainly, in Bucer's description of what he called "the Ministry of the Discipline of the Life and Manners."

> The discipline of life and manners consists in this … by the authority and magisterium of our Lord Jesus Christ, each person should strengthen and advance his neighbors, wherever this is possible, and urge them to progress in the life of God, as his disciples, in his faith and knowledge. And if any fall into error of doctrine or some vice of life and manners, whoever can should with utmost zeal recall such persons from all false doctrine and depraved activity …[26]

Conclusion

I cannot recall encouraging anyone, at least lately, "by the authority and magisterium of Jesus Christ I urge you to progress in the life of God." But it is clear that Bucer's heart for his flock was to feed and care for them with love and grace. Discipline is not merely for those who struggle and fall. Nor is it ever reducible to hauling wayward members before the Session. Discipline is the work of the Holy Spirit.

For Bucer, teaching and ruling elders serve together as shepherds under the One True Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Their authority derives not from personal attributes, knowledge, charisma, or any quality within them. Rather it is conferred upon them by the Holy Spirit through their appointment as servants of the Word. They have no authority in themselves, but only as they fulfill their responsibilities to love, lead, and care for the flock by the power of the Holy Spirit under the authority of God's Word. Bucer's words remind us of Paul's: "In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22); "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry …" (Eph. 4:12).

Bucer believed it is the Holy Spirit who governs the Christian community and it is also by the Spirit that ministry is made effective. He also believed the Holy Spirit not only gives authority but ability as well. The Spirit gifts each and every member, like the 70 elders

called to serve alongside Moses, to take their "place in the body." Every Christian belongs to Christ and "is an instrument of the Holy Spirit and ordained for the special work of the salvation of the entire body."[27]

In 1538 Martin Bucer received into Strasbourg a young pastor, already a leader in the Reformation, who had been forced to leave Geneva, the city in which he had worked alongside Guillaume Farel to reform according to Scriptural principles. It was in Strasbourg that John Calvin, whose name is nearly synonymous with elders and is even erroneously given credit for inventing the office, was given the form of government to lead the theological and ethical reform he sought. Phillip Benedict claims that during his stay in Strasbourg from 1538–1542 "Bucer directly inspired him."[28] To the "Master of Geneva" and his considerable influence on elder leadership, we will turn next.

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[1] Clarke McDermott, *A History of the First Presbyterian Church of Dayton, OH* (Dayton, OH: Journal Book and Job Printing Establishment, 1880), 69–70.
[2] Hugo Grotius, *Annotationes in Acts of the Apostles,* vi, xi. Cited in Samuel Miller, *An Essay Upon the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath School Work, 1832), 45). Hereafter *Ruling Elder*.
[3] James T. Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 232.
[4] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, tr. William Whiston (Philadelphia: J.A. Smith, 1854), XIV.9.4.
[5] Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, 296.
[6] Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Volume 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 583.
[7] Theodoret, *Comentarius in Omnes B. Pauli Epistolas*, 2, ed. C. Marriot (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1852), 44–45.
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Luther, Calvin, and the Recovery of Congregational Singing

Is the Reformers' Legacy at Risk?

by Robert P. Mills

From the earliest days of the church, Christians who gathered for corporate worship spent at least some of their time together singing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16). However, in Roman Catholic churches at the outset of the Protestant Reformation, "priests chanted in Latin, and choirs of professional singers predominantly sang polyphonic choral music in Latin." As Paul S. Jones writes, "there was neither congregational song nor any church music in the common tongue."[1]

Think about that for a moment: At the time Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Cathedral door, in the corporate worship of the Catholic church there was neither (1) congregational singing, nor (2) any church music sung in the language that was spoken by the worshipers. For Christians today—at least for most of us, at least for the moment—such a situation seems almost incomprehensible. Yet that historical reality, largely unknown to contemporary Christians, is essential to this look at the Reformer's legacy of recovering congregational singing in corporate worship.

The first and longest part of this paper will explore Martin Luther's legacy. We will consider his understanding of the importance and power of music in the church and his contributions to the recovery of congregational singing, specifically his use of the chorale and his role in the development of hymnbooks. The essay's second part will look at the contributions and legacy of John Calvin, noting where he agreed with, and where he differed from, Luther and highlighting Calvin's emphasis on metrical psalmody.

The brief final portion of the paper will identify four current trends that seem to put at risk not only the Reformer's specific legacy of *congregational* singing but also their larger understanding of Christian worship.

Luther, the Chorale, and the Hymnbook

As is frequently and rightly observed, Martin Luther (1483–1546) never wanted to establish a new ecclesiastical institution. He wanted to *re-form* the Roman Catholic Church; he wanted to help bring the church in which he had been raised back into conformity with New Testament doctrines and practices. Since part of what Luther wanted to recover was congregational singing, it will help to take a quick look at early Christian hymnody.

The practice of God's people singing in corporate worship goes back at least to the Psalms. Many psalms seem to have been written to be sung to specific tunes. For example, Psalm 46 begins with the ascription, "To the choirmaster. Of the Sons of Korah. According to Alamoth. A Song." The Hebrew word *alamoth*, literally "young women," might be the name of the tune to which the psalm was intended to be sung, or it might indicate it was to be sung by what we today would call soprano voices. Whatever the exact meaning of *alamoth* in this context, the final words of the ascription, "a song," clearly show this Psalm was meant to be sung.

The earliest hymns of the Christian era were written not by amateur musicians but by esteemed theologians. In the first three centuries, Antioch and Constantinople were hymn-writing centers for the early church. In the third and fourth centuries, hymn texts were written in Greek by church leaders including: Methodius, the bishop of Olympus; the Eastern Church leader Gregory of Nazianzus; and other Christian scholars now collectively known as the Early Church Fathers.

The first known writer of Christian hymns in Latin was the 4th-century French theologian Hilary of Poitiers. Soon after Hilary's death, Ambrose, the bishop of Milan who was instrumental in Augustine's conversion, helped establish the regular use of hymns and psalms in the developing liturgy of the Western Church.

However, by Luther's time, while music was featured in Catholic corporate worship, congregational singing was nonexistent. Even when it became apparent that his break with the hierarchy was permanent, Luther still kept much of the Roman Catholic liturgy, including considerable use of Latin, in his worship services.

He also kept much Roman Catholic music, both plainchant and polyphony. Sometimes this music would use the original Latin text, sometimes those texts would be translated into German, and sometimes a new German text would be used with an old melody, a practice called *contrafacta* or *parody*. The esteemed music historian Donald Grout succinctly observes that Luther "believed strongly in the educational and ethical power of music and wanted all the congregation to take some part in the music of the services."[2]

Luther's desire was quickly and widely realized. In the words of one church historian, as the Reformation

spread: "The church was no longer composed of priests and monks; it was now the congregation of believers. *All were to take part in worship* … a taste for music was diffused throughout [Germany]. From Luther's time, the people sang; the Bible inspired their songs. … Hence the revival, in the sixteenth century, of *hymns* … hymns were multiplied; they spread rapidly among the people, and powerfully contributed to rouse it from sleep."[3]

The Chorale

Again quoting Grout, "The most distinctive and important musical contribution of the Lutheran church was the strophic congregational hymn called in German a *Choral* or *Kirchenlied* (church song) and in English *chorale*."[4] Today we are most familiar with these chorales in their four-part harmonized settings, especially those written or arranged by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), the greatest Baroque composer and himself a Lutheran.

While many Lutheran chorales were in four parts, others, like plainchant (more widely known today as Gregorian Chant), contained just two elements: a text and a tune. These were written with the intent that they would be sung in unison by the entire congregation. And, just as polyphonic masses and motets, which use harmony and counterpoint, grew out of monophonic Gregorian Chant in the Catholic tradition, so much later Protestant church music can be understood as an outgrowth of the simplest unison Lutheran chorales.

The Hymnbook

It was not long before these chorales and hymns were collected and published. The earliest hymnbook of the Reformation—perhaps the earliest of all printed hymnbooks—was published at Wittenberg in 1524. Known as the *Achtliederbuch*, literally the eight-songs-book, it contained eight hymns, four of them by Luther. Three of Luther's contributions were settings of Psalms: 12, 14, and 130. And as Ernest Ryden writes, "The little hymn-books flew all over Europe … Luther's enemies lamented that 'the whole people are singing themselves into his doctrines.'"[5]

That lament, coming from Luther's theological opponents, is a testimony to Luther's estimate of the educational power of music, which he articulates in his preface to the *Achtliederbuch*. Luther writes:

> That it is good, and pleasing to God, for us to sing spiritual songs is, I think, a truth whereof no Christian can be ignorant; since not only the example of the prophets and kings of the Old Testament (who praised God with singing and music, poesy and all kinds of stringed instruments) but also the like practice of all Christendom from the beginning, especially in respect to psalms, is well known to every one: yea, St. Paul doth also appoint the same (1 Cor. xiv) and command the Colossians, in the third chapter, to sing spiritual songs and psalms from the heart unto the Lord, *that thereby the word of God and Christian doctrine be in every way furthered and practiced*. (emphasis added)
>
> Accordingly, to make a good beginning and to encourage others who can do it better, I have myself, with some others, put together a few hymns, in order to bring into full play the blessed Gospel, which by God's grace hath again risen: that we may boast, as Moses doth in his song (Exodus xv) that Christ is become our praise and our song, and that, whether we sing or speak, we may not know anything save Christ our Savior, as St. Paul saith (1 Cor. i).
>
> These songs have been set in four parts, for no other reason than because I wished to provide our young people (who both will and ought to be instructed in music and other sciences) with something whereby they might rid themselves of amorous and carnal songs, and in their stead learn something wholesome, and so apply themselves to what is good with pleasure, as becometh the young. … The world is, alas, not so mindful and diligent to train and teach our poor youth.[6]

Without doubt, the most famous chorale from the Reformation era is Martin Luther's *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*. The text is Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 46, which, as we noted earlier, contains the ascription "A song." Luther also wrote the tune. The exact date of the chorale's composition is uncertain, but it is generally believed to have been written for the Diet of Spires in 1529, where the use of the term "protestant" was first recorded.[7] Whatever the occasion of its composition, Luther's hymn was sung boldly as an affirmation of God's power over forces that sought to disrupt God's truth. Not without reason has the German chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* long been known worldwide as "The Battle Hymn of the Reformation."

Before we move on to Calvin, Luther's emphasis on training the young people of his day deserves a comment. In light of some contemporary trends I will identify at the end of this paper, it is noteworthy that Luther did not say that music in the churches needed to be adapted to the preferences of the churches' younger members. Rather, he said the churches' youth needed to be trained in music. That is a distinction those who want to continue Luther's legacy might do well to ponder.

Calvin and the Psalms

Like Martin Luther, John Calvin (1509–1564) also grew up in the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike his older contemporary, Calvin was strongly opposed to keeping any Catholic elements in his worship services. Calvin

did, however, share Luther's understanding of the power and importance of music.

In his preface to an early version of the *Genevan Psalter*, Calvin said of music: "There is hardly anything in the world with more power to turn or bend, this way and that, the morals of men, as Plato has prudently considered."

Calvin's reference is to Plato's *Republic*, where Plato insists that only music approved by the state be taught to children. Plato gives detailed instructions for what types of music are to be allowed in the *Republic* and what types are to be forbidden, writing: "The overseers of our state must … be watchful against innovations in music and gymnastics counter to the established order, and to the best of their power guard against them … For the modes of music are never disturbed without unsettling of the most fundamental political and social conventions."[8]

Echoing and amplifying Plato's perspective, Calvin continues, "in fact we find by experience that it [music] has a secret and almost incredible power to move our hearts in one way or another. Wherefore we must be the more diligent in ruling it in such a manner that it may be useful to us and in no way pernicious." Calvin adds:

> Now in speaking of music I understand two parts, namely, the letter, or subject and matter, and the song, or melody. It is true that, as Saint Paul says, every evil word corrupts good manners, but when it has the melody with it, it pierces the heart much more strongly and enters within; as wine is poured into the cask with a funnel, so venom and corruption are distilled to the very depths of the heart by melody. Now what is there to do? It is to have songs not merely honest but also holy, which will be like spurs to incite us to pray to God and praise Him, and to meditate upon His works in order to love, fear, honor, and glorify Him.[9]

Why did Calvin want "songs not merely honest but also holy?" One reason is that the songs would be suitable for congregational singing in corporate worship.

Voices and Instruments

Calvin and fellow Reformer William Farel (1489–1565) ministered in Geneva from 1536–1538, but were then exiled. When the city council invited them back in 1541, the two made the introduction of congregational singing in corporate worship a condition of their return. That this was a dramatic change from prevailing Catholic practice is not surprising. Calvin and the other Genevan Reformers strongly opposed keeping any Roman Catholic elements in their worship services.

These elements included anything the Reformers thought to be Catholic holdovers from Judaism, notably the use of musical instruments. In a sermon on I Samuel 18 Calvin declared, "All that is needed is a simple and pure singing of the divine praises, coming from heart and mouth, and in the vulgar [vernacular] tongue. … Instrumental music was tolerated in the time of the law because the people were then in infancy."[10]

In his commentary on Psalm 33:2, Calvin expands on this rationale, writing: "we may not indiscriminately consider as applicable to ourselves, everything which was formerly enjoined upon the Jews. I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and the viol, and all that kind of music, which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile instruction of the law: I speak of the stated service of the temple."

With the anti-Catholic fervor characteristic of his era, Calvin adds that the use of "musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to Him." The human voice, Calvin concludes, "assuredly excels all inanimate instruments of music."[11]

Metrical Psalms

Not only did the Genevan reformers want to keep instruments out of their worship services, they were also concerned that the congregation not sing any texts not found in Scripture. One consequence of this latter concern was the production of Psalters, rhymed metrical translations of the Psalms.

Why focus on singing Psalms in corporate worship? In his *Articles Concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva*, presented to the Council of Ministers in January, 1537, Calvin answered: "The psalms can stimulate us to raise our hearts to God and arouse us to an ardor in invoking as well as in exalting with praises the glory of His name."[12]

While exiled from Geneva to Strasbourg, Calvin himself produced six metrical psalms in French for his congregation to sing. The first edition of what would become the *Genevan Psalter* was published in Strasbourg in 1539. It contained 22 metrical psalms. After Calvin returned to Geneva, new editions were published in 1542 and 1543.

The main author of the texts was Clement Marot (1496–1544), the most famous French poet of the 16th century. Before turning the psalms into verse, Marot studied Martin Bucer's commentary on the Book of Psalms to make sure he understood the Hebrew text well enough to render it into French poetry.[13]

Many of the melodies were composed by Guillaume Franc (1500–1570), a music teacher and composer, who was hired by Geneva's city council for this purpose. In corporate worship, these melodies were sung in unison and unaccompanied, although for devotional use at home, musical settings were made in four or more parts. Gradually, some of the simpler four-part settings were introduced into public worship.[14]

Marot left Geneva not long after the psalter was published. His task of turning the psalms into poetry with rhyme and meter was taken over by the theologian Theodore Beza, Calvin's eventual successor in Geneva. Franc left Geneva at about the same time, the result of the city council's refusal to raise his salary.[15] His role as composer went to Louis Bourgeois (1510–1559). Perhaps the most famous of 'Bourgeois' melodies is known as the "Old Hundredth," a tune still widely used for the hymn "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." In 1551 an expanded edition of the *Genevan Psalter* was published, containing 83 Psalms, many with new melodies by Bourgeois and new texts by Beza.[16]

The final version of the *Genevan Psalter* was published in Geneva in 1562, just two years before Calvin's death. It contained all 150 psalms (using 125 different melodies), as well as settings of the Ten Commandments and the Song of Simeon.

For Calvin, the singing of psalms and hymns was a form of prayer. Prayer was one of the three essential elements of corporate worship along with preaching and the sacraments. In the preface to the 1562 edition of the *Genevan Psalter*, Calvin wrote:

> As for public prayers, there are two kinds. The ones with the word alone: the others with singing. And this is not something invented a little time ago. For from the first origin of the Church, this has been so, as appears from the histories. And even St. Paul speaks not only of praying by mouth: but also of singing. And in truth we know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says), and also, there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church in the presence of God and his angels.[17]

Risks to the Reformers' Legacy

Calvin's restoration of congregational singing in Geneva, his insistence that the singing be done in the vernacular, and his distinction between music appropriate for Christian worship and music appropriate for entertainment in other venues are among his most overlooked legacies to the church today. His comments about singing Psalms in the presence of God lead to a final section of this essay, which touches very briefly on four current trends that seem to put at risk the Reformers' recovery of congregational singing in corporate worship.

Before I discuss these trends, please understand what I am and am not saying: I am not saying that each of the four is equally evident in every congregation. I am saying that each is evident and that, taken together, they do put at risk, even if unwittingly, the Reformation's legacy of congregational singing in corporate worship. In the context of this essay, the best I can do is to offer a broad outline of these trends, without giving any the detailed attention each deserves. Here are some of the trends putting the Reformers' legacy at risk is:

1. Replacing simple tunes with ostentatious melismatic formulations

Yes, I could have said, "Replacing simple tunes with complex melodies." But I have background and training in music and "ostentatious melismatic formulations" does roll off the tongue in a delightful way, does it not?

It likely does not come as news that many songs being sung in many churches today cannot be sung by many of those who have come to those churches hoping to participate in worship.

Don Chapman, himself a worship leader, wrote an article in a newsletter for worship leaders where he observed: "Many new worship songs only sound good when sung by professional singers, not average congregations. … Just look at the typical melody—it's a syncopated frenzy, and probably way out of your congregation's vocal range. How can the average person sing that? They can't."

He made this discovery while leading worship for a small group. "One chorus in particular," Chapman wrote, "was a complete train wreck—no one could follow the melody … I hadn't noticed during church with the band blaring, but the problem was quite obvious in this casual setting."

To Chapman's considerable credit, he not only noticed the problem but took steps to correct it. "From then on,"

he wrote, "I tried to select songs that were reasonably simple to sing and within a normal vocal range."[18]

Unfortunately, some in positions similar to Chapman's have not yet discovered what he learned. They certainly have not followed his course of action. And in those churches, congregational singing in corporate worship is, understandably, declining. This first trend is made more problematic by a second:

2. Removing hymnals from places of worship

Martin Luther helped create the first Protestant hymnal. John Calvin spent a quarter century working with poets, theologians, and composers to publish versions of the psalms his congregations could sing. In full-throated rejection of this legacy, some church leaders today are proudly removing hymnals and psalters from the places where their congregations worship. This trend has several troubling implications.

First, even as congregations are being confronted by unsingable melodies they have never heard and may only hear once or twice again before new unsingable melodies takes their place, collections of songs that have been sung by congregations for generations, even centuries, are being consigned to the dustbin of history. Whatever the reasons given for this hymnal holocaust, and their name is legion, the inevitable result is a further decline in congregational singing.

A second troubling effect of this trend is that it actively discourages anyone, musically trained or not, from actually reading music. Most Christians I know who have ever opened a hymnal on a Sunday morning have not known how to read music. And yet, after years or even decades, of singing hymns in church, they have been able to follow along fairly well, even if the hymn was new to them. As a choir member in my home church, a man who had a wonderful tenor voice but could not read music, once told me: "I know that when the notes go up, I sing higher; when they go down I sing lower; and when they have things hanging on them, I sing faster."

Not only does removing hymnals remove an incentive for Christians to, in Luther's words, train our youth in music, it also renders music reading ability useless to those who have labored to acquire it, and who find that reading music helps them sing God's praises.

Finally, a truth long known to previous generations of church leaders is that most Christians in most congregations learn most of their theology through singing hymns. Listening to sermons and participating in Sunday school classes are essential if we as Christians are, in Paul's words, to "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). But sermons and Sunday school lessons are not the only, or even the primary, ways in which we learn the Christian faith. And replacing hymns written by trained theologians and composers, hymns that have stood the test of time, with the recent efforts of well intentioned amateurs who know three guitar chords and how to make a PowerPoint slide seems ill-advised if not irresponsible.

3. Reducing music to amusement

I suspect that many worship leaders today, were they ever to become aware of it, would not simply disagree with but would treat with contempt John Calvin's assertion that "there is a great difference between music which one makes to entertain men at table and in their houses, and the Psalms which are sung in the Church." Today, Calvin's distinction is not simply disappearing as a result of benign neglect, it is actively being dissolved by those who insist that unless the music in our churches mimics the music of our culture at the moment, the church itself will not survive.

The dissolution of this distinction is detailed in T. David Gordon's wonderfully titled book *Why Johnny Can't Sing Hymns: How Pop Culture Rewrote the Hymnal*. Pop culture, Gordon writes, "exists as the child of two parents: mass media and commercial forces." Pop culture, he continues "must be accessible … The commercial forces that drive it cannot afford to lose audiences." In a culture-bound effort to maintain market share, many contemporary congregations are turning away from the music Donald Grout described as having "educational and ethical power," that is, music that requires an investment of intellectual energy, and replacing it with music that is merely entertaining, music meant as effortless amusement. Gordon notes that the verb *muse* means "to give careful attention to a matter" while *a-muse* "means just the opposite: 'no-muse,' or 'no serious attention to be given.'"[19]

Gordon describes his book as an attempt to observe cultural changes that "have impoverished congregational praise. If, as most orthodox thinkers have said, worship is a dialog between God and his people, and if, as I argue both his primary means of addressing us (preaching) has declined and our primary means of addressing him (praise) has declined, then worship itself has declined profoundly."[20] Gordon's work suggests that the first three trends I have identified coalesce in the fourth:

4. Returning to medieval Catholic worship

At the outset of the Protestant Reformation, "priests chanted in Latin, and choirs of professional singers predominantly sang polyphonic choral music in Latin; there was neither congregational song nor any church

music in the common tongue."[21] But as the Reformation spread: "The church was no longer composed of priests and monks; it was now the congregation of believers. *All* were to take part in worship. … From Luther's time, the people sang … *hymns* were multiplied; they spread rapidly among the people, and powerfully contributed to rouse it from sleep."[22]

Sadly, in at least some of our churches today, a different mathematical process is at work. Hymns are being subtracted—a verse (or two or three) here, an entire hymnal there. In at least some of these congregations, prospective worshipers are being lulled back to sleep by music rooted in an entertainment culture, music designed to amuse, music that announces, "no serious attention to be given here." Relax. Enjoy. Leave the driving to us. As in medieval Catholicism, the people in the pews (or in the plushly padded theater style seats) are deprived of meaningful participation in the dialogue of Christian worship.

And, as in medieval Catholicism, while the congregation watches, the priests chant and the professional choirs sing. Of course, in the place of priests ordained in apostolic succession, today we have worship leaders who can trace their own authoritative ecclesiastical genealogies. Today, the language is not Latin, but neither is it accessible to the people. Today, polyphonic motets have given way to licks on electric guitars, but many congregations are not doing much more singing today than was being done in 1517. *Indeed, the Reformers' legacy is at risk*.

Conclusion

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." That observation, by George Santayana (1863–1952), is widely, albeit variously, quoted. Most of the variations, I suspect, come from those who cannot remember what Santayana actually said. The statement comes in the first of his five-volume work *The Life of Reason or The Phases of Human Progress*, where he also said, "Fanaticism consists in redoubling your efforts when you have forgotten your aim."[23]

Santayana's dictum has been widely discussed. At a minimum he seems to be suggesting that people—in a church or in a culture—are not able to make progress unless they know their history and heritage. In more clichéd terms: It is hard to know where you are going if you do not know where you have been; if you do not know what you are aiming at, you will hit it every time.

Luther, Calvin, and other Magisterial Reformers have left today's Christians many wonderful legacies: Psalms paraphrased to incorporate rhyme and meter; hymns and chorales in the language of the people; a recognition of the educational and ethical power of music; and church leaders committed to congregational singing in corporate worship. Keeping the Reformers' contributions in view may help us see our own way forward.

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Are You Ready For a Real Theologian?

Few in our generation have written more perceptively about the challenges of ministry than Eugene Peterson. In a creative but lesser known work, *The Wisdom of Each Other: A Conversation Between Spiritual Friends*,

Peterson writes to an old college friend, "Gunnar," who contacted him after forty years of "virtual silence."

Gunnar had recently retired from a highly successful career as an "extraordinarily competent" scientist. But estranged from his kids, two former wives, and, by his own lights, from God, he had lived a rather sad life. Yet now, recalling some of their earlier conversations about faith, he wanted to inform his old friend, "I've finally decided to quit competing with God and join him."

Forty years in the far country, he had many questions. Knowing that his friend was a pastor, Gunnar sought his advice. Peterson obliges, encouraging him, first, to go to church, but not to expect to find "a company of friends" with so much in common. "The church is not a natural community composed of people with common interests; it is a *super*-natural community. And the *super* in that word does not mean that it exceeds your expectations; it is *other* than your expectations, and much of the other is invisible to you as yet." Yes, going to church can be often humbling and hard. But remember: "It's the Holy Spirit's style to fashion holy lives among the inept."

Peterson warns against many other temptations common to those young in the faith, such as: church shopping, conference hopping, the allure of "boutique spirituality," and all sorts of "spiritual" fads and clichés. Peterson, in fact, admits he tries to avoid using the word "spiritual" at all: "To often it seems to signal a split between sacred and secular, between inside and outside, between a refined religious sensibility and the coarser necessities of ordinary life like changing diapers, paying bills, and giving good weight in a job you feel stuck with."

Finally, after a period, Peterson writes, "I think you are ready for a theologian. I mean a *real* theologian. Especially in this secularizing culture we live in, when virtually all our mental habits are formed by people training us to get what we think we have coming to us and looking out for the big chance, we desperately need men and women at our side who have disciplined their minds to think *God*: who God is and what he is doing in and among us; what it means to be created and chosen by God and how we get in on what he intends for us. We need help, most of us, in thinking, not just *about* God, but in terms of God, with God as our presupposition" in thinking about all sorts of things yet never as a *mere* presupposition in thinking about anything.

"When we start taking the Christian life seriously," Peterson writes, "it necessarily, of course, involves taking *ourselves* seriously. But most of us then get distracted from our main task by taking ourselves more seriously than God. And God is our primary concern, not us." In other words, even when we say, 'It's not about us,' it often turns out to be still primarily about us.

"I know that theology is not stylish in this generation of Christians. When our friends think of going for help for their souls, they usually think in terms of their feelings and egos—their innerness, their hearts—and quite naturally gravitate to counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists—something along the lines of the therapeutic. But," Peterson adds, "in matters of the Christian life, and especially prayer, it is the theologian we want at our side, to help us *start* with God, not just end up with God as a court of last resort."

At one point, Peterson tells his friend that if he has psychological issues he needs to sort out "go ahead and consult a psychologist, but if it's God you're after, get a theologian. Many of the difficulties in prayer come from paying too much attention to ourselves—our moods, our feelings, our fitness to pray. But prayer is paying attention to God. We Christians need theologians far more than we need psychologists. Keep a therapist/counselor in the wings for those times when you need help untangling your self from yourself, but make sure you get a theologian to walk by your side."

After visiting a Christian bookstore, Gunnar returned home confused and suffering from buyers' remorse. Peterson commiserates: "All this *Christian* stuff being written more or less behind your back while all these years you had been off reading your technical journals. … And then the disappointment of finding that you had purchased nothing but extended cheerleader slogans written in bad prose." "And not one of them qualifies as theology." Peterson regrets he did not warn him sooner.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that during the forty years that you were off doing your own thing, having concluded that religion was for ninnies, a considerable number of people in North America wondered whether religion could be marketed as a consumer product for just such ninnies." Peterson concedes, "They were right. Writing in the market-tested style that so effectively sells automobiles and deodorants, they were similarly successful. Their basic strategy is to locate an area of dissatisfaction in modern life, and then promise God, or something that has to do with God, as the solution."

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

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By making God "the Answer" to *their* questions (while assuming they know what the right questions are from the start), these authors consistently domesticate God. Busy, lazy, or patronizing pastors often pass off such pablum to parishioners, assuming they are not willing or able to think more seriously simply because they are not. So instead of settling for such condescending fluff, Peterson suggests, "Why not start at the top? Start with John Calvin. Among Christians of our ilk, he continues to hold the center for biblical soundness and intellectual clarity. Buy *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It comes in two volumes. Make sure to get the translation by [Ford Lewis Battles]." Peterson is not joking.

"If you're troubled by dust balls of opinion on Calvin that you have picked up through hearsay through the years, do your best to sweep them out with the trash—come to him fresh with a clean imagination. You'll be surprised at how accessible he is, how sane, how *Christian*. A truly elegant intellect," Peterson claims. "Of course, as with anyone writing several centuries ago in another language and culture (sixteenth century, French and Latin), there are many allusions that you will miss and not a few pages that you will pass over rather quickly. But mostly, you can expect to be directed wisely and prayerfully to God—thinking about God accurately, responding to God truly. Calvin brought a biblically disciplined mind and a Spirit-attuned heart to his writing."

What also commends Calvin is that he was no armchair theologian. "He was a pastor, first and foremost a pastor with a congregation whom he taught and prayed for, visited, baptized and married and buried, whose problems he dealt with and whose faith he guided. He was writing for Christians like you who are trying to get a clear sense of God's revelation in the cultural/religious murk of a very messed-up society—messed up mentally and morally. He was *not* writing a source book for doctrine dissertations. He was writing so that every-day Christians with jobs and families could think and say the words 'God' and 'Jesus' and 'Spirit' cleansed from all the misleading distortions and superstitions that we pick up in church street-talk."

"I guess what I want to convince you of up front," Peterson writes, "is that real theologians don't make God more complicated but less. They clear the ground. They simplify our lives, not clutter them. So don't be intimidated by the big names. If you can read the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal* with understanding, you can read Calvin. …"

"But this warning: you don't come to God by thinking but by praying," Peterson adds. "Thinking rightly about God in itself doesn't get us where we want to go. But bad thinking can mess us up considerably. The task of the theologian is not primarily to teach us to think about God but to help us to pray to God—pray to the God revealed biblically in Jesus, and not just piously grovel around in some figment of our idolatrous imaginations. Again, that's why Calvin is so useful—he was a pastor/theologian who prayed."

Peterson is so helpful because he always emphasizes substance. No platitudes. No short cuts. No junk food, even when it is labeled, "Chicken-Soup-for-the-Soul," and even when it may not be what we want to hear.

Granted, not everyone is ready for a real theologian. Nor does everyone need real theology. It depends on the questions one has and how seriously one takes them. But the ministry of *Theology Matters* bears witness to the fact that there are still Christians today, especially in the Presbyterian family, who want to grow, think, and pray through various theological questions, challenges, and temptations of our times. You, dear reader, are not alone. There are more of you than most pastors realize. So don't settle for their fluff. Ask for more meat, please.

Richard Burnett, Managing Editor