

The Canterbury Letters

By Robin Phillips

Contents

Contents	2
Endorsements	3
Foreword	4
Introduction	6
1 The Via Media	8
2 Catholic Protestants	9
3 Evangelicalism vs. Sacerdotalism.....	12
4 Sola Fide: The Ecumenical Doctrine	14
5 Trent, Calvin and Sola Fide	16
6 Bowdlerized Sola Fide	19
7 Sola Fide and Microbiology.....	22
8 Recovering the Biblical Context.....	24
9 How to Lose the Gospel.....	27
10 Images in Worship	29
11 What's So Bad about Graven Images?	31
12 Factoring in the New Covenant	34
13 Calvin and Docetism.....	37
14 Faith in All of its Amplitude.....	40
15 Stepping Stones to God.....	43
16 Praying to Saints	46
17 Anthropology	50
18 Liturgies of Desire	53
19 Aiming at the Heart.....	55
20 Dumb Sacraments?	57
21 The Liturgical Year.....	61
22 Is Evil Necessary?.....	65
23 Fate, Necessity and Evil.....	69
24 Is God the Author of Evil?.....	72
25 Secondary Causes	75
26 From the Eucharist to the Pulpit	76
27 Emptied Worship	77
28 Sacred Spaces and Times.....	81

Endorsements

“This is an exciting dialogue between Canterbury Chris and Geneva George exploring the common ground between catholic and reformed aspects of the Faith. While there is still much work to be done to reconcile these polarities, Robin Phillips has made a bold stab and his book is a real page turner. As a life-long Anglican I have much sympathy with the 19th Century Charles Simeon who when pulled between the reformed and catholic wings of the Church said that truth does not lie in some mid-point between two extremes, but at both extremes. For this reason, I guess that would make me a Canterbury George!”

--Peter C. Moore, D.D., Associate for Discipleship, St. Michael's Church, Charleston and author of *A Church To Believe In* (Latimer).

These Letters show an earnest yet good-humored engagement with what many would agree to be the more serious, more thoroughgoing “party” of the Reformation, the Reformed or Calvinist movement. Recalling C.S. Lewis’ Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer, these Letters demonstrate respect and even admiration for the Reformed position, personified as Geneva George. Yet the fictional author, Canterbury Chris, does not shrink from charitably noting the shortcomings of the Calvinist George, especially in his tradition’s failure to embrace a more fully orbbed, broader vision-ed, dare I say more Catholic understanding of the faith.

--The Very Rev. Dr. Mark A. Quay
President and Dean
Anglican School of Ministry
Little Rock, Arkansas

Foreword

By Mark Quay

“Our forefather was a wandering Aramean...”

-- Pesach Haggadah, quoting Deuteronomy 26:5

Journeys are in the very nature of our faith. Abraham left his home in Ur and traveled until he came to Canaan, the land of God’s promise. Moses left the palaces of Egypt for the desert, arriving eventually at Horeb and the burning bush. Israel wandered in the wilderness till it learned the lesson of the consequences of faithlessness. Judah was carried into exile so that the Land could recover from the abuse of unobserved Sabbaths. Jesus recapitulated Israel’s desert journeys, demonstrating to the people of God that one can be faithful, even while in a “dry and weary land where there is no water.” Paul dwelt in the deserts of Arabia for three years, learning his theology from the Holy Spirit. From these Biblical accounts and the many stories of the saints in the Christian era, we can see that journeys of faith are one of the hallmarks of being among God’s elect people. In this book, *Canterbury Letters* (it’s title evoking, of course, Chaucer’s stories of pilgrims on the Canterbury Trail), we find such a journey.

These Letters show an earnest yet good-humored engagement with what many would agree to be the more serious, more thoroughgoing “party” of the Reformation, the Reformed or Calvinist movement. Recalling C.S. Lewis’ *Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer*, these Letters demonstrate respect and even admiration for the Reformed position, personified as Geneva George. Yet the fictional author, Canterbury Chris, does not shrink from charitably noting the shortcomings of the Calvinist George, especially in his tradition’s failure to embrace a more fully orb-ed, broader vision-ed, dare I say more Catholic understanding of the faith. Chris exhorts George to consider the implications of the more than 1,400 years of Christian journey (from the end of Acts to 1517) which Calvinists often neglect or (taking a cue from the Enlightenment) relegate to the dust bin of the Dark Ages. To ignore or disparage such a lengthy and formative portion of the Church’s pilgrimage of faith is to lose a vast treasure of wisdom which the experience of the Canterbury Trail brings to the churches’ of the Reformation.

I resonated with these Letters because I have been Geneva George and am now, in my own way, find myself to be a Canterbury Chris. I have been on a pilgrimage for many years. Born and raised Baptist, I came to know and love Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and to have an extensive knowledge of the content of the Bible. Later as a teenager, I became involved in the charismatic renewal movement and there experienced the power of the Holy Spirit. Still keeping my renewal ethos, I discovered the great Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, became a thoroughgoing Presbyterian, and was ordained a teaching elder. Finally, falling in love with the Church Fathers, I came to hunger for a church which was both fully Catholic and fully Reformed. I recalled that, while living in England, I was exposed to the glories of Anglicanism in the best of all settings—Evensong at Westminster Abbey. The seed of that experience, planted in the years before my ministry as an ordained Presbyterian pastor, finally bore fruit and I was ordained a priest (or presbyter, if you prefer) in Christ’s One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church as expressed in the Anglican Church.

Since becoming an Anglican, I have had the opportunity to interact with Anglicans from the US, Canada, England, Africa, Asia, and Australia. What I found is that there are all kinds of Anglicans—Low Church, High Church, Mid Church, Anglo-Catholic, Charismatic, and other flavors I have probably forgotten (I will not deal here with liberal or radical

“Anglicans,” just as my Presbyterian Church in America friends would prefer I not mention similar Presbyterians or Reformed). What holds them together are four central Catholic convictions, sometimes called the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral: the Bible as the Word of God and only sufficient source of revelation for salvation, the Nicene Creed as an accurate summary of the essential doctrines of the Bible, the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion as means of saving and sanctifying grace, and the importance of bishops in historic succession from the Apostles for the welfare of the church. Accompanying these convictions is a culture of worship based upon the *Book of Common Prayer*, the English Reformation’s greatest glory. There may be differing emphases on these points, and others may wish to give additions, but for the sake of a foreword, let these suffice.

Like Canterbury Chris, in Anglicanism I have found the community of faith in which I can worship the Lord in spirit, and in truth, and in the beauty of holiness. In Anglicanism, I have come to find philosophy’s three great varieties—truth, beauty, and goodness—intentionally expressed in a fellowship of prayer, living out the idea of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer in the law of faith). In Anglicanism I have discovered the blessedness of the *via media*, the middle way of being a Christian, which is simultaneously sacramental, Scripture-based, and Spirit-anointed.

For those of you who are interested in exploring what it means to be Anglican beyond these Letters, I can point you in the direction of some foundational authors, such as the three great luminaries of the English Reformation: Thomas Cranmer, Richard Hooker, and Matthew Parker. But more importantly, if you want to understand the riches of the tradition described by Canterbury Chris, my main encouragement to you must be this: find an orthodox Anglican Church (again, not discussing the liberal and radical varieties) and there experience the worship service—this is the best appetizer. Sample high and low, Anglo-Catholic and Reformed, contemplative and charismatic—you will find a flavor you like. Come, taste, and see that the Lord is good.

Mark+

The Very Rev. Dr. Mark A. Quay
President and Dean
Anglican School of Ministry
Little Rock, Arkansas

On the Feast of Saint Simon and Saint Jude, 2011

Introduction

In the ‘New Jerusalem Project Report’ column for Volume 1, Issue 4 of ‘Fermentations’, Brad Littlejohn made an interesting observation. “Like adopted children who one day awaken to seek their birth parents,” he wrote, “young Calvinists have subsequent epiphanies. The first epiphany, of course, is to Calvinism itself with all its promise: a comprehensive and glorious worldview that is finally ready and able to engage the ‘cultural mandate!’”

Littlejohn went on to talk about a second epiphany that many experience, one described by an ancestral longing for the fathers of our faith: “Whereas the first epiphany solidifies youthful vision and brings a sense of satisfaction, the latter comes as an ancestral longing. It leaves a gnawing hunger for fathers in the faith to lead us beyond our Plastic Present.”

Like many evangelicals with a background steeped in fundamentalism, individualism and anti-intellectualism, I found the reformed tradition to be a breath of fresh air. I reveled in the ecclesiology, covenantalism and intellectual rigor that Calvinism provided. Here surely, I thought, was the place where the faith entrusted to all the saints was still faithfully preserved against errors from all sides.

My enthusiasm for the reformed faith led me to try to defend it, specifically against the claims of Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy. I had a personal reason for wanting to do this. You see, as young adults half my siblings converted to Roman Catholicism and the other half to Eastern Orthodoxy. Being the only one left in the Protestant camp, I took it as my personal mission to investigate these other traditions in order to point out their errors and prove them wrong. As I started reading, however, I began to feel the call of the second epiphany.

It wasn’t so much that I began to doubt the doctrines of grace or any specific theological formulations. It was more that I began to ask whether our tradition is big enough to contain the majesty, mystery and expansiveness of the Christian vision as it has been articulated throughout the history of the church and not merely in the last 500 years? Can the profoundly and grandeur articulated by St. Augustine, Dante and George Herbert “fit” within the vision carried and perpetuated by American Presbyterianism? As I began to ask these questions, I was blessed to have many friends, both inside and outside my Presbyterian tradition, who were willing to engage with me in correspondence and conversation over these important matters. Most of the chapters in this book have been directly drawn from these discussions, if not sections of actual letters I have written to Calvinist friends, although the events referred to in the letters are purely fictional, as are the characters of Chris and George.

This last point is necessary to emphasize since some scholars who have read this book prior to publication were concerned that the character of Geneva George is an unfair caricature of a Calvinist, thus misrepresenting the complexity and diversity of the reformed tradition. While this is a legitimate criticism, I can only say in my own defense that in almost without exception, the views I have attributed to Geneva George are those I have myself encountered in dialogue and correspondence with various Presbyterian friends. But while George’s theology is a composite of those opinions I have encountered in real life, Geneva George himself is not modeled after any individual, living or dead.

In order to remove the characters one step from reality, I have made their author an Anglican, which I am not. As of writing this book, I remain a loyal reformed Presbyterian. This itself should serve as a clue to another important point about this book. This book is not an attack on the reformed faith in any general sense. Rather, it is a critical interaction with a certain *type* of Calvinism, one which exists as a hybrid of right-wing Puritanism and modern evangelicalism. While the positions taken by Geneva George are those which I have myself

encountered when interacting with fellow Presbyterians, his approach should not be taken as representative of Calvinism in any historic sense. Indeed, many of the positions he adopts are almost opposite to those made on the floor of the Westminster Assembly.

Special thanks must be given to Father Bryan Owen, who kindly allowed me to use his Creedal Christian blog (<http://creedalchristian.blogspot.com/>) as a platform for originally publishing these letters.

1

The Via Media

Dear Geneva George,

I enjoyed seeing you at the conference last Saturday and I do hope we can keep in touch. I think your idea of a regular correspondence was a great idea! Hopefully this will give us the opportunity to explore in more detail many of the questions we were discussing.

To start the ball rolling, I'd like to pick up on the comments you made last weekend about the 'via media.' I fear that the way I described the "via media" may have inadvertently given a wrong impression. I spoke of it as a middle way represented by Anglicanism (especially High Anglicanism) of being not quite Protestant but neither Catholic. I described it as a sort of halfway house between Rome and Geneva which finds expression in the great Anglican compromise.

Articulated as such, I'm not surprised that you reacted the way you did, as if I had embraced a lukewarm state that is neither one thing nor the other, a type of theological schizophrenia that lacks either the nerve to become Roman Catholic or the guts to be consistent with the logic of Protestantism. I hope to use this correspondence as a chance to alleviate this wrong impression.

For the present, please also be assured Geneva George, that when I spoke of the 'Anglican compromise', I did not mean compromise in the sense of a concession to error. (That may certainly apply to some of the more liberal Episcopalian churches in America, but I would argue that that is itself a departure from classic Anglicanism.) On the contrary, the middle way I spoke of is more akin to Aristotle's 'golden mean' – a balanced state of equilibrium between two unhealthy extremes.

This middle-of-the-road approach is not limited specifically to Anglicanism, but is a mindset that Protestants of all traditions would do well to adopt. It is, in short, a mentality which continually seeks to emphasize the continuity that Protestants have with Rome without compromising their core Protestant convictions. Such an emphasis is a necessary corrective to many of the dangers inherent within the contemporary Protestant mindset.

The children are ready for me to put them to bed, so that will have to be all for now. However, I do look forward to exploring these ideas in future letters.

Regards,

Canterbury Chris.

Catholic Protestants

Dear Geneva George,

Trust you to push me for more precision (yes, I know, we serve a precise God, as Richard Rogers rightly reminded us). Certainly Anglicanism is fully Protestant in the technical sense in which you have employed the term. When the coronation oath established that the Church of England was ‘Protestants’, the sovereigns were expected to swear that they understood its terms to be “as they are commonly understood by English Protestants...” Certainly this included Anglicans as well as orthodox dissenters under the generic term ‘Protestant’. Joining with all Protestants, the British sovereign was expected to solemnly disavow certain doctrines of the Church of Rome, which is why historians can quite rightly speak of the ‘Protestant succession’ of sovereigns after James II.

Yet it is also clear that the particular understanding of Protestantism nuanced by the ‘via media’ (middle way) is very different to the type of Protestantism that you advocated in your last letter. This should become clear as I interact with some of your comments about Roman Catholicism.

Certainly if what you call “the temptation of Rome” is one of the greatest dangers within contemporary Protestantism, then everything you wrote follows with irrefutable logic. Yet I would dispute that this is a great danger facing Protestantism. Have you considered that the greatest danger facing Protestantism today may be neither Roman Catholicism nor liberalism, but anti-Catholicism?

I know this question sounds bizarre because we have come to think of Protestantism as being, by definition, anti-Catholic. Certainly there is a sense in which Protestantism is based on protest, but the question is protest against *what*? In your last letter you specifically mentioned (A) the protest against Rome’s sacramentalism; (B) the protest against Rome’s claims to universality; (C) the protest against Rome’s concept of authoritative traditions or the magisterium.

There is a whole tradition of reformation thinkers who have actually argued that we protest against Rome for not being catholic enough. The distinction is crucial so I want to repeat myself: there is a whole tradition within the reformation stream which has argued that we protest against Rome for not being catholic enough. According to such thinkers, the characteristics you mentioned are problematic for Rome, not because she puts too *much* emphasis on them but too *less*. You are right that Rome’s sacramentalism is a problem, but wrong about the *reason*: the real reason Rome’s sacramentalism is a problem is because she isn’t sacramental enough. You are right that Rome’s claim to universality is a problem, but wrong about the *reason*: the real reason Rome’s claims to universality is a problem is because she isn’t universal enough. You are right that Rome’s concept of an authoritative tradition is a problem, but you are wrong about the *reason* this is a problem: it is a problem because her traditions aren’t authoritative enough.

With regard to the first, think of the way the blessed Eucharist was functionally devalued in medieval Europe within a system that was prepared to deny wine to the laity and restrict even the bread to annual services. Or again, consider the way Rome trivializes the Eucharist by allowing those who support abortion and even homosexuality (and who would therefore be quickly excommunicated in conservative Protestant churches) to have access to Christ’s body and blood merely because they are Roman Catholics. Rome is to be applauded for her high view of the Eucharist, but we do right to protest against her for not holding a higher view.

Or consider Rome’s claims to universality. Rome is right to emphasize the importance of the church’s visible unity and catholicity. Yet when she excommunicated the entire

Eastern portion of Christendom in 1054, and later excommunicated Protestants for recovering many of her own teachings (including some teachings that had been preserved in the East), one has to wonder how deep her commitment to visible unity really runs. Even when Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism acknowledged that Protestants are "members of Christ's body", part of "Christian communions," and "justified by faith," Rome still didn't have the guts to officially retract her earlier sectarian statements to the contrary. Since the Anathemas of the Council of Trent and Vatican II's 'Syllabus of Errors' still officially stand, both Protestants as well as Roman Catholics have been struggling to understand just how serious Rome's claims to catholicity are in the post-Vatican II world. So while I applaud Rome for holding a high view of catholicity, I think we do right to protest against her for not holding a higher (or even a more coherent) view.

Or again, Rome is to be applauded for her high view of tradition, but we do right to protest against her for not holding a higher view. Think of the way Vatican II rendered much of the Church's past tradition meaningless by reinterpreting the meaning of past documents without recourse to authorial intent, rather like liberal judges routinely do with the American constitution. When a Protestant succumbs to the impulse of liberalism, all he has to do is to say that he no longer assents with his church's historic confessions, whether it be the 39 Articles or the Westminster Confession of Faith. But when a Roman Catholic becomes liberal, he cannot reject the infallible magisterium and so he simply reinterprets it. Hence, a statement like Cyprian's *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the church there is no salvation") which was once used to exclude Protestants, can now be interpreted in a way that includes Hindus (at least, according to some of the more liberal interpretations of *Mystici corporis Christi* of 1943). We are thus left with the bizarre situation of priests like Father Feeney being officially excommunicated for affirming doctrines that Rome once considered orthodox. Paradoxically, by making church tradition subordinate to Holy Scripture, Rome ends up with a fluid concept of tradition that has the effect of devaluing the authority of tradition in practice. Rome is to be applauded for her high view of tradition, but we do right to protest against her for not holding a higher view.

Put all of this together and what do you get? You get Protestants like myself and others within the Anglican tradition who can legitimately object to Roman Catholicism for not going further in the areas she claims to affirm. This is in contrast to Protestants like yourself who object to Roman Catholicism for her alleged excesses in these same areas. The former perspective asserts that we can do a better job at being Catholic than Roman Catholics themselves, and this is something that the emphasis of the 'via media' tries to achieve. In other words, we have realized that we can trump Roman Catholics at their own game. But we must recognize that it is, in fact, *our* game – a game that is lost as soon as we make anti-Catholicism a central pillar of our credo as you have done.

I close with a penetrating quotation from the foreword that Peter Leithart wrote to Brad Littlejohn's book *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity*:

I teach my theology students to be 'because of' theologians rather than "in spite of" theologians. God is immanent not *in spite of* His transcendence, but *because of* His transcendence. The Son became man not *in spite of* His sovereign Lordship, but *because* He is Lord, as the most dramatic expression of His absolute sovereignty. Creation does not contradict God's nature, but expresses it.

So too with Protestant Catholicism: Protestants must learn to be catholic *because* they are Protestants, and vice versa.

I'll leave it at that for now, but I'd love to know your thoughts.

Best wishes,

Canterbury Chris

Evangelicalism vs. Sacerdotalism

Dear Geneva George,

Alright, I concede that I equivocated on my definition of “catholic” and “catholicity.” And certainly I do agree that not all the problems in Roman Catholicism can be reduced to Rome simply not going far enough. Keep in mind that I was merely responding to the areas you had specifically addressed.

You ask whether I would use this same rubric for areas of clear excess rather than neglect, such as “flagrant sacerdotalism”, the denial of Sola Fide and the use of images in worship. If you don’t mind, I’d like to address all three of these issues in successive letters, beginning with the first.

No I hadn’t read any B.B. Warfield before, but I have tried to familiarize myself with his theology this week. I found it interesting that, following Warfield, you set up a contrast between salvation by faith alone vs. salvation by sacraments, the latter of which you call ‘sacerdotalism.’ You argued that the former depends on God while the latter depends on man.

Yet surely this is a false dilemma George, since it hinges on the prior assumption that the sacraments are not of God. After all, if salvation can be mediated through faith and still be from God since faith is a gift, then what reason in principle is there why salvation can’t be mediated through the sacraments and still be from God since the sacraments are also gifts?

Notice that I am not suggesting here that salvation does come through the sacraments. That is a separate question. What I am suggesting, however, is that *if* salvation comes through sacraments, it does not necessarily follow that it doesn’t come from God. This is because you are confusing instrumental causation with efficient causation.

You quoted Ligon Duncan when talking about Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy on a Ligonier Ministries panel where he said,

There are two systems of salvation: the sacerdotal system and the evangelical system. Sacerdotal doctrine of salvation is based upon the dispensation of sacraments by the church. Evangelical system of salvation acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the sinner, drawing the sinner to Christ, uniting him to Christ by faith.

Now it may be false that salvation is based upon the dispensation of sacraments by the church. But merely to hold that the sacraments are one of the instrumental means by which God conveys salvation to his people is not necessarily to deny the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the sinner, any more than to say that faith is one of the instrumental means by which God conveys salvation to his people does not in itself entail a denial of the Holy Spirit’s work in the life of the sinner. To establish that you would need to provide a separate argument.

Consider the same problem from a different angle. There are many Protestants who hold that we are justified by faith alone but that the Holy Spirit has already given natural man all the equipment necessary to exercise such faith. This is a form of Arminianism, and it stands against the soteriology of Calvinism which emphasizes that the work of the Holy Spirit must be antecedent to faith. Then there are also many Roman Catholics in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas who, while affirming that merit and sacerdotalism are necessary for salvation, believe that such things are gifts to which the work of the Holy Spirit is antecedent. If this establishes anything, it is that the questions of the Holy Spirit’s work are logically independent to the questions of what it is that actually conveys salvation, whether faith alone, sacraments or both.

B.B. Warfield seems to have made this same mistake. In Fred Zaspel and Sinclair Ferguson's discussion of B.B. Warfield's theology in their book *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary*, they write that the key question separating sacerdotalism and evangelicalism is the question of whether divine grace comes to us "immediately or by means of supernaturally endowed instrumentalities - the church and sacraments." They do acknowledge that both are supernatural, yet it is puzzling that they do not acknowledge that faith is also among the "supernaturally endowed instrumentalities." If they would only recognize this, then the entire position would be seen to be a false dilemma.

Warfield himself writes,

"Does God save men by immediate operations of his grace upon their souls, or does he act upon them only through the medium of instrumentalities established for that purpose?...[Evangelicalism] sweeps away every intermediary between the soul and its God, and leaves the soul dependent for its salvation on God alone, operating upon it by his immediate grace."

Here again we have the same assumption that a faith-mediated salvation equals dependence on God while a sacrament-mediated salvation equals lack of dependence on God. But such an assumption would only work if you start with the assumption that the sacraments are not of God. But such a position is novel even by the standards of historic Protestantism. I suspect that what might be animating this false dilemma is the Gnostic idea that faith is spiritual because it is invisible while the sacraments are somehow less spiritual because they are material. Or it may be the evangelical allergy to mediation, an allergy that has a strange immunity when it comes to salvation being mediated through faith.

None of this is to say that salvation does come through the sacraments; rather, it is to try to clear away some of the dross before we can even address that question. Moreover, I rather suspect that the sacraments cannot be separated from faith just as knowledge of Christ cannot be separated from faith. In Luther's Larger Catechism he argued that faith alone entails the Sacraments, not because the Sacraments are added to Christ, or to faith; rather the Sacraments present Christ to us, and our faith clings to that. I will end with Luther's excellent words. Notice how he can emphasize the mediatory role of the sacraments and still maintain that everything depends on faith. The Lord's Supper, he writes, is

a ford, a bride, a door, a ship, and a stretcher by which and in which we pass from the this world into eternal life. Therefore everything depends on faith. He who does not believe is like the man who is supposed to cross the sea but is so timid that he does not trust the ship; and so he must remain and never be saved, because he will not embark and cross over. This is the fruit of our dependence on the senses of our untrained faith which shrinks from the passage across the Jordan of death; and the devil has a gruesome hand in it."

Yours truly,

Canterbury Chris

Sola Fide: The Ecumenical Doctrine

Dear Geneva George,

Thank you for such a thorough reply! If you don't mind, instead of responding directly, I would like to explain why I said that I regarded *Sola Fide* as a fundamentally ecumenical doctrine. I think you will find that much of it relates to what you have just written.

I must confess I was trying to be rather mischievous to call *Sola Fide* an ecumenical doctrine, for *Sola Fide* and Ecumenism are not concepts normally associated with each other. Indeed, if there is any doctrine that alienates Protestant evangelicals from their brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox traditions, the doctrine that we are justified by faith alone has to be it. In fact, when Hodder and Stoughton published *By Faith Alone* in 1995, they subtitled it “the doctrine that divides.”

Unfortunately, *Sola Fide* not only divides Protestants from non-Protestants, but many Protestants will use it as a club with which to beat up on fellow Protestants. Not infrequently a narrowly defined interpretation of *Sola Fide* will be used as an ideological boundary marker to separate those who are ‘truly reformed’ from those who, while claiming to be Calvinists, are allegedly “heretics.” The irony of this position is that it actually amounts to a functional denial of *sola fide*. But I am already anticipating the argument I want to develop.

In short, I want to argue for what I call a *Sola-Fide*-shaped-ecumenism, and my argument will be broken down into four different steps.

The first step towards a *Sola-Fide*-shaped-ecumenism is to appreciate that the doctrine of *Sola Fide* owes much to the Roman Catholic church. To establish this, a short historical detour is necessary.

As you know, Luther formulated his thinking about justification in response to two great events in his life. The first of these was the epiphany he had while reading scripture, particularly the book of Romans, where the apostle wrote, “For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16-17) This realization set Luther free from feeling he needed to earn God's approval through his own works-righteousness. Instead, he could rest confidently in the merits of Christ. Thus, he would go on to speak of a “grasping faith” (*fides apprehensiva*) which grasps Christ and unites Him to us independently of our own merits.

The second seminal event for Luther was the visit that the Dominican friar, Johann Tetzel, paid to Wittenberg. To raise money for reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica, Tetzel was travelling throughout Saxony selling indulgences – certificates assuring a person that in exchange for money, they could be released from specific amounts of time in purgatory. Luther's opposition to the sale of indulgences culminated in his penning the monumental 95 Theses that he posted them on the church of All Saints on 31 October 1517. While Luther had been using his lecturing post to preach justification by faith, it was this event that thrust the issue before all of Europe.

The idea that our salvation is 100% from God and not ourselves was hardly a novel concept. In fact, in formulating his views on justification, Luther was drawing on a whole tradition of Catholic theology going all the way back to Augustine's dispute with *Pelagius*. Throughout the Medieval period, debates about justification were an in-house issue, with many taking the position (as Aquinas had in his ‘Treatise on Grace’ in the *Summa Theologiae*) that grace is unmerited, and that we can do nothing without God's grace. Some even used the language of “faith alone”, as did Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) when he wrote “let him trust in the One who changes the sinner into a just man, and, judged righteous in terms of faith alone...” The emphasis on the absolute necessity of God's grace

for salvation can even be found in leaders of the Catholic Church in the high Middle Ages. For example, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), a cardinal of the Catholic Church in the Holy Roman Empire and wrote in his *De Pace Fidei* that, “It is necessary that we show that salvation of the soul is not obtained by works, but rather from faith” and “no living person can be justified through works in the sight of God, but only gratuitously....” Further examples might be multiplied. It would be anachronistic to assume that these writers meant the same thing as Protestants when they used similar vocabulary, and certainly things become more complicated when considering *how* God works out the salvation that is by grace alone. After all, a salvation that is by grace alone may not necessarily also be by faith alone. However, historians agree that in developing his views of justification, Luther was not drawing on scripture merely, but on a pre-existing theological tradition. (See Franz Posset’s book, *The Real Luther: A Friar at Erfurt and Wittenberg*)

Given that Luther was saying nothing unorthodox, he fully expected Pope Leo X to agree with him. Of course, once the issue was complicated with the question of church authority, both sides took to the trenches and the possibility of constructive dialogue was over. Yet there was nothing intrinsically un-catholic about the doctrine that we are justified by faith alone. In fact, Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft has boldly declared that “The split of the Protestant Reformation began when a Catholic discovered a Catholic doctrine [*i.e.*, *Sola Fide*] in a Catholic book.” Or as Philip Schaff argued in his marvellous book *The Principle of Protestantism*, the Reformation was the greatest act of the catholic church since the apostles. Luther was simply unfolding the best of the historical church's theology, and further sharpening it with his additional exegetical insights. The Protestant reformation was a purifying and reposition of what was already there.

Thus, the first step towards recognizing the ecumenical nature of *Sola Fide* is to appreciate that Protestants do not have a monopoly on the concept. The doctrine of *Sola Fide* underscores the fact that Protestants have much in common with the rich theological heritage of both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Yours truly,

Canterbury Chris

Trent, Calvin and Sola Fide

Dear Geneva George,

I must be doing something write if you are on tenterhooks to learn what the second step is in the process of developing a *Sola-Fide*-shaped-ecumenism.

Because *Sola Fide* is so often used as a Protestant battle-cry against both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, the term itself has come to be paradigmatic of the great divide separating these traditions. An unfortunate corollary to this has been that it has tended to obscure the fact that both sides in the *Sola Fide* debate actually have something valuable to contribute. Recognizing this fact is my second step.

Before proceeding, however, I want to consider the objection you raised in your last reply. You wrote, “while the idea of salvation by faith alone may have been articulated by Roman Catholics throughout the Middle Ages, didn’t the Roman Catholic Church solidify its theology in reaction to Protestantism, resulting in Trent’s condemnation of Sola Fide as official heresy?”

It is certainly true that at the Council of Trent (1545 -1563) Rome anathematized *Sola Fide* along with numerous other Protestant doctrines. Well, kind of. It is interesting that Trent defined justification as “The movement from the state in which man is born a son of the first Adam to the state of grace and adoption as sons of God through the second Adam, our savior Jesus Christ.” That, however, is not the Protestant doctrine of justification, as Alister McGrath reminded us in his 1990 publication *Justification by Faith*. McGrath pointed out that, in contrast to Trent, Protestant denominations have historically defined justification in more forensic terms. This means that Trent was condemning a caricature of the Protestant doctrine, rather than the doctrine itself, not unlike the way evangelicals will frequently condemn Roman Catholic teaching without having taken the time to really understand it. Thus, technically speaking, the *Protestant* doctrine of justification by faith alone has never been officially repudiated by the Roman Catholic church.

But what was the crucial difference between Trent’s definition of justification and that of the Protestants? I’ll McGrath answer this question by quoting from his book *Studies in Doctrine*:

“It will therefore be obvious that the Roman Catholic understands by ‘justification’ what the Protestant understands by ‘justification *and* ‘sanctification’ linked together. The same word is used by both – but it has a different meaning in each case. This has led to enormous confusion. Consider the following two statements.

- A. We are justified by faith alone.
- B. We are justified by faith and works.

The former broadly corresponds to the Protestant, the latter to the Roman Catholic position. But what do they mean?

For the Protestant, statement A means that the Christian life is begun through faith, and faith alone, which appears to be the New Testament teaching on the question. For the Roman Catholic, however – who understands ‘justification’ in a different way – statement A means that the Christian life *as a whole* is begun and continued by faith alone, which seems to exclude any reference to regeneration or obedience. For the Roman Catholic, statement B means that the Christian life is begun in faith, but is continued and developed through obedience and good works – which appears to be the

general position of the New Testament. But the Protestant – who understands ‘justification’ to refer only to the *beginning* of the Christian life – would regard this as a totally unacceptable doctrine of justification by works. In fact, there is general agreement between Protestant and Roman Catholic that the Christian life is *begun* through faith and *continued and developed* through obedience and good works – the Reformation slogan ‘faith is pregnant with good works’ embodies this principle.”

If McGrath is correct, then does it follow that the entire reformation was based on a mistake, on an unfortunate equivocation of terms? That is essentially what Peter Kreeft has argued in *Fundamentals of the Faith*, as well as in an apologetic work that he co-authored with Ronald K. Tacelli for InterVarsity. In the latter text, Kreeft and Tacelli write that “since Catholics were using *salvation* in a bigger sense and *faith* in a smaller sense, and Luther was using *salvation* in a smaller sense and *faith* in a bigger sense, Catholics rightly denied and Luther rightly affirmed that we were saved by faith alone.... Both sides spoke the truth.”

This is likely an optimistic over-simplification. The varying definitions between Protestants and Catholics certainly masked substantive theological differences, and we should not forget that debates about justification dove-tailed with a web of other important (and interconnected) disagreements, as the text of Trent shows. At the same time, however, Kreeft and McGrath have usefully reminded us that the Protestant and Catholic position may be a lot closer than most people realize. Both sides agree that faith and works are necessary for salvation, and both agree that salvation is a gift of God’s grace. After all, just listen to what the Council of Trent wrote about salvation being a gift of God’s free grace:

“...we are therefore said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation, and the root of all Justification; without which it is impossible to please God, and to come unto the fellowship of His sons: but we are therefore said to be justified freely, because that none of those things which precede justification - whether faith or works - merit the grace itself of justification. For, if it be a grace, it is not now by works, otherwise, as the same Apostle says, grace is no more grace.”

Now listen to what Calvin writes about the soteriological necessity of works in his *Institutes*:

“We dream not of a faith which is devoid of good works, nor of a justification which can exist without them.... Thus it appears how true it is that we are justified not without, and yet not by works, since in the participation of Christ, by which we are justified, is contained not less sanctification than justification.”

Protestant theologians have long argued that the seeming inconsistency between James and Paul arises because each has a different definition of ‘faith’ and ‘justification’ so it should not be difficult in principle to recognize that a same dynamic underscores much of the seeming inconsistency between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Recognizing that disputes about *Sola Fide* have been partially disputes over semantics may help to break down barriers so that both sides can learn something valuable from the other. And that, my dear George, is the second step towards a *Sola Fide*-shaped-ecumenism. Again McGrath grasps this point well:

“In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that Roman Catholics and Protestants have several important insights into this doctrine in common. Thus the Council of Trent insisted upon the priority of faith over everything else in

justification. “Faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God.’ Similarly, the Reformers insisted upon faith as the sole instrument of justification.”

By blending these different emphases and listening to both sides, Protestants and Catholics at the end of the 20th century have found that they can make important moves towards unity, as evidenced by the Evangelicals and Catholics Together statement of 1994 and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in 1999. The scope for Ecumenical projects such as these as been greatly expanded since Vatican II, when Rome became much more “Protestant” in her understandings. Rome has always had a unique ability to adapt itself to the changing contingencies of history, and that has meant it has imbibed much of the reformational emphases without even realizing it.

Well, I’ve jabbered on for too long. It’s your time to say something.

Faithfully,

Canterbury Chris

Bowdlerized Sola Fide

Dear Geneva George,

Do you remember our conversation about Roman Catholics that had at the conference? You said that while individual Roman Catholics can be saved, this can only happen if they “trust in Christ alone for salvation.” When I pressed you to explain what it meant to “trust in Christ alone for salvation,” your response was that it means the Roman Catholic has to (more or less) believe in *Sola Fide*. To reject *Sola Fide* is to reject Christ, which is to reject any hope of salvation.

That makes a good lead-in to the third step towards a *Sola-Fide*-shaped-ecumenism, which is that Protestants must truly believe and live by their own doctrine instead of a bowdlerized version of it. Many barriers towards ecumenism have arisen from Protestants not understanding their own doctrine of *Sola Fide*. I referred to our earlier conversation because it seems that you have manifested just such a misunderstanding.

Essentially what has happened is that the historic doctrine of justification by faith alone has been unconsciously conflated with the doctrine of justification by *Sola Fide*. That is to say, the notion (A) that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone for salvation, has been confused with (B) the notion that we are saved by *believing* in justification by faith alone. Where this leads is to the view that a person must assent to *Sola Fide* before the possibility even exists of them being justified by grace. While you may not think that *Sola Fide* is a sufficient condition for being saved, you are certainly perceiving it as being necessary for salvation.

The problem here is that the position expressed in B above is not only a distortion of historic Protestant teaching, but is actually a functional *denial* of Sola Fide. Douglas Wilson explained why this was in a blog post from 2005. Echoing comments that N.T. Wright had recently made to the same effect, Wilson wrote:

justification by faith is not accomplished by affirming or believing in justification by faith. Believing the doctrine of justification by faith alone as a way of being justified is a fine way of actually *denying* the doctrine of justification by faith alone. We are not saved by works -- ethical *or* theological. We are not saved because we got better than a ninety on the ethics quiz, or over a ninety-five on the justification section of the theology exam.

R.C. Sproul (one of your theological heroes) has argued similarly in an article “Tilting at Scarecrows” on the Ligonier Ministries website:

The doctrine of justification by faith alone not only does not teach that justification is by believing in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but in fact, teaches that which is totally antithetical to the idea.

Consider the same problem from another angle. If *Sola Fide* is true, then to deny it (for example, to say that we are saved by faith in Christ *plus* works) is to lack perfect faith. Yet can any one of us really claim to have perfect faith? Evangelicals frequently hold meetings where someone will testify (rightly) that they learned to make Christ Lord of some new area of their life. Well, what does that mean other than that such a person realized they were trusting themselves, and not Christ, in some important area of their life? The person had imperfect faith, but that does not mean they had no faith at all. Similarly, in matters relating to salvation, even staunch five-point-its-all-by-grace Calvinists can fall into the trap of

unconsciously trusting in themselves rather than Jesus. But this lack of perfect faith does not mean that the person in question cannot be saved. As the judicious Hooker put it in *A Learned Discourse on Justification*,

“They be not all faithless that are either weak in assenting to the truth or stiff in maintaining things any way opposite to the truth of Christian doctrine. But as many as hold the foundation which is precious, although they hold it but weakly and as it were by a slender thread, although they frame many base and unsuitable things upon it, things that cannot abide the trial of the fire, yet shall they pass the fiery trial and be saved, who indeed have builded themselves upon the rock which is the foundation of the Church.”

Part of the problem here is that the reformed doctrine of “justification *per fidem propter Christum*” (justification by faith on account of Christ) has morphed into its parody “justification *propter fidem per Christum*,” (justification on account of faith through Christ). While the difference is subtle, the second actually leads to a denial of the historic Protestant doctrine, as Douglas Wilson showed in the quotation above. When *Sola Fide* is used as a weapon to divide Protestants from Catholics, it is usually because the Protestant has unconsciously accepted this parody of the traditional doctrine.

In their book *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings*, Gritsch and Jenson have suggested that if one is justified by believing that one is justified (which is essentially what we are left with as soon as we make assent to *Sola Fide* a necessary condition to salvation), then we have unwittingly embraced “a works-righteousness that makes medieval Catholicism seem a fount of pure grace.” As they note,

This “belief”-condition is either too easy or too hard. If, as usually happens, “faith” is psychologized into the holding of certain opinions and/or attitudes, then to offer salvation if only this work is done (never mind others) peddles grace more cheaply than did the worst indulgence-sellers. We usually sense this, and try to patch on a little authenticity by adding a few more conditions such as “love” and “really” believing. Then even the verbal reminiscence of the Reformation is lost, and the pattern of medieval Catholicism is fully embraced....

“Faith” no longer means, in ordinary usage, what it did in the usage of the Reformers. Perhaps the abstract best would be to eliminate the vocabulary of “justification” and “faith” from our gospel-language altogether; for, as the words “justification by faith” are *now* almost certain to be understood, they are an exact contradiction of the Reformation proposition.

...the whole point of the Reformation was that the gospel promise is *unconditional*; “faith” did not specify a special condition of human fulfillment, it meant the possibility of a life freed from all conditionality of fulfillment....

The solution is to remind ourselves exactly what the Protestant doctrine of justification says. R.C. Sproul helpfully summarized the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone like this: “The phrase ‘justification by faith alone’ is theological shorthand for saying justification is by Christ alone. Anyone who understands and advocates the doctrine of justification by faith alone knows that the focal point is that which justifies — trust in Christ and not trust in a doctrine.”

Amen?

Love,

Canterbury Chris

Sola Fide and Microbiology

Dear Geneva George,

Ok, ok, hold on. You write

“Sure, belief in *Sola Fide* is not instrumental to our justification. However, anyone who denies the doctrine simply reveals that he doesn’t have true faith. Believing that Jesus isn’t a cucumber may not be instrumental for our justification, but that doesn’t mean that you can believe Jesus is a cucumber without there being eternal consequences.”

The problem with what you’ve written is that if *Sola Fide* is true, then one can deny it and still have true faith, whereas it is doubtful that one could maintain that Jesus is a cucumber and still have true faith. To be sure, if *Sola Fide* is true, then to deny it is to lack *perfect* faith, but that is not the same as lacking *true* faith. The father of the boy with seizures in Mark 9 expressed faith in Jesus’ power to help his son, yet in the same breath he confessed to struggling with unbelief (Mark 9:24). Or consider the case of Apollos in Acts 18: he was called “an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures” and “fervent in spirit” and even that he “taught accurately the things of the Lord” even though he knew only of the baptism of John. (Acts 18:24-28)

Even in the best of us, our faith is faulty and imperfect, tinged with a pride in our own self-righteousness. This does not mean that we should be apathetic about misunderstandings faith. But it is to emphasize that how we understand faith is part of the *bene esse* of the church, related to its well-being, not part of the *Esse* of the church, related to its essence or foundation. Precisely *because* I accept the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Fide* I am committed to making this distinction. Consider, *Sola Fide* affirms that if a person is saved, it is only because of Christ and His finished work, mediated to us through our faith, and that all other things are irrelevant. The ‘all other things’ include imperfections in and misunderstand about faith itself. The Protestant who really believes *Sola Fide* is thus released from having to assume that the efficacy of a person’s faith is dependent on a person having a correct theology about faith.

The same point can be made by way of analogy. A person can die of microbiological poisoning without believing in microbiology, as was the case until comparatively recently in human history. Likewise, a person can experience the results of living on a heliocentric planet without believing in Heliocentrism, as is still the case for some primitive tribes. Similarly, a person can be saved by faith alone without believing in justification by faith alone, as everyone agrees is the case with children and mentally handicapped individuals.

If we can get this simple fact straight, there are enormous implications for ecumenism. The Protestant is released from having to assume that the efficacy of a person’s faith is based on that person having to agree with his theology of justification. This releases Protestants to rejoice in the faith of those who hold to a different theology of faith. It can enable there to be common ground between those who affirm *Sola Fide* and those who do not.

Once again, we see that *Sola Fide*, though so often used to separate Protestants and non-Protestants, can actually be foundational to ecumenism. *Sole fide* is indeed the ecumenical doctrine, and thus should impel us not only to preach the gospel to all, but also to embrace all those who trust in the Christ of Scripture, whatever their other theological shortcomings.

Blessings in Christ,

Canterbury Chris

Recovering the Biblical Context

Dear Geneva George,

I know you're anxious to hear what my fourth and final step is towards a *Sola-Fide*-shaped Ecumenism. This is one that you will like. The fourth step is that we must recover the Biblical context.

As you know, the epistles of Paul are organized in the New Testament from his longest to his shortest. Thus, Paul's longest epistle, Romans, comes at the beginning of his corpus, while his shortest epistle, Philemon, comes at the end. The fact that Romans hits us first has had enormous implications in Christian theology, some good and some not so good. For example, when most people get to Galatians, they unconsciously tend to read Paul's discussion of justification in light of what they think he has already said in Romans. Yet imagine if it were the other way round. Try reading Romans through the lens of Galatians. To do so, I suggest, can have an enormous impact, not least on this central question of ecumenism. This is because Galatians, more than any other book of the Bible, so clearly shows the ecumenical implications of justification by faith.

We often forget that Paul's great exposition of justification in the epistle to the Galatians sprang out of his controversy with the Judiasers that was recounted back in Acts 15. Because the Judiasers have often been misunderstood in post-reformation historiography, a brief excursus about them will be necessary.

It is often assumed that the Judiasers were proto-*Pelagians* encouraging people to earn their salvation through works-righteousness. However, N.T. Wright and others have helpfully pointed out that it is far more likely that the Judiasers were simply good Jews who were operating as things always had done under the old covenant. (For starters, see Wright's books *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision* and *What Saint Paul Really Said*.)

It is often assumed that the Judiasers were proto-Pelagians encouraging people to earn their salvation through works-righteousness. However, N.T. Wright and others have helpfully pointed out that it is far more likely that the Judiasers were simply good Jews who were operating as things always had done under the old covenant. During the age of the Mosaic covenant Gentiles could join the people of God, but they had to first convert to the Jewish faith and receive circumcision. When the Judiasers began to contend that "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1), they were simply affirming what had always been the case: the way to God is through the door of Torah. By urging that people needed to get circumcised and come under Torah to be 'saved' (which, to a first century Jew, had more to do with entering into the visible people of God than going to heaven when you die), the Judiasers were not advocating a type of proto-Pelagianism. They were not urging that people needed to work their way to heaven through works-righteousness. After all, even in the old covenant period, we can see that contextually "keeping the works of the law" (Torah) never meant living perfectly by every command; rather, it meant faithfulness within the context of the covenant. Such faithfulness was expressed by entering into the basic structure that defined this people over and against the Gentiles, availing oneself of the atonement system, living by the Mosaic ceremonial codes, being separate from the Gentiles, and of course getting circumcised. The only thing wrong with the Judiasers' prescription is that it had expired. They were turning back the clock on redemption history, failing to properly reckon with the fact that Christ had died and risen from the dead, and that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on Gentiles *as Gentiles* (Acts 10:44-48 & 15:8).

Thus, the conflict that Paul and the Jerusalem council had against the Judiasers was not a conflict between a group who advocated a works-based soteriology vs. those who were

contending for a grace-based soteriology (again, salvation has always been by grace, even under the old covenant system that the Judiasers were still trapped in). Rather, the conflict hinged on two different ways of answering the question “How do you define the people of God?” Both groups believed in an expanding covenant and both groups could assert that God’s plans were international. The difference is that the Judiasers said that the Gentiles had to stop being Gentiles and enter the covenant through the door of circumcision (i.e., conversion to Judaism) and the “works of the law” (i.e., Torah of Moses). By contrast, Paul asserted that faith in Christ was the only requirement.

This backdrop helps us to understand what is going on in Galatians 2, when Paul recounts to his Galatian readers the confrontation he had with Peter at Antioch. Paul called Peter a hypocrite (Gal. 2:13) because even though Peter had stopped living like a Jew (Acts 11:3) and even though Peter had opposed the Judiasers at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:7-11), nevertheless when “certain men came from James... he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision.” (Galatians 2:12) That is to say, Peter separated himself from the Gentile Christians, keeping table fellowship only with the Jewish Christians. Given the pressure that the Judiasers had been exerting on the church, Peter’s action was understandable. But it was wrong.

Paul’s purpose in recounting to the Galatians his confrontation with Peter seems to be that they too were being influenced by the Judiasers. They too seemed to have fallen into the trap of thinking that converts to Christianity had to go through the gate of Judaism. Paul’s refutation of this is his great exposition of justification by faith in Galatians 3 and 4. He expounds the doctrine of justification as his way of urging that all who have faith in Christ belong to the same common table, that our identity as the people of God cannot be subordinated to Torah (the law). Getting the context of Galatians right is important, because it shows that the doctrine of justification was as much a pastoral issue for Paul as an abstract doctrine. Moreover the pastoral concern was fundamentally ecumenical. While the doctrine of the Judiasers was dividing one group of Christians (Jewish Christians) from another group of Christians (Gentile Christians), the doctrine of justification by faith did the opposite: *it brought all the groups of Christians together around a common table*. The doctrine of justification by faith is thus the doctrine of fellowship by faith.

No doubt Paul would be sad if he could see that in our time the doctrine of justification by faith – the very doctrine he expounded to bring Christians together - is once again being used to separate believers and build walls. We have taken Paul’s very uncomplicated point - that through Christ, Gentiles can be saved without having to become Jews – and read back into it our post-reformation debates. Thus, the Judiasers become proto-Roman Catholics and Paul is turned into an evangelical targeting those who would earn their way to heaven through works-righteousness. The problem with this approach – apart from being anachronistic and failing to engage with the 1st century context – is that it loses the ecumenical nuance inherent in the original doctrine.

What Paul realized, and what he would no doubt desire for us to understand, is that the doctrine of justification by faith is at heart an ecumenical doctrine. Not only does it affirm that Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman, all belong to the same common table, but it even gives a theological framework for union between those who affirm and those who deny *Sola Fide*. While the doctrine of the Judiasers was dividing one group of Christians (Jewish Christians) from another group of Christians (Gentile Christians), the doctrine of justification by faith did the opposite: *it brought all the groups of Christians together*. Should the doctrine of *Sola Fide* be anything less?

It is for these very reasons that I could never contemplate conversion to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy. Those who join either of those traditions end up having to excommunicate all their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, they would never put

it like that, but that is the implication of them not being allowed to partake of the blessed Eucharist with us. Neither RC nor EO will admit us to the table and many within the Orthodox tradition will not even recognize that we have churches. When members of these traditions visit our churches, they are expected not to share the Eucharist with us, even though Vatican II acknowledges that we are “members of Christ’s body”, part of “Christian communions,” “justified by faith” and that Protestants *as Protestants* have “access to the community of salvation.” (From the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism).

In light of Galatians 2, what would Paul say about a group of Christians who functionally excommunicated a whole group of legitimately-baptized Christians? Make no mistake: both Rome and EO acknowledge the Trinitarian baptisms of Protestants to be legitimate, which is why Protestants who convert to these traditions do not have to be re-baptized. Yet despite the fact that Rome recognizes Protestant baptisms as being legitimate in a way that the baptisms of heretical sects (i.e., Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses) are not, such baptisms are seen as insufficient to establish Eucharistic fellowship. In light of Galatians 2, what would Paul say about a group of Christians who functionally excommunicated all other believers simply because they do not believe in doctrines like the immaculate conception or the assumption of Mary or papal infallibility – doctrines which I am quite certain Paul himself never heard of? I think I know what Paul would say to that because he addressed an almost identical situation when writing to the Galatians.

So while I applaud Rome and the East for all that they have preserved from the early church, I lament the way that they have gone far beyond what the Bible warrants in terms of Eucharistic admission. Thus, although I have sometimes felt insecure in my Protestant identity, in the end I am just too ecumenical to be anything other than a Protestant. This is because Protestantism is really the only location in the visible church right now where the ecumenical problem can be solved. Since this is the great asset of Protestantism, let’s not jeopardize it with faulty applications of *Sola Fide*.

Cordially,

Canterbury Chris

How to Lose the Gospel

Dear Geneva George,

If you don't mind, I'm just going to address the paragraph where you wrote the following:

Still, don't Paul's warnings regarding justification amount to him saying that the Galatians are losing the gospel? In Galatians 1:6-9 Paul condemns alternative understandings of justification as "another gospel" and says, 'If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.' So whether through works-based righteousness or non-inclusion of Gentiles, either way the Gospel is at stake. Hence, the non-Sola Fide Christian, whether a Judiasers or a Roman Catholic, is in jeopardy as to the Gospel since it involves adding to, mutating, departing from the gospel.

It is true that Paul seems to think that to embrace a false understanding of the gospel or of justification can amount to fall from grace. This comes out in the passage quoted above, but also in 5:4: "You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." I say that it "can" amount to a fall from grace because Paul doesn't seem to think that denial of the correct understanding of justification is *necessarily* or *automatically* indicative of a fall from grace, since incorrect understandings of justification seem to come on a continuum. On one end of the continuum would be lay people who may be 'foolish' and 'bewitched' like the Galatians (Gal. 3:1) or those who may need a sharp rebuke like Peter at Antioch (Gal 2:14) but who are still basically faithful. Then on the other end of the continuum would be false teachers who are leading people astray. We see both sides of this continuum in Galatians 5:10 where Paul says, "I have confidence in you, in the Lord, that you will have no other mind; but he who troubles you shall bear his judgment, whoever he is." This suggests that the false teachers would be judged with greater severity than those on the other end of the continuum whom Paul is confident will be of one mind after receiving his teaching. Similarly, when writing to the Colossians over essentially the same set of issues Paul addresses them as "faithful brethren" and continually gives thanks for them. He spoke that way about believers who had apparently fallen, or were in danger of falling, into the same type of works-based legalism (properly qualified) as the Galatians and yet never for a minute is their the hint that they are anything less than brothers and sisters in Christ.

Given that there is this continuum, the question we need to ask regarding Roman Catholics are these:

- 1) What end of the continuum does Roman Catholicism fall on as an institution? More specifically, is her official theology of justification bad enough to come under the curse of Galatians 1:6-9?
- 2) Where on the continuum do individual Roman Catholics fall who self-consciously believe the Roman Catholic dogma of justification including her denial of *Sola Fide*? Assuming that the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Fide* is correct, does such a denial mean that the person in question has embraced "another gospel"?

Given that all of us have only partial and imperfect understanding of *sola fide*

anyway, and that we have all probably imbibed minor errors regarding justification at some point, in answering both of the above questions it is not good enough to simply establish that Roman Catholic teaching is false or even idolatrous. Rather, we must ask whether the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification is *sufficiently* gospel-denying to warrant the claim that it is “another gospel.”

To the extent that I have already shown that much of the doctrinal difference between Catholics and Protestants on justification is semantic, the likelihood is greatly lessened that Roman Catholic denials of *Sola Fide* are sufficiently bad enough to amount to “another gospel.”

I also argued that the specific threat to justification facing the church in Galatia was not that the same denial of justification which Protestants typically accuse Roman Catholics of committing but, rather, a failure to recognize the universality of the gospel. While it may be true that the errors of the Judiasers and the errors of Roman Catholics amount to equally serious denials of justification, this is not obviously so on the basis of Galatians and would require further argumentation before such a claim could be established. Put somewhat differently, the fact that (A) the Judiasers embraced “another gospel” when they failed to appreciate the universality of Christ’s redemption, does not necessarily entail (B) that Roman Catholics have also embraced “another gospel” when they fail to understand the appropriate relationship between faith and works. The two positions may be sufficiently similar to fall under the same Pauline curse, but it would be illogical to assume that B follows from A independent of additional argumentation.

But let’s assume for the sake of argument that the person making the above objection is correct, and that it is true that “whether through works-based righteousness or non-inclusion of Gentiles, either way the Gospel is at stake.” If true, this immediately raises certain questions: would the gospel also be at stake for all Protestants who preach the non-inclusion of Roman Catholics? Would the gospel also be at stake for all Protestants who functionally deny *Sola Fide* by confusing “justification *per fidem propter Christum*” with “justification *propter fidem per Christum*”? If non-*Sola Fide* Christians are in jeopardy of losing the Gospel, and if *Sola Fide* is nuanced according to its original Pauline context, then it is by no means certain that contemporary Roman Catholic community would come out worse than the contemporary evangelical community, given some of the observations I made in earlier letters.

(Sola) Faithfully,

Canterbury Chris

10 Images in Worship

Dear Geneva George,

I'm not ignoring the insights of your last letter, but I'm conscious that I still haven't yet responded to your remarks about the use of images in worship.

I went and re-read the passage you referred to about the Second Commandment in the Westminster Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism. I had forgotten that the Westminster divines not only forbade worshipping representations of God, but also "the making of any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever." (Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 109). While the Catechism does not explicitly reject representations of saints, I noticed that the Heidelberg Catechism takes care of that when it asks, "may not images be permitted in the churches as teaching aids for the unlearned?" The people are instructed to answer with a resounding: "No, we shouldn't try to be wiser than God. He wants his people instructed by the living preaching of his Word not by idols that cannot even talk." (*Heidelberg Catechism* 1563, Lord's Day 35)

I must say, George, that the automatic association between visual aids and idolatry does seem tenuous, as was the Westminster Assembly's decision to support their argument against Christian iconography with proof texts that uniformly refer to Israel's worship of false gods. Calvin seems to make the same mistake in Book 1, Chapter 11 of *The Institutes*, where his argument against Christian images rests on the assumption that such images are idolatry (and, of course, if that is your starting point, then it is very easy to construct a Biblical case against them.)

But this raises a legitimate question: is it even possible to eradicate all visual stimuli from the worship of God? We may be able to worship the Lord in a room with bare walls, but how many of us who can honestly claim to have sat through one church service without at some point representing God "inwardly" in our mind – an activity explicitly forbidden in the Westminster Catechism?

Moreover, if we are good regulative-principle-Calvinists like yourself, then every time we sing the Psalms we are endorsing the use of created things as a prompt, a means of, or an aid to (call it whatever you like) worship, seeing that frequently the Psalmists reach the peak of worship only after considering and meditating on the visible phenomena of the natural world. That is why I said a minute ago that if your argument proves anything, it proves far too much.

On the other hand, if you allow that we can meet with God in the natural world, since creation "declares the glory of God" (Psalm 19) and moves us to spontaneous praise when we contemplate it (Psalm 97), then on what basis are you prepared to say that artistic sub-creation cannot serve a similar end? If the things that God made (namely, the natural world) can be so central to worship, why not the things that man makes which equally reflect the beauty of God's holiness (Psalm 90:17)? If it is appropriate for the sight of God's handiwork in the firmament to propel us to new heights of worship (Ps. 19:1-6), then why is it not appropriate, even in principle, for the sight of God's handiwork in his saints (and I have Christian iconography in mind) to propel us to new heights of worship? None of these questions can be adequately answered without first taking the time to develop a theology of sub-creation and to explore the spiritual function of art in the Bible. However, I fear that your knee-jerk reaction against the use of images in worship leaves little room for this type of necessary analysis.

Of course, there are thousands of practices we might imagine that inspire worship but which would, nevertheless, be inappropriate as part of the worship service. Though your

treatment of the regulative principle hinges on a number of false dilemmas, I do agree that worship is not to become a vaudeville show of anything we imagine could lead to edification. My only point in arguing from the Psalms in the way I just did is to suggest that it is not necessarily idolatrous to invest Christian art with a liturgical role. Whether Christian art is actually appropriate for worship is a different question. On that more positive question, I'd like to pass on to you some words that Bradford Littlejohn wrote in an email on this topic in July 2011:

Certainly being an "aide to worship" does not in itself justify the use of something. It is a necessary, but not a sufficient cause. The way I would approach it is this. Does Scripture positively command (or otherwise clearly obligate) the use of something in worship? If so, then of course we *must* do it. If not, then, does Scripture positively forbid (or otherwise clearly show to be wrong) the use of it? If so, then of course we *must not* do it. If not, then it falls into the realm of what the Reformers called *adiaphora*, and its appropriateness for the Church must be evaluated in terms of more general Scriptural guidance for and against, in terms of the historic practice of the Church, and of course, on whether it is edifying for believers in worship (which will differ contextually). If it is not edifying, then we shouldn't do it. If it is edifying, and it is not otherwise forbidden, then we may do it, though we may not *require* it unless Scripture does so.

So then, this discussion is really about two distinct questions: 1) are all liturgical uses of images forbidden by Scripture? 2) If not, are the permitted uses edifying aides to worship?

On the first, the key point, my argument would run, in its most general outlines, that a) the Old Testament itself demonstrates that the second commandment cannot be intended in as sweeping a sense as we might imagine, and so we would be foolish to impose a tighter rule for the Church's obedience to it than God did on Israel, that b) the situation is changed in important ways in the New Covenant, as Jesus offers us a visible representation of God himself, and as the Church is invited to greater maturity and liberty to determine for itself how to worship than Israel was, and that c) insofar as this issue is open to doubt, we ought to err in favour of the historic teaching of the Church, which as you know was quite pro images, even setting down their defence at what was traditionally considered one of the Seven Ecumenical Councils.

Amen?

Canterbury Chris

What's So Bad about Graven Images?

Dear Geneva George,

I'd like to begin by responding to the part of your letter where you wrote, "Of course, there is nothing wrong with lapsing into praise of God because you have just climbed a majestic mountain or beheld a lovely sunset. In that sense, created things may certainly aid us in personally worshipping God. But public corporate worship is a different matter entirely. When gathering to worship God in the sanctuary, there should not be anything visual that assists us."

I'll start by explaining where I agree. It does seem that your distinction between private and public worship is necessary when dealing with questions of this sort. The people I've known who conflate this distinction tend to end up devaluing both the sacraments and corporate worship on the Lord's day.

But while I accept the distinction, I think the inferences you make from this are problematic. If I understand you correctly, you seem to be saying that visual/material phenomena is fine in private worship, but is idolatry in corporate worship. Immediately certain problems arise. Consider that the Psalms, which you agree employ created things such as the firmament and mountains as "aids" to worship, make up the hymnal that your church uses (I don't go along with you on exclusive Psalmody, but that is a debate for another time).

Equally problematic is the fact that the public/corporate worship of God in ancient Israel did include a vast array of visual objects and "graven images." It is hard to read the descriptions of the temple and say that all the likenesses of created things is mere decoration rather than an actual means of worshipping Yahweh. While the people were not to worship these images throughout the temple, they were a means to worshipping God along with everything else within the temple complex. This included the carved Cherubim (3:7), the two Cherubim carved in the Most Holy place (2 Chron. 3:10-13; 1 Kings 6:29), the one hundred pomegranates on wreaths of chain work (2 Chron. 3:16; 1 Kings 6:29), the faces of the cherubim decorating the "water chariots" outside in the courtyard (1 Kings 7:28-39), the molten sea or bath supported by the likeness of oxen (2 Chron. 4:1-5; 1 Kings 6:29), and I could go on.

The people of God always understood that the plethora of images throughout the temple was fundamentally different to the images of false gods, the worship of which God had forbidden by the second commandment (Duet 5:8-9; Ex. 20:4-5). They also apparently saw no contradiction between the Lord's command to make these carved images for the temple, on the one hand, and his prohibition of "likenesses" in Deuteronomy 4:16-19, on the other.

You referred me to James Jordan's *The Liturgy Trap*, where he wrote that the second commandment "means that no pictures of God, angels, or saints are allowed. It also means no pictures of men, dogs, whales, trees, or anything else are allowed." Based on this understanding of the Second Commandment, Jordan goes on to dismiss the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglo-Catholic traditions as semi-idolatrous. Well, my question would be simply this: how do you square this with the fact that God mandated pictures of both angelic beings and animals in His temple? Even James Jordon, when writing about the temple shortly after the section you quoted, has to qualify his earlier prohibitions by saying that "We are free to make pictures and sculptures of things in the creation, including heavenly things...it is not wrong to have pictures, including faces, in the house of worship--provided we never, ever bow down toward them." Then later on he adds another qualification: not only are we never to bow down to the pictures in the house of worship, but we are not allowed to even look at them. As he says, "the only thing to look at in worship is other

people.” I must confess that all of this seems to be simply splitting hairs and utterly pedantic. What is the point of allowing pictures in the sanctuary if people are not allowed to look at them? Does this mean that the art God ordered for the temple was never intended to be looked at? Even though the whole temple complex was designed to facilitate the worship of God, are we to conclude that the graven images in the temple were extrinsic rather than intrinsic to such worship?

Even some Presbyterian scholars have recently been forced to recognize the complete illogicality of the iconoclast position. For example, in the IIM online Magazine, Volume 6, Number 6 (published on Dr. Richard Pratt’s Third Millennium website), Ra McLaughlin wrote an excellent article, “Are Images of Christ Sinful?” In the article he writes that “As I understand the passages in Exodus and Deuteronomy, they prohibit the making and worshiping of false gods. They do not specifically prohibit the use of images in the worship of God...”

Finally, you asked why this issue is so important to me. Three reasons come immediately to mind. The first reason is actually revealed in your last letter. Based on your views of images, you feel justified in following James Jordan in characterizing the entire Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglo-Catholic traditions as “idolatrous”, “semi-Christian”, “semi-pagan” and you talk about those you know who have joined them as “back-sliding” from the reformed faith. While there are some legitimate problems (even idolatries) in these traditions that need to be addressed (just as there are idolatries in Protestantism that also need to be addressed), the misdiagnosis of the problem actually short-circuits the type of critical engagement so necessary when assessing these traditions.

But not only does your hyper-iconoclasm short-circuit critical engagement, it also creates great barriers to ecumenical work. And that is my second reason why the issue of images is important to me. By recognizing that this whole question is far from being a slam-dunk issue, hopefully you can come to appreciate that you actually have more unity with these other branches of Christendom than you might at first have realized.

Thirdly, this issue is important because of the practical problems that iconoclasm creates in the lives of actual people. I’ll give you an example from my own experience. Last year a Presbyterian lady came to me in confusion after attending a lecture by James Jordan that her church had recommended in which the topic of images was addressed. Now this lady and her daughter had moved to America from England. In England they had attended an Anglican church in which they had found it very helpful to look up into the vaulted ceiling where images of the saints and angels were depicted. This would give them great comfort by reminding them of the invisible cloud of witnesses that surrounded them at all times but especially during worship. It would also turn their minds immediately to the scriptural descriptions of God’s throne room, in which God is never alone, but always surrounded by both the angelic hosts as well as the departed saints (Rev. 6:9-10) who continually intercede for those still on earth (Rev. 7:9-17). The stained glass pictures of Bible scenes would help to keep the daughter’s distractible mind focused on things above. The visible reminders in the sanctuary of God’s objective work helped to stabilize this woman and her daughter. Moreover, she said it helped to eliminate the subjective distractions that threatened to pull them back into introspection and subjectivism. During the Easter season, mother and daughter would both find that the pictures associated with the stations of the cross, brought them to a place of deep thankfulness as they saw what Jesus had done for them and were reminded of His love. Now all of these things were aids for helping them worship God, just as the mountains and hills were aids to worship for the Psalmists. They found that pictures, images, colors, architectural beauties, different bodily postures (kneeling and crossing oneself) allowed the worship of God to permeate into all of life, rather than to be kept in the

subjective compartment of the “spiritual.” It helped to underscore the point that our whole salvation is outside of ourselves, as Luther reminded Melancthon.

I know that this woman and her daughter were not alone in the experience I have related. Calvin acknowledged that in his day there were “not a few” who relied on these visual aids (which, in every case, he refers to as “idols” in his *Institutes* Book 1, chapter 11) However, he argued that this reflected the “stupidity” of those who had not been instructed in correct doctrine. As he writes,

“Of what use, then, were the erection in churches of so many crosses of wood and stone, silver and gold, if this doctrine were faithfully and honestly preached...?... From this one doctrine the people would learn more than from a thousand crosses of wood and stone. As for crosses of gold and silver, it may be true that the avaricious give their eyes and minds to them more eagerly than to any heavenly instructor.”

After moving to America and joining a Presbyterian church, this lady kept hearing that images were idols and it confused her. When she heard James Jordan lecture he said that the churches which allow images are guilty of “spiritual masturbation” and “apostasy” and “idolatry.” In his writings, he has argued that Protestant converts to Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and High Anglicanism are nothing less than apostates and idolaters. I quote one of his more severe statements:

“These men already had Christ, the Bible, the Church, the sacraments, true worship, etc. But they wanted something else. They wanted idols. They have yielded to the idolatry of their hearts. They are apostates.”

When this lady came to me in confusion I began studying the scripture’s teaching on the topic and I realized that the issue was hardly as clear-cut as James Jordan was making it. It seems that unless the scripture is very clear on this matter, we should be hesitant to divide the body of Christ over it, least of all to dismiss the two whole branches of Christendom as idolatrous. So I told her that there was nothing wrong with the experiences she had had in Anglican churches and that she should reject the iconoclast position as heterodox. Of course, I am willing to rethink my stand, but I am still too much of a good Protestant to change my mind without solid Biblical evidence, which you have failed to provide.

Blessings in Christ,

Canterbury Chris

Factoring in the New Covenant

Dear Geneva George,

You suggest that in appealing to the Old Testament temple, I have glossed over the important paradigm shifts that have occurred between the Old Testament to the New Testament. You're right that I didn't address these changes, but wrong to think that I was arguing that because certain practices were commanded in the Old Testament that they are therefore legitimate for us today. That was not my argument. My point was simply that the second commandment cannot have prohibited graven images for worship *per se* because otherwise the prescribed worship of God within the temple would have been idolatrous.

With regard to the change from the Old Covenant to the New, I guess my question would be: does scripture give us any explicit or implicit warrant for assuming that visual representations in worship (permitted under the Old Covenant) are idolatrous under the New? Does the New Testament ever abrogate the Old Testament's use of visual representations in worship? Granted that the temple system has now been abolished, and that the symbols we use in Christian worship should reflect that important shift, are we to assume that the very principle of using visual representations in worship has been abrogated? I'm not convinced that the Bible gives us grounds for answering in the affirmative.

I would have thought that if anything, the incarnation further legitimizes the use of visual objects in worship. After all, the second person of the Trinity Himself became a visual object, taking on the form of one of God's image-bearers, so that Deut. 4:15-16 can no longer be said to be descriptive since mankind *has* now seen the form of God at the time of the incarnation. This is one of the reasons that Ra McLaughlin allows for the legitimacy of images of Christ. Writing in the article I cited in my last letter, McLaughlin notes that

God is not opposed to all images of himself. Even in Scripture we find verbal descriptions of God's appearance, which are intended to create mental images for us (e.g., Exod. 13:21; Dan. 7:9). Then, too, human beings are all images of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 11:7). And we are not only allowed to make more, but we are exhorted to do so (cf. Gen. 5:3)!...

With regard to images of Jesus in particular, certainly we ought not to make and worship an image Jesus, because we ought never to worship any image. But worshiping images and using images in worship are two different things, as we have seen....

One reason I believe it is fine to make images of Jesus goes back to the Westminster Larger Catechism's thought that the same aspect of God's character that prohibits a graven image also prohibits a mental one. We see this type of dynamic in many places of Scripture, such as in the idea that looking at a woman lustfully violates the same principle that adultery does (Matt. 5:28). Just as we may not bow down to an idol in worship, we also may not worship the idol in our hearts even while we do not bow with our bodies.

If thoughts and realities are connected in principle, then if it is acceptable to have a mental image of Jesus, it should also be acceptable to make a physical representation of him, provided it is for proper use. Certainly no one would argue that it was wrong for Mary to have remembered Jesus' face, or for his disciples to have recalled his features in his absence. And if these mental images were not wrong for them, then

they should not be wrong for us. And if the mental images were not wrong for them, then neither would a painting have been wrong. And if that was acceptable for them, then it is acceptable for us.

Granted, we don't know what he looked like. But that is not a valid reason to object to the existence of an image. After all, images never look precisely like the things they represent. Sometimes they are very different indeed. In practice, many images of Jesus don't even show the features of his face, so the objection would not even really apply.

You mentioned specifically about people who bow down before icons and statues of saints. While bowing down before someone is frequently associated with worship in the Bible (Acts 10:26; Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9), this is not always the case. James Jordon recognizes this in *The Liturgy Trap* and argues that bowing down before men is often Biblically appropriate. In fact, he even advocates having the pastor bow before the congregation. What Jordon will not allow is bowing before inanimate objects. Yet it is a point worthy of mention that the Bible gives examples where the saints express devotion to God by bowing down before inanimate object such as the Temple or the altar in the Temple (Psalm 5:7; 2 Chr. 29:28-30) or fire that comes from God (2 Chron. 7:3) or the reading of the Word (Nehemiah 8). These passages seem to undermine the knee-jerk assumption that any time a person bows to an inanimate object he is automatically committing idolatry. When my boys do martial arts, they are required to bow as they enter the arena – are we to say that this is idolatry as well? Now certainly the person who bows before an icon *may* be guilty of idolatry, but you would need another argument to establish that.

Your argument that images and icons function as a substitute to relationships because they don't talk back seems utterly simplistic. There are many things in the world that don't talk back to us, and that doesn't make those things necessarily bad. For example, although a pastor can talk to you, a published sermon cannot. But that doesn't mean that published sermons are bad. It is interesting that at the time of Plato many people objected to books on the same grounds that you objected to icons: books couldn't answer back and so people worried that they would destroy conversation. However, God considers books to be good because He commanded Moses to write certain things down and He gave us His Word. Of course, the Bible can "speak" to us in a more general sense, but then so can images and icons. In fact, icons are painted in a way to make them look *at* you with that stern sort of gaze that communicates more than words do. Icons, no less than mountains and rivers, most definitely communicate to us, though they use no speech.

Have you considered that sometimes the most powerful statements are made by things that do not speak to us in a direct and specific sense? That which is "almost being said" can be the most powerful, as Philip Larkin understood in his poem "The Trees".

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.
Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.
Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.

Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Trees coming into leaf, like music, sculptures, cathedrals and mountains, do often speak more powerfully than words. And so does the type of religious art that you so quickly dismiss as idolatry. In his book *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith*, Peter Hitchens describes how Van der Weyden's great altarpiece, "Last Judgement", 'spoke' so powerfully to him that it nudged him on the path towards repentance and conversion. In no way was Van der Weyden's altarpiece functioning as "a substitute for relationships." In fact, Hitchens describes how the path it set him on ultimately helped his relationships. Part of the problem may be that your latent puritanism finds it difficult to accommodate any type of "speaking" that is not explicit and didactic.

Your argument that images should not be used in worship because they are man-made is equally problematic when we consider that sermons are also man-made. So if you wish to argue that images cannot be used in worship because they are man-made, you would have to argue that sermons should not be part of the liturgy since they are man-made. You would also have to object to the pews, the collection plate and the pulpit. How far are you willing to extend your logic, or do you merely apply it arbitrarily?

Also keep in mind that if the arguments you gave in your last letter are sound, they apply beyond the liturgical uses of religious art but rule out their legitimacy in any context whatsoever. To be consistent with what you write you would have to embrace the hyper iconoclasm of Islam.

Finally, you wrote that "when we meet to worship God, the focus should be on Him and not on the saints. Hence, paintings, statues and icons of saints are fundamentally unacceptable." Is it possible you're making something of a false dilemma here? It is far from obvious that icons or statues of saints necessarily remove the focus from the Lord any more than a Bible, a pulpit or a steeple. Quite the contrary, for where are we when we meet for worship? The book of Revelation shows us what a worship service in Heaven looks like, and what we find is departed saints gathered around the innermost sanctuary of God's throne room. Imitating this Biblical model and populating the sanctuary with saints cannot be wholly without warrant. Moreover, I do wonder if saying "we should focus on the Lord and not the saints" would be rather like if I said that you should love your wife less so that you can love the Lord more. The problem with such a statement would be that one of the many ways in which love for God can be expressed is through loving your wife. Similarly, to say that we should focus on the Lord and not the saints is to fail to appreciate that one of the ways we focus on God is by meditating and imitating the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before.

Blessings in Christ,

Canterbury Chris

13 Calvin and Docetism

Dear Geneva George,

Wow – you seem to take the regulative principle as being self-evidently true, and because the comments I have been making fall outside the narrow confines of your application of this principle, they must necessarily be false. But did you ever stop to ask whether the regulative principle, as explained in your last letter, actually conforms to its own criteria? That is to say, does scripture itself teach the legitimacy of the regulative principle as you have articulated it?

I leave that for you to ponder while I move on to address your Biblical arguments and the stuff from Calvin that you gave me to read.

I agree with what you said in your last letter that maintaining the distinction between veneration and worship does not make one immune to the sin of idolatry. Along this line, I think you make a good point about classical pagan idolatry always recognizing the distinction between the image and the things signified. However, where we part ways is when you suggest that “idolatry is present whenever these things become a *means* of worship.” You make a distinction between “adornment and beautification” on the one hand, and “means of worship” on the other, classifying the latter as idolatry. You go on to classify “icons, crucifixes and statues of saints” as “means of worship” and therefore “idolatry.”

Once again, the problem with your argument is exegetical. True, Deuteronomy 4 does forbid the false worship of Yahweh through likenesses (Deut 4:15-18). However, consider that in verse 12 God states that the reason behind this prohibition is because no form of God was seen when He spoke in the midst of the fire. This may help to explain how God can elsewhere mandate that the worship of Him include likenesses of things that *had* specifically been seen, for example the oxen that I have already referred to (2 Chron 4:3-4). But this raises a question: if Deuteronomy 4 doesn't rule out graven images of created things that have been seen, such as oxen, and if it doesn't rule out the use of such objects within worship but actually mandates it (2 Chron 4:3-4), then on what basis can we use Deuteronomy 4 to prohibit graven images of other created things that have been seen and their use within worship, such as icons, crucifixes, and statues of the incarnate Son? To issue a prohibition against all such things is to impose a tighter interpretation of the second commandment on the church than God did on Israel. And that, my friend, is the sin of the Pharisees.

From what I can make of your reasoning, it would seem that the problem hinges on whether these things are functioning as “means of worship.” You use the bronze serpent that Moses made as an example of a “means of worship”, and you suggest that it had to be destroyed precisely because it had become a means of worship. But if the central question is whether things like statues, paintings and icons are functioning as ‘means of worship’ rather than what you call “adornment, beautification”, then we would first need to know what constitutes a “means of worship.” If you are using the phrase in the broader sense that I meant it when discussing the temple, then I'm not sure the distinction between beautification and “means of worship” holds. After all, to say that A is a means to B, is simply to say that A assists with or contributes towards B. In this broader sense, everything from pews in church to the tie I wear when worshiping to the oxygen people breathe during the service is a “means of worship.” We worship the Lord *via* these things in the same way that I love my wife via the kisses I give her or the words of affection that I speak to her. That doesn't mean that the kisses are the object of my love, any more than the oxygen I breathe at church is the object of my worship. To imply such would be absurd. That is why I don't see the relevance of the situation with Moses' bronze serpent. Moses' staff was idolatrous not because it was a means

of worship, but because it became an *object* of worship, with the people offering incense to it (2 Kings 18:4) Go and read 2 Kings 18:4 again!

On the other hand, if you are defining “means of worship” more narrowly to exclude adornment and beautification but to include the use of icons, crucifixes, statues of saints, etc., then how is this not a case of simply taking the practices you disagree with and then categorizing those as “means of worship” while categorizing the practices you are fine with as being adornment and beautification? Wouldn’t such an approach simply reduce your whole argument to a tautology? And couldn’t someone else just as easily define icons, images and statues of saints as being “decoration and beautification” rather than a “means of worship”? I make this point to show that so much of your argument hinges on semantics rather than substantive content.

Thanks for the stuff from Calvin. I do think Calvin was a first-rate thinker, and I have a lot of admiration for him. But in this chapter you gave me to read from the *Institutes* on the “Impiety of Attributing A Visible Form to God”, Calvin is completely sub-par.

I did find it very interesting, in light of what I said in my last letter, that while Calvin goes through all the various times God did appear in a form (as when He appeared in the cloud, the smoke, the flame, and when the Holy Spirit appeared under the form of a dove), he lacks any mention of the incarnation itself! Curiously, Calvin does mention the times when “God sometimes appeared in the form of a man...in anticipation of the future revelation in Christ.” Had the revelation of Christ itself qualified as an instance of God appearing in visible form, one wonders whether Calvin could still have confidently concluded that

It is true that the Lord occasionally manifested his presence by certain signs, so that he was said to be seen face to face; but all the signs he ever employed were in apt accordance with the scheme of doctrine, and, at the same time, gave plain intimation of his incomprehensible essence.

Or consider later in the same chapter of the *Institutes*:

“The Lord, however, not only forbids any image of himself to be erected by a statuary, but to be formed by any artist whatever, because every such image is sinful and insulting to his majesty.”

How these statements of Calvin’s can square with the reality of the incarnation remains a complete mystery to me. If a visible image of God is insulting to His majesty, then the physical body of Christ would have been insulting since that was a visible image of the invisible God according to Colossians 1:15 (“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.”). If this be true, then it’s time to start dishing out the Docetism.

No offence George, but I think you have followed in Calvin’s wake in manifesting a similar type of hermeneutical schizophrenia. Consider, you are more than happy to interpret the fourth commandment through the lens of Christ’s resurrection, yet you stop short of interpreting the second commandment through the lens of the incarnation – that great event when visible form was attributed to God.

In *Institutes* 1.11.1 Calvin wrote that “we must cling to this principle: God’s glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him.” But again, was not form attached to God during the incarnation? In Philippians 2:6-7 Paul describes the Incarnation in terms of Jesus having the “form of God” (εν μορφη θεου) and taking on the “form of a servant” (μορφην δουλου). If “God’s glory is corrupted by an impious falsehood whenever any form is attached to him”, as Calvin argued, then the incarnation is an impious falsehood; ergo, we are still dead in our trespasses.

The incarnation is thus the big elephant in the room that Calvin's iconoclasm always fails to acknowledge. Calvin makes the same mistake in his *Geneva Catechism*, where his argument against images rests on statements about God that are false, even heretical, if applied to the incarnate Son.

Master. - Why is it unlawful to represent God by a visible shape?

Scholar. - Because there is no resemblance between him who is an eternal Spirit and incomprehensible, and a corporeal, corruptible, and lifeless figure. (Deut. iv. 15; Acts xvii. 29; Rom. i. 23.)

Master. - You think then that an insult is offered to his majesty when he is represented in this way?

Scholar. - Such is my belief.

If Calvin is talking about the incarnate Word, then it is Docetic to predicate the qualities of incomprehensibility and non-corporeality to Him. But if Calvin is talking about God the Father (which is more likely), then his argument is a straw man since no one argues for building images of God the Father, although it has occasionally occurred.

Because Calvin believed that the one who is pictured is not worthy to be worshiped, and thus strictly speaking not God, the affirmation of Christ's deity entailed a simultaneous repudiation of images of Christ. The problem here is not Calvin's contention that the divine nature cannot be pictured, because it can't. Rather, the problem is that Calvin fails to recognize that we are able to picture one worthy of worship.

It might be useful to pause and take a moment to clarify what I am not saying, since your last letter seemed to misunderstand me on this point. I am not saying that because of the incarnation that our church services can now become a big free for all, or that public worship can legitimately include elements that fall outside broad scriptural warrant. In this regard, I agree with the nuanced version of the Regulative Principle that Jeff Meyers has articulated in his book *The Lord's Service*. However, I am suggesting that if we are prepared to incorporate the denunciation of all images into the very worship service itself (which is what your church does when it reads the Heidelberg Catechism during the service), and if we are prepared to dismiss as idolatry those ecclesiastical traditions which have been using images for hundreds of years (which is the implication of the Westminster Catechism treating the issue under the Second Commandment), and if we are to join Jordan in condemning as "apostate" all who leave our reformed churches to become a high Anglican, then we need some pretty clear scriptural warrant. At the moment, I struggle to see that such warrant can be found in scripture. I am too much of a good Protestant to jump on board the iconoclast bandwagon without at least a modicum of scriptural support.

I'd love to know your thoughts.

Blessings in Christ,

Canterbury Chris

Faith in All of its Amplitude

Dear Geneva George,

Ok, ok, but even if you are right, your argument would only delegitimize images of Christ. You still have not adequately answered my points about images of saints.

With regard to icons of Christ, you say that the problem is that they either (A) represent Christ's divine nature, (B) represent His human nature; (C) attempt to blend the human and divine natures in a single icon.

Option A, you rightly point out, is impossible; option B leaves us with a false separation of Christ's human and divine nature, which is the heresy of Nestorianism, while option C is the heresy of Monophysitism denying Christ's two natures. To put the icing on the cake, you then quote the Council of Chalcedon's statement that the two natures of Christ exist "without confusion, change, division, or separation; the distinction of natures in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved."

Before explaining what is wrong with your argument, I wonder if you have realized the implications. If this line of reasoning is correct then we should rip out all the pictures of Jesus from Sunday school curriculum, never participate in any Easter pageant, refuse to watch Mel Gibson's film *The Passion*, and Christ's disciples should never even have pictured Jesus in their minds. Moreover, we must not even *talk* about Christ, because one could always turn around and say, "if your statement about Christ is in reference to His divine nature, then you haven't done adequate justice to it since language is circumscribed and finite; but if your language about Christ is in reference to His human nature only, then you have falsely separated Christ's human nature from His divine nature like the heretic Nestorius; but if your statement about Christ attempts to blend both the human and the divine natures, then you have committed the heresy of Monophysitism." Thus the problem with the argument is that, if true, it proves too much.

But, in fact, the argument hinges on a false trilemma that can be exposed by paying more attention to Chalcedonian Christology. You seem to forget that the Council of Chalcedon distinguished between Christ's *nature* and His *person*. The above argument only works if the purpose of an icon is to portray Christ's human nature. But no one has ever argued that. Defenders of icons throughout the centuries have always argued that the purpose of an icon is to portray the *person* of Christ in which the two natures are united. An icon of Christ does not blend the two natures, but represents the person who has two natures. As Daniel Clendenin has put it, summarizing the arguments used by Christians throughout history to defend images of Christ:

"An icon, then, did not attempt to represent either the human or the divine nature alone, but instead the unity and totality of the two natures in a single person. The defenders of icons pointed to the Eucharist, the precrucifixion transfiguration, and even the glorified, post-resurrection Christ as examples demonstrating how the totality of the divine-human person remained at the same time fully divine, fully human, and necessarily localized and therefore circumscribable."

With regard to images of saints, your arguments about mediation and idolatry are simply sophistic and lack any meaningful content. Sorry for putting it bluntly! Consider your statement, "Any time an image, picture of anything is used as a medium through which to worship God, that thing becomes idolatrous and falls under the prohibition of the second commandment." The problem here is that your concerns about 'mediums' are just as vacuous

as your earlier remarks about “means of worship.” The dictionary defines ‘medium’ as an intermediate or middle condition between one thing and another thing. Now if we are going to maintain that *anything* which is a medium through which to worship God is automatically idolatrous, then not only must images be rejected, but so must the sacraments, hymns, prayers, Bibles, speech and even the natural world itself, since all these things can play a part in being intermediaries between God and man. Indeed, if we sing Psalm 104 in worship, with all its wonderful description of mountains, valleys and seas, then the natural world is in some sense acting as a middle condition (“medium”) between one thing (us) and another thing (God). The idea that worship has to be direct and unmediated seems to be a myth perpetuated by revivalism and has no place even in historic Protestantism. Images in worship may be inappropriate, but you cannot argue for that based solely on the fact that they function as “mediums.”

It is important to make these fine theological distinctions since it reveals that the typical iconoclastic position rests on shoddy thinking, illogical argumentation and (most importantly) unsound Biblical exegesis. Above all, your iconoclastic approach seems to hinge on the leaky bucket fallacy whereby you will employ one argument that is illogical in itself to come to the aid of another argument that is also illogical in itself, and after doing this about half a dozen times you feel like you have a case, when in reality all you have is just six or seven leaky buckets stacked inside one another. Put another way, a bad argument doesn’t become a good argument just because it has been joined together with other bad arguments.

I appreciate your concern that “Even if the use of images in worship may not always be idolatrous in the strict sense, the mere potential for idolatry to creep in is itself sufficient grounds to object to such practices.” Certainly idolatry is always a danger whenever a good thing is embraced. However, to try to eradicate all potential for idolatry (which seems to be what motivates you to eliminate all visual aids in worship) would be to dismiss every good gift which the Lord has given us. This is the basic problem with your slippery slope argument.

It also seems that we should be cautious of the tendency to guard most tenaciously against those heresies that are generally not temptations to us, while lowering our defenses against those excesses which we really ought to be guarding against. High church Protestants like myself love to talk about the dangers of dualism just as modern evangelicals love to talk about the dangers of externalism and ritualism, while fundamentalists like to focus on the dangers of liberalism. At some level, such polemics can function to obscure the idols in our own midst. Applied to the question before us, we would do well to question whether the paranoia among you and your Calvinist friends against the alleged idolatry of using visual objects in worship has obscured the Gnosticism, Docetism and semi-Manichaeism in your own camp. (OK, I’m being intentionally polemical, but the question is a legitimate one.) Moreover, by attempting to remove visual apparatuses from the place of worship, are you not subtly underscoring the secular axiom that religion has its locale only in the heart rather than the physical realm? Are you not implicitly colluding with the Gnostic notion (revived by post-enlightenment spirituality) that spiritual truth must be kept unbodied?

This is not merely an academic concern: In my youth I was involved in more than one Protestant group that descended down the slippery slope from the matter/spiritual dualism of radical Protestantism (complete with a large dose of iconoclasm) to Gnosticism and then finally to the New Age. Usually this process occurs over many generations. It is easy for Evangelicals to think about visual objects in worship as the slippery slope to idolatry and externalism, while being oblivious to the very real sense in which the elimination of these things can function as the slippery slope into a worse state of affairs. This was something that Dorothy Sayers was acutely conscious of when her play, *The Man Born to be King*, was preparing to be performed. The drama was criticized for represented Christ on the stage. At

the time she wrote the play, there was a law forbidding the representation of Christ on the stage unless the producer first received a special dispensation. In her introduction to the play Sayers suggested that this law had “helped to foster the notion that all such representations were intrinsically wicked, and had encouraged a tendency, already sufficiently widespread, towards that Docetic and totally heretical Christology which denies the full Humanity of our Lord.”

Now naturally idolatry is going to slip in anywhere it can, and it would be fatal to trust to any system of worship as a safeguard against idolatry. Yet the argument that visual objects are a Trojan horse to idolatry can go both ways. Along these lines, one cannot help but wonder whether the slippery slope from rationalism to liberalism and from liberalism to apostasy that has ravaged the Puritan’s descendants in both America and England may have started, in part, with an overly cerebral orientation that would never have been sustainable had the whole body (ears, mouth and *eyes*) been robustly participating in the worship of the Triune God. It should also not be overlooked that the dualisms of dispensational movement only came about after years of non-physical worship oriented the American church to unconsciously think of matter and spirit as divisible. We might also ask with profit whether the tendency towards a privatized religion that is pushed on us from both secularism and much of the Postmodern project (and has resulted in the apostasy of so young people from Christian homes), is made more plausible by the Gnostic and semi-Manichaeian orientation that is in the very air of Anglo-American Protestant culture and for which the use of images in worship can serve as a practical antidote. This is a point that Thomas Howard makes in his excellent book *Evangelical is not Enough*. Howard remarks that

...the Reformation has a lively sense of how prone we all are to magic and idolatry. We mortals would much rather bob at the cross than embrace its truth in our hearts. To light candles is much easier for us than to be consumed with the self-giving fire of charity so effectively symbolized by those candles. We lavish respect on the altar at the front of the church and neglect the sacrifice of a pure heart. Evangelicalism presses home these observations, quite rightly.

But it is one thing to see dangers; it is another to be true to the Faith in all of its amplitude. By avoiding the dangers of magic and idolatry on the one hand, evangelicalism runs itself very near the shoals of Manichaeism on the other – the view, that is, that pits the spiritual against the physical. Its bare spare churches, devoid of most Christian symbolism...be speak its correct attempt to keep the locale of faith where it must ultimately be, in the heart of man. But by denying the whole realm of Christian life and practice the principle that it allows in all the other realms of life, namely, the principle of symbolism and ceremony and imagery, it has, despite its loyalty to orthodox doctrine, managed to give a semi-Manichaeian hue to the faith...

If by its practice [our religion] implies that colors and symbols and gestures and ceremonies and smells are inappropriate for the house of the Lord and must be kept outside, for ‘secular’ and domestic celebrations like birthdays, parades, weddings, and Christmas banquets, then it has driven a wedge between his deepest human yearnings and the God who made them

Great stuff, eh?

Sincerely,

Canterbury Chris

15

Stepping Stones to God

Dear Geneva George,

In response to the question you posed at the end of your last letter, yes I do agree that images can and often do function idolatrously. But my reason for thinking this is very different to yours, and this is crucial since it affects the pastoral approach I would take when counseling someone struggling in this area. There are a number of ways that images can function idolatrously, and I hope to address those in my next letter. In this letter I wanted to spend some time camping out around your comment that I have been “compromising with the core commitments of Protestantism.” This is a curious inference to make from the fact that I have refused to jump on your bandwagon of radical iconoclasm. Moreover, your statement is not even historically accurate, since iconoclasm hardly has a monopoly on the Protestant tradition. This is best appreciated by comparing the different approaches of Calvin and Luther.

Luther’s own crisis of faith had led to an experience of divine favor that would propel him to always emphasize the immediacy of God’s supernatural grace. For Luther, God’s presence could be mediated in physical objects used in worship no less than the natural world (“God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees, and flowers, and clouds, and stars”), while the keen interest he took in music would assure that art would always retain a special place in mediating to man something of God’s beauty, majesty and awe (this, of course, reached fruition in J.S. Bach). Luther had no problem with stepping-stones to God, provided they were not sinful. Thus, the Lutheran churches of the reformation retained much of the embodiment of Medieval Catholicism, including crucifixes, pictures and images of saints and angels, vestments, ceremonial lights, beautified altars, and so forth. For Luther, these things need not subtract from emphasis on the Word but can actually enhance it. Thus, Luther’s German translation of the scriptures, as well as his catechisms, were adorned with numerous woodcuttings. Grace for Luther was not a zero-sum game, where God can only be glorified at the expense of the creation.

By contrast, the dispassionate and logical Calvin tended to emphasize God’s absolute transcendence, majesty and otherness. While this highlighted an important aspect of the Bible’s teaching about God (to say nothing of being a necessary corrective to many medieval notions and practices), a downside is that it tended to mitigate against those tangible gestures of piety which remain embedded in materiality, thereby subtly depreciating God’s eminence. This can be clearly seen in the churches that grew up in those lands influenced by the Calvinist strain of reformation, which tended to downplay the physical-ness of worship in a way reminiscent of the ancient Gnostics. I have already had occasion to remark on this crypto-Gnosticism in Calvin’s approach to images, but Calvin’s nascent hostility to physicality in worship can also be seen in his discussion of music. “...the singing which calvin allowed was in fact sung prayer in unison” (not harmony) writes William Dyrness, while musical instruments were among the shadows that were dispelled “when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated.” To quote from Calvin himself:

“With respect to the tabret, harp, and psaltery, we have formerly observed, and will find it necessary afterwards to repeat the same remark, that the Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people, while they were yet tender and like children, by such rudiments until the coming of Christ. But now, when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the shadows of the law and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler

form, it would be to act a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time ... We are to remember that the worship of God was never understood to consist in such outward services, which were only necessary to help forward a people as yet weak and rude in knowledge in the spiritual worship of God. A difference is to be observed in this respect between his people under the Old and under the New Testament; for now that Christ has appeared, and the church has reached full age, it were only to bury the light of the gospel should we introduce the shadows of a departed dispensation.”

Some of Calvin’s enthusiasts have been tempted to gloss over his views on musical instruments as if they are an anomaly. But it is important to appreciate the basic continuity that his views on instruments have with his larger theological commitments, including those which dominate most reformed churches to this day. Writing from within the reformed tradition, William Dyrness asked in 2004 “Why have the walls of my own (Protestant) churches always been bereft of imagery and color when the churches of my friends have frequently been crowded with images and carvings? Why has my worship experience centered around sermons and studies with carefully constructed outlines, while that of my friends has often focused centrally on movement and drama?” The answer to this question is not rocket science. To put it bluntly, Calvin eschewed Lutheran physicality, aiming to keep worship closely tethered to those things which could be formulated in didactic and cognitive terms. As Evelyn Underhill noted in *Worship*:

In the type of worship which [Calvin] established, we seem to see the result of a great religious experience - the impact of the Divine Transcendence on the awe-struck soul - and the effort towards a response which is conditioned by a deep sense of creaturely limitation, but deficient in homely and child-like dispositions; and, with intrepid French logic, refuses the use of creaturely aids. Calvin desired, as so many great religious souls have done, a completely spiritual cultus; ascending towards a completely spiritual Reality, and rejecting all the humble ritual methods and all the sensible signs by which men are led to express their adoration of the Unseen. God, who 'hath no image', was the ultimate fact. Therefore a pitiless lucidity of mind, which ignored the mysterious relation between poetry and reality, and the need of stepping-stones from the successive to the Eternal, insisted that all which is less than God must be abjured when man turns to adoration. Unlike Luther, Calvin was really hostile to the mediaeval embodiments of worship. He regarded them with abhorrence, and went to all lengths in the fury of his denunciation. Without Luther's first-hand knowledge of Catholic devotion, and interpreting Catholic theology in terms of the crude popular religion of the time, he even felt able to say that in the Roman Mass "all that a criminal godlessness could devise is done". Hence he cast away without discrimination the whole of the traditional apparatus of Catholicism; its episcopal order, its liturgy, symbols, cultus. No organ or choir was permitted in his churches: no colour, no ornament but a table of the Ten Commandments on the wall. No ceremonial acts or gestures were permitted. No hymns were sung but those derived from a Biblical source. The bleak stripped interior of the real Calvinist church is itself sacramental: a witness to the inadequacy of the human over against the Divine.”

I could be wrong, but I sometimes wonder whether the type of minimalism described by Underhill, and apparent throughout your last few letters, is the result of subtly seeing grace as a zero-sum game. God can only be properly honored, you seem to think, at the expense of the creation, including human beings. Thus, in order to give God His proper glory

and honor, we have to make sure there is no glory and honor given to created things, including those things of beauty which human beings create.

Regards,

Canterbury Chris

16 Praying to Saints

Dear Geneva George,

OK, you asked me to explain how an image can become an idol. To answer this question I'm going to jump upstream a bit and look at ancient pagan idolatry and prayers to saints. By the end of the letter I hope to have connected the dots to the question of images.

In the ancient pagan world, certain gods and demigods had powers in specific areas. For example, Hermes was the god of messengers, travel, and a few other things. So if you were preparing to take a long journey or to send an important message, you would want to invoke Hermes rather than, say, Demeter, who was goddess of agriculture and grain. But if you were going on a journey to buy grain, you might want to invoke both Hermes and Demeter, to increase your chances of a successful enterprise.

When the gospel originally permeated the polytheistic world, many common people began treating saints in the way they had previously treated their pagan gods and demigods. So different saints were seen to have different specialties, and by knowing the area each saint specialized in, one could more effectively evoke their blessing, favor and assistance. For example, Saint Joseph is the patron saint of travel while saint Saint Bernard (778 –842) is the patron saint of agriculture.

Over time, as legends accumulated about the different saints, their range of specialties increased, so that Wikipedia tells me that Saint Joseph is considered to be the patron saint, not only of travel, but also of doubt, hesitation, dying people, expectant mothers, happy death, holy death, interior souls, people in doubt, people who fight Communism, pioneers, pregnant women, travellers, and fetuses. (Wikipedia is not where we go to for theology, but it can be very useful in giving the popular view of things, which is what I'm concerned about right now.) One of my favorites is Saint Gertrude of Nivelles (626–659) who can be “invoked against fever, rats, and mice, particularly field-mice.” I like the “particularly field-mice” bit. If you have a house-mice problem, you might be better off with Saint Servatius from the 4th century, since he deals in all kinds of mice, in addition to rats and trouble with your feet.

It can be easy for Protestants to miss the actual problem inherent in these practices. They typically think that the whole issue can be settled simply by appealing to 1 Timothy 2:5, which says that “there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.” The invocation of saints, therefore, subtracts from the mediatory role of Christ according to this argument. However, if you ever use this line of reasoning against a non-Protestant, they will simply reply, “How is asking a saint to pray for me any different than asking you to pray for me?” They will go on to point out that to “pray” simply means to petition, so to pray to a saint is simply to petition them to talk to God on our behalf.

When we were at the conference and I asked you to pray that my job interview went well, did that mean that I was turning you into an idol? Did that mean that I was using you to replace the mediatory role of Christ? Certainly not! So why is it any different if I ask Saint Ignatius to pray for me? If we say that the difference is that you can hear me and Saint Ignatius cannot, then I can accept that. But although talking to someone who can't hear me may be a waste of time, do we really want to call it idolatry? Let's assume for the sake of argument that it is idolatry to talk to someone who cannot hear me. If it is, then am I guilty of idolatry every time I speak to my wife when I think she is in the same room but she really isn't?

Of course, the above argument breaks down when we realize that petitioning a saint to pray for me is not like asking a living person to pray for me. Return to the analogy with pagan polytheism. On a grass-roots level, the invocation of saints has functioned very

similarly to the invocation of pagan gods and goddesses, together with all the superstitions that went along with it. In fact, a good historical argument can be made that the former was the genesis of the latter.

The devotional lives of many non-Protestants are testimony to the fact that in practice the saints function as a half-way house between us and God. Because the saints are holier than us, and because they are already in God's presence, the assumption is often that it can be effective to ask them to put in a good word for us. Tom Wright describes how the dynamic works in his book *For All The Saints*:

Within this scheme, the saints, being in heaven and in the intimate presence of God, could pray directly to him on behalf of those still here on earth. The image in mind is of a medieval court. Here I am, let us suppose, in my village a hundred miles away from London. How can I get the king to take any notice of me? Well, there is a man from my village, an old friend of my father's, who is the chief pastry-cook at the palace. He will put in a word for me. I have, in that sense, 'a friend at court'. In the same way, the saints were thought of as being that much closer to God than we were; but since they were our own folk, humans like us, they could sympathize with us, see the problems we were facing, and present our case before the royal throne. To this end, we in turn could and should call upon them ('invoke' is the word normally used), asking them to pray for us, and sometimes simply asking them to do things for us directly. This aspect of belief in the saints, in their accessibility to us and usefulness on our behalf, was and is among the most popular features of piety for some Christians...

In this way, the invocation of saints has functioned to obscure the reality both of our direct access to the King, and of Jesus' closeness to each and every one of us by virtue of His humanity. The problem is that our Heavenly Father is not some distant king that we can more effectively reach by going through someone else; on the contrary, each and every one of us should feel confident to approach Him directly through the blood of Jesus.

Thus, when the issue is fleshed out a bit, we see that the common Protestant objection - that saints subtract from Christ's mediator role - is essentially a sound objection provided that it is filled in with attention to what happens on ground level.

Still, someone might rejoin, as long as one avoids the above tendencies, is it idolatrous to ask saints to intercede? Given that idolatry is fundamentally a state of the heart, it is impossible to answer a question like this in the abstract. Yet even if one avoids the errors mentioned above, and even if one has not turned the saints into idols, there are still good reasons not to invoke their intercessions.

One such reason is that it is far from certain that the saints can actually hear us (I can think of no Biblical evidence suggesting that they can hear us), so speaking to them may be a waste of time. But let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the saints do hear us when we speak to them. That would mean that popular saints, such as Mary, would have to be virtually omnipresent to process all the requests simultaneously occurring at any one point of time. To assume that Mary can hear and deal with the requests of her votaries is to assume that she has transcended certain limitations of being a creature. Now in principle this is not problematic, since we know that sanctification involves taking up many aspects of the divine nature. But unless we have evidence for thinking it is probable that Mary has indeed been endowed with these sort of abilities, talking to her may be an exercise in futility. Some have suggested that when we talk to the saints, God picks up our requests and 'delivers' those requests to the saint in question. In that scenario, what is happening is this: I am asking Mary to pray for me; God picks up my request for Mary and delivers it; Mary receives my request and then delivers it

back to God. Apart from the problem that this is all pure speculation, my immediate question would be: why not just streamline the process by going directly to God in the first place? (I am not, of course, implying that those who pray to saints do not also pray to God.)

One final problem arises from the fact that in practice petitions to saints function very much like prayer to God and even (dare I say it) like *worship*. Would you talk to another human being like the Eastern Orthodox talk to Saint Nicholas in the following prayer?

A PRAYER TO SAINT NICHOLAS

With divine myrrh the divine grace of the Spirit anointed thee,
who didst preside as the leader of Myra,
and having made the ends of the world fragrant with the myrrh of virtues,
thou holiest of men,
through the pleasant breathings of thine intercessions
always driving away the evil stench of the passions.
Therefore, in faith we render thee great praise,
and celebrate thine all-holy memory, O Nicholas.
O blessed Nicholas,
show compassion to me who fall down praying to thee;
and enlighten the eyes of my soul, O wise one,
that I may clearly behold the Light-Giver and Compassionate One.
The truth of things revealed thee to thy flock as a rule of faith,
an icon of meekness and a teacher of temperance;
therefore, thou hast achieved the heights by humility, riches by poverty.
O Father and Hierarch Nicholas,
intercede with Christ God that our souls be saved.

While it might be hard to isolate any one aspect of the above prayer and label it as idolatry, let's consider the whole package. This is a prayer being offered up to Nicholas in a service devoted especially to him in which there are icons of Nicholas that the priest can bow down to while offering the prayer. This is a prayer being offered up to Nicholas in a service devoted to him. There are icons of Nicholas the priest can bow to while offering the prayer. Moreover, the prayer itself shows that there is more going on than merely asking a saint to pray for me and praising God's work in his life. The assumption seems to be that Nicholas himself has power to grant our requests ("show compassion to me...enlighten the eyes of my soul"), including helping us in our salvation ("intercede with Christ God that our souls be saved"). The same problem can be found in many of the Marian hymns: "Honour her that she may free thee from thy many sins. Call on her, lest the storm of sins overtake thee." Here Mary is assumed to have quasi-divine honours that she can employ to directly help us, even to save us from our sins.

Within this larger context, we see that the statement, "If it's wrong to ask the Saints to pray for me, it's wrong to ask you to pray for me" is a flawed argument precisely because it overlooks the fact that Saints are given a mediatorial role that transcends anything possessed by us here on earth.

Now I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In the book of Revelation the martyrs in heaven are interceding for justice to be done on the earth (Rev. 6:10). Thus, I have no problem affirming that the saints in heaven are interceding for us. But this is something very different to evoking their help or assuming they can help us in a way that requires levels of functional divinity. Similarly, there is no Biblical reason why praying *for* (as opposed *to*) dead people should be off-limits, as C.S. Lewis rightly observed in his *Letters to Malcolm*.

One final point before I explain what this has to do with images. One of the saddest things about the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox misuse of saints is that many Protestants are afraid of giving our mothers and fathers in the faith their due honor. This is once again a case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Protestant approaches to Mary. Though Mary said herself that future generations would call her blessed, there are many Protestants who hate Mary with a passion, while others simply ignore her altogether. This is quite sad and we Protestants have a long way to go to recover a proper and balanced Maryology.

Now what does any of this have to do with images? Simply that images are often the instrumental means whereby prayers to saints are conducted. It is through the images that we connect with the saints, just as it is through the saints that we connect with Jesus. Thus, when a non-Protestant venerates an image of saint Irenaeus or a statue of the blessed Virgin, there is often more going on than if I were to bow to an American flag (though that is a different whole subject) or kiss a Bible. Venerating material objects is not wrong in itself (Protestants do it all the time without realizing it), but if done as part of the wider package of praying to saints, it is unbiblical if not actually idolatrous.

Regards,

Canterbury Chris

17 Anthropology

Dear Geneva George,

I want to pick up on something you wrote in response to the Thomas Howard quote. You suggest that all this stuff about an embodied faith fails to take into account the primary role of preaching the Word. “Worship” you say, “should flow out of correct doctrine. It is crucial to remember which precedes which in order to keep our liturgical practices from lapsing into empty ritual or even idolatry.”

I think this serves to highlight one of our more fundamental differences. The problem with seeing worship as first and foremost an expression of worldview or doctrines is that it assumes what James K.A. Smith has described as a top-down, ideas-first anthropology. It assumes that doctrines are the gas that makes the engine go, whereas doctrines are really just like the car’s oil. The thing that gives life to the whole show – the gas that drives the engine – is our *loves* not our doctrines.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. When I refer to a rationalistic anthropology I refer to those constellations of practices and assumptions which assume that human identity is primarily cognitive, that what we think defines who we are. I am arguing, on the other hand, that it is our desires (what we *love* not what we *think*) that gives us our fundamental identity as human beings. And here’s the rub: our loves are cultivated through the embodied practices of communal ritual, through material practices that educate our desire and, in so doing, shape our identity on a level far deeper than the cognitive mind is even aware.

If you have read James K.A. Smith’s excellent book *Desiring the Kingdom*, you will see that I am very much tracking with him here. Referring to the rationalist model of identity which I feel you have implicitly assumed, Smith writes,

“While this model of the person as thinking thing assumed different forms throughout modernity (e.g., in Kant, Hegel), this rationalist picture was absorbed particularly by Protestant Christianity (whether liberal or conservative), which tends to operate with an overly cognitivist picture of the human person and thus tends to foster an overly intellectualist account of what it means to be or become a Christian. . . It is just this adoption of a rationalist, cognitivist anthropology that accounts for the shape of so much Protestant worship as a heady affair fixated on messages. . . The result is a talking-head version of Christianity that is fixated on doctrines and ideas. . .”

Smith contrasts this cognitivist anthropology with secular liturgies, such as those which surround consumerism and nationalism. The appeal inherent in the mall, or the seductive pull of American nationalism, is that these things are advertised by those who understand that the heart is the portal to a person’s allegiance, and the body is the portal to a person’s heart. They advertise their vision of the good life by recognizing that our fundamental identity – that which drives our desires – is not first and foremost cognitive, but bodily. Smith goes on to write that

"while the mall, Victoria's Secret, and Jerry Bruckheimer are grabbing hold of our gut (*kardia*) by means of our body and its senses - in stories and images, sights and sounds, and commercial versions of 'smells and bells' - the church's response is oddly rationalist. It plunks us down in a 'worship service, the culmination of which is a

forty-five minute didactic sermon, a sort of holy lecture, trying to convince us of the dangers by implanting doctrines and beliefs in our minds. While the mall paradoxically appreciates that we are liturgical, desiring animals, the (Protestant) church still tends to see us as Cartesian minds. While secular liturgies are after our hearts through our bodies, the church thinks it only has to get into our heads. While Victoria's Secret is fanning a flame in our *kardia*, the church is trucking water to our minds. While secular liturgies are enticing us with affective images of a good life, the church is trying to convince us otherwise by depositing ideas. ...We may have construed worship as a primarily didactic, cognitive affair and thus organized it around a *message* that fails to reach our embodied hearts, and thus fails to touch our *desire*.

Thus, our ultimate loves are tied to a certain vision of what we think human flourishing looks like, a vision that moves us to think “*this is the good life.*” But that vision is affective and implicit before it becomes the material of direct cognition. It is an inchoate vision that grabs our unconscious with an aesthetic pull in a way similar to how David Brooks described the formation of political preferences in his book *The Social Animal*.

I would argue, George, that you have implicitly assumed a cognitivist anthropology of the human person when you write about the job of the minister as being first and foremost to educate a person's mind in correct doctrines. Many of the other things you have said tend towards what Hart called a “theological or moral reductionism in which Protestants boiled down the Christian faith to its doctrinal or ethical core.”

If your implicit operating assumption is that we are primarily defined by what we think, then we will view church as first and foremost a vehicle for preaching the Word, for giving doctrinal instruction and for equipping the saints for another week of thinking correct thoughts. This is, in fact, the mistake committed by Calvin, whose rationalism led him to treat prayers, singing and even the Eucharist itself as simply adjuncts to the preaching of the Word. Writing about the reforms Calvin introduced into Geneva in his book *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, William Dyrness pointed out that “These reforms made possible a new way of experiencing both worship and the broader world. In Calvin's Geneva the instruction in the catechism, the prayers even the singing, all were a dramatic elaboration of the preached word (which itself rested on the structure outlined in the *Institutes*).... While there is great beauty in St. Peter's church [where Calvin preached], which is visible to this day, the space and environment of worship did not play a major role in the thinking of Calvin.” Dyrness explains what this Word-centred culture looked like in practice during a typical week:

“Sunday services in Geneva were to begin with sermons ‘at break of day’ at St. Peter's (Calvin's parish church) and St. Gervais, then again at the usual hour at all three churches. At noon the catechism was to be taught to children at all three churches. At three o'clock there would be a third sermon at St. Peter's and St. Gervais. Additionally at St. Peter's, services were to be held three times a week, on Monday, Tuesday and Friday. For these services ministers were appointed – this schedule needed, at the beginning, five ministers and five coadjutor ministers.”

On the other hand, if the anthropology sketched above is correct, then it makes sense to adopt a more sacramental and liturgical view of worship, one which recognizes that our loves are cultivated not primarily by through hearing correct doctrine but by the embodied practices of communal ritual and through material practices that educate our desires and, in

so doing, shape our very identity. (Again, this is all James K.A. Smith stuff, though it goes back as far as Saint Augustine and the Psalmists.)

Now I don't want to make a false dilemma between things that are really two sides of the same coin, but the reason this is not a false dilemma is because there can be a priority of emphasis in two things which are both true. I use the phrase "first and foremost" to emphasize that this is not an either/or situation, but a matter of what receives more emphasis and which comes first. It's a question of what is the more fundamental locus of our identity: is it what we think in our mind, or what we desire in our hearts? Part of the problem with the reformed tradition (especially those with Presbyterian and Puritan roots) is that it has tended to answer this question with reference to the former. What Diarmaid MacCulloch said of the English Puritans in his book *The Reformation* tends to be fairly typical of the Presbyterian mindset:

Observations of the way in which the Prayer Book was used had increasingly disenchanted Puritans with liturgical approaches to God. They became convinced that preaching was the only way in which Christians should in normal circumstances receive God's truth: Calvin said similar things, but had never been so categorical in asserting that a sermon was 'the ordinary means of salvation'. Now they felt it a matter of scandal that there were not enough sermons in England – a major proof of the Church's corruption.

The result of this disenchantment with liturgical approaches, together with the notion that worship is first and foremost a matter of instruction in the Word of God, is a highly cognitivist account of what it means to be a person.

I can't wait to know what you think about this.

Sincerely,

Canterbury Chris

18

Liturgies of Desire

Dear Geneva George,

Thank you for your feedback. I can tell from your response that I didn't communicate as clearly as I had hoped. But I am glad I perked your interest in reading James Smith's book *Desiring the Kingdom*. I think that book will go a long ways towards clearing up some of the confusions you expressed in your latest letter.

You said you couldn't grasp my point about the relationship between anthropology and worship. Let me try to explain it like this. If we have a cognitivist anthropology of the human person, then we will see the job of the minister as being first and foremost to educate a person's mind in correct doctrines. What results is that church begins to have a whole feel about it which is more like attending lecture than ascending into the heavenlies. If we emphasize, even implicitly, that worship is first and foremost about the teaching that is imparted and received, then this is probably because we have unconsciously imbibed an anthropology which assumes that our fundamental identity is cognitive. Such an anthropology cannot help but lead to an unbiblical ecclesiology, a subtle-deemphasizing of the sacraments and an inflated premium on doctrinal categories (it seems that this has happened in much of the Calvinist tradition, despite "officially" keeping Word and Sacrament parallel).

The alternative is to aim deeper than our minds at our heart, by nurturing a vision of the good life that seeps into our very gut. Smith argues that this occurs by appealing first to our imaginations and aesthetic sensibilities through the habit forming rituals that are the fulcrum of desire. Many of the rhythms and rituals of the catholic (lowercase c) tradition do just that. Practices like genuflecting, crossing ourselves and kneeling to receive the blessed Eucharist, are more than merely accessories to the really important business of preaching the Word, but are part of a communal expression of what constitutes the good life. These physical practices seek to aim our desires through habit forming rituals involving our body. That is why rituals like this can so deeply inscribe a certain vision of the world in our hearts. Such practices get into our bones and prime us to a certain picture of human flourishing that penetrates deeper than mere cognition. To quote again from Smith,

Our worldview is more a matter of the imagination than the intellect, and the imagination runs off the fuel of images that are channeled by the senses...The senses are portals to the heart, and thus the body is a channel to our core dispositions and identity. Over time, rituals and practices – often in tandem with aesthetic phenomena like pictures and stories – mold and shape our precognitive dispositions to the world by training our desires. It's as if our appendages function as a conduit to our adaptive unconscious: the motions and rhythms of embodied routines train our minds and hearts so that we develop habits – sort of attitudinal reflexes – that make us tend to act in certain ways toward certain ends.

You suggested in your last letter that I was guilty of creating a false dilemma. I agree that if I am positing a choice between being thinking people vs. being people who love, then it was indeed a false dilemma. But that is not what I have been suggesting, nor is it what Jamie Smith has argued, as you will see when you read his book. Rather, the question is which precedes which and what is more fundamental to our identity. Human beings brush their teeth, but our lives do not revolve around tooth-brushing. Similarly, human beings are thinkers, yet this is not the fundamental locus of our identity. We are what we *love* because it is what we love and desire that shapes our actions and thoughts on a precognitive level. Yet

your discussion of worship makes it seem as if the human person is first and foremost defined by what he thinks. Thus, I suspect that our differences about ecclesiology are at root really disagreements about anthropology.

Even on a purely historical level, the way you order things gets it completely wrong. The early Christians were worshipping Jesus long before their Christological theology was formalized. When they did come to articulate a formal theology, their conclusions were drawn largely from their worship practices, not the other way round. For example, the church recognized that it had been worshipping Jesus and therefore Jesus cannot have been created since created things are unworthy of our worship. *lex orans, lex credens* — the rule of worship is the rule of faith. As Bryan Owen put it in his review of Aidan Kavanagh's *On Liturgical Theology*,

It is not the case that the disciples first engaged in theological reflection on the resurrection as a means of reaching the conclusion that "Jesus is Lord." On the contrary, Kavanagh would insist on just the opposite scenario: the disciples responded to the resurrection by proclaiming in worshipful adoration that "Jesus is Lord." Only subsequently were the theological implications spelled out in doctrines and creeds. Liturgical response to God in Christ preceded theological articulation of the doctrinal meaning of God in Christ.

It follows that academic theology, properly understood and practiced, grows out of the liturgical action of worship....The fruits cannot take the place of the root, but rather are dependent upon the root for their very existence. Put differently, the liturgical praxis of the Christian community is the seedbed for the more cognitive and reflective aspects of belief.

You ask why this is important to me. Here's one reason. As I watch and observe what happens to young people who fall away from the faith, it seems that quite often it isn't for any lack of correct doctrine, but because another vision of the good life has been nurtured in their gut. The vision of the good life presented in the liturgies of consumerism, or the hedonistic liturgies implicit in so much of pop culture, grab hold of our young people's imaginations, aesthetic sensibilities and desires through an appeal to the body. These rival visions of the good life seep into our very bones and gut long before they become cognitive, and the reason they are so compelling is they do justice to our materiality.

Now what happens if church is so self-consciously non-seeker-friendly that we neglect her role in aiming for the gut? What happens is that we simply cannot compete with these other liturgies — the secular liturgies that seduce us precisely because they are pre-cognitive and are designed to have aesthetic appeal for the body. The un-sacramental, intellectualistic model of church which says, "We gather first and foremost to hear the preaching of the Word" completely misses the mark because it neglects to capture the heart on this deeper level. Such a model sees all the cadences of worship as primarily an "expression" of our worldview, which again falsely assumes this same top-down, ideas-first anthropology.

Am I making more sense now? I hope so!

Regards,

Canterbury Chris

Aiming at the Heart

Dear Geneva George,

Thanks for giving me Terry Johnson's little book *Reformed Worship*. I must confess I haven't read it yet, but I hope to get to it this week.

You wrote, "*The distinction you make between the cognitive approach vs. the liturgical approach neglected to take into account a third factor, namely lifestyle. Your discussion of youth being seduced by alternative models of the good life failed to consider that this is often because they do not see Christianity lived.*" Thank you for bringing this up, though your description of my distinction suggests that you still may not have grasped my basic point.

To start with, I am not making a distinction between church being really cognitive vs. church being really liturgical. To do so would be to pit two things against each other that are two sides of the same coin. Rather, I am arguing that while the cognitive element is important and must be present, it is not what comes first and foremost. It is our identity as *lovers* – as beings who *desire* – that forms a person's center of gravity. This most fundamental part of us is reached through many things, not least through rituals that reach the heart via the body. That is why physical postures of adoration are so important. Bryan Owen hit the nail on the head when he observed (again in his review of Aidan Kavanagh's *On Liturgical Theology*) that "Adoration precedes assent to dogmatic propositions."

Your point about lifestyle merely underscores this point. Many Christian parents have taught their sons and daughters all the correct doctrine, yet because they have not lived it out in front of their children, when the children grow up they end of walking away from the faith. The parents' hypocritical lifestyle has failed to convince the children that the faith is lovely (something worthy of adoration), and hence the youth fall prey to rival images of the good life. I have even seen people turn to rival images of the good life while still believing cognitively that the faith is true. But while there are many examples of youth abandoning a faith they know is true because their hearts have been lured by rival images of the good life, how many times have you heard of it working the other way round? How many young people do you know who have abandoned the worldview of Christianity without first having been enticed by a rival vision of the good life? Not very many, if any, and here's why: our center of gravity is not the mind, but the heart. It is the heart which sends us the message, "This is the good life," or "This is not the good life." Now the lifestyle in the Christian home is crucial here, since our behavior in front of our children will unconsciously inscribe one of these two messages in the hearts of our children. The hundreds of little things we do with our kids from playing with them to disciplining them to just patiently listening to them talk, all help to reinforce that *this* is the good life. What is being reinforced is pre-reflective automated desires that only afterwards take form in abstract thought.

This is because the truth of the gospel is not an abstract or purely intellectual truth, but an engaged, embodied, and particular truth – something that must be done and not merely talked about. Now if the lifestyle within the Christian home needs to take account of this love-shaped anthropology, then it seems that the life in the church should do so as well. But this can never happen as long as we are subscribe to the type of cognitivist anthropology that underpinned so much of your second to last letter.

This has a profound impact on our apologetics. Our apologetics must not be merely intellectual, occupied with the Big Questions of the universe and its origins. We must also engage in "cultural apologetics", working to transform the rhythms and practices of our culture, not least the culture of our Christian communities and churches, to reflect the beauty and desirability of Christ. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once noted, "In vain does one repeat what

the heart does not find sweet.” It is not good enough simply to prove to someone that Christianity is true; if we are to have an impact for Christ we must also show that the faith is sweet, that Christianity is not only true, but lovely and desirable.

With that in mind, I’d like to close with a quotation from Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, from his 2002 message, ‘The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty.’ It relates indirectly to some of these same themes:

Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction. Of course we must not underrate the importance of theological reflection, of exact and precise theological thought; it remains absolutely necessary. But to move from here to disdain or to reject the impact produced by the response of the heart in the encounter with beauty as a true form of knowledge would impoverish us and dry up our faith and our theology. We must rediscover this form of knowledge; it is a pressing need of our time....

The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes, so that later, from this experience, we take the criteria for judgment and can correctly evaluate the arguments. For me an unforgettable experience was the Bach concert that Leonard Bernstein conducted in Munich after the sudden death of Karl Richter. I was sitting next to the Lutheran Bishop Hanselmann. When the last note of one of the great Thomas-Kantor-Cantatas triumphantly faded away, we looked at each other spontaneously and right then we said: "Anyone who has heard this, knows that the faith is true."

The music had such an extraordinary force of reality that we realized, no longer by deduction, but by the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothingness, but could only have come to be through the power of the Truth that became real in the composer's inspiration.

Good stuff, eh?

Regards,

Canterbury Chris

Dumb Sacraments?

Dear Geneva George,

I am very sorry I offended you by quoting from the Pope, and I really mean that. I had no idea that you would find it so disturbing and I do apologize. If it helps, just pretend the quotation came from me and forget it was Benedict XVI.

Thanks for giving me Terry Johnson's little book *Reformed Worship*. I must confess I haven't read it yet, but I hope to get to it this week.

I can't say I was as impressed by Johnson's book as you were. Indeed, far from undermining what I wrote in the previous three letters, I think it confirm many of my concerns, especially about the cognitivist anthropology.

One of the things I found most interesting was his exposition of John 4:21-24 where Jesus said to the Samaritan woman,

“Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and Truth.”

Johnson takes our Lord's words to mean that “True worship is not a matter of sacred places but the spiritual condition of the heart.” He goes on to contrast the external, formal and symbolic worship of the Old Testament with the heartfelt, internal worship of the New Testament. Yet as Stuart Bryan reminds us in his discussion of this approach to John 4:21-24 (<http://tinyurl.com/5w845yq>), “The difficulty faced by advocates of this approach is not the insistence that worship is to be heartfelt and genuine. That is most certainly true. The difficulty is that this was no less true in the Old Testament than in the New. ‘Sacrifice and burnt offering you did not desire,’ David declares. ‘The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite spirit.’ Heartfelt, genuine worship was to characterize the Old Testament no less than the new?”

So what then is the change in worship that Jesus was anticipating in his conversation with the Samaritan woman? Again, allow me to quote a rather lengthy passage from Stuart Bryan's discussion of these verses:

First, Jesus insists that the corporate worship of the people of God would be decentralized. No longer on Mount Gerizim in Samaria nor on Mount Zion in Jerusalem would corporate worship be confined – rather corporate worship would be spread throughout the earth. Note that he is addressing corporate worship, for that was what happened in Jerusalem and, idolatrously, on Mt. Gerizim. Jesus is announcing that wherever the servants of God gather together in the Name of Christ and lift His Name on high, there is Mount Zion, there is the City of our God, there is the place of corporate worship. Jerusalem in Israel is no longer the center of God's dealings with man; the heavenly Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the Church is the center.

Second, Jesus informs us that not only would corporate worship be decentralized, it would be explicitly Trinitarian. When Jesus rose from the dead and sent forth His Spirit, the worship of God's people was forever transformed. It became explicitly Trinitarian – worshipping the Father in Spirit – the very Spirit whom Jesus promised

would come and lead His people into all righteousness – and in Truth – the very Truth who took on human flesh and declared to His disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.” ...

Worshiping the Father in Spirit and Truth is not an exhortation to heartfelt, genuine worship – that exhortation had been given throughout the Old Testament. ... It means that...as we gather together to worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth, as we gather to worship the Triune God, we are entering into the presence of God Himself. Brothers and sisters, the roof has been ripped off and we have been ushered into the presence of the Most High.

Now if it is true that God’s presence dwells with His people when they gather corporately to worship Him, then it is appropriate that the places where this meeting of heaven and earth occurs should be treated with extra respect and honor, just as we give the Bible more honor and respect than a normal book since it is the very words of God. Thus, there is an appropriate sense in which church buildings are set apart from ordinary functional buildings. Yet Terry Johnson seems to eschew this. In *Reformed Worship* he writes with approval of when the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah dedicated a new church building in 1891 and deliberately refrained from calling it a ‘sanctuary.’ Instead they called it a ‘church building’ or ‘church house.’ Johnson comments, “God’s presence is in heaven. There are no holy buildings, holy places, or holy things through which God’s blessing is uniquely mediated.... This seemed to be better understood a hundred years ago than it is today. The point for us is that worship can never be a matter of getting our bodies in the right building at the right time for the right ritual.”

Of course worship does involve more than getting our bodies at the right time for the right ritual, but does it involve less? God is transcendent in heaven, but is He not also present with the saints who gather to worship Him? So much Protestant architecture hinges on the assumption that while God is everywhere generally He is nowhere in particular, a point that seems to be underscored by the steeples on Western churches which point *away* from earth. I consider this nothing other than architectural Docetism.

What is true of religious buildings is true of all architecture. It is an inescapable fact that buildings are always implicit with a value system or worldview. Our houses, malls, apartment complexes, cityscapes, and even bridges and tree-houses, all say something about what we prioritize as people or as communities. (Not insignificantly, the concept of postmodernism was applied to architecture before it was applied to anything else.) Consider this description of a house from John Buchan’s story *Fullcircle*:

In this kind of house you have the mystery of the elder England. What was Raleigh’s phrase? ‘High thoughts and divine contemplations.’ The people who built this sort of thing lived closer to another world, and thought bravely of death. It doesn’t matter who they were – Crusaders or Elizabethans or Puritans – they all had poetry in them and the heroic and a great unworldliness. They had marvelous spirits, and plenty of joys and triumphs; but they also had their hours of black gloom. Their lives were like our weather – storm and sun. One thing they never feared – death. He walked too near them all their days to be a bogey.

All that from a house! Now here’s my point: if houses, malls, apartment complexes and cityscapes, all say something about us as people, then so do churches. And the type of church buildings that theologians like you and Johnson favor proclaim the type of de-sacralization that unfortunately still haunts the reformed tradition. This de-sacralization

affects not just how our buildings look, but also how they are used. Consider, for example, the way all Protestant church buildings other than Anglican tend to keep their buildings locked during the week, a practice recommended by Calvin. By contrast, Roman Catholic and Anglican churches have traditionally left their buildings unlocked so laypeople can use them as places of prayer. For Calvinists, who do not recognize physical spaces as being sacred apart from the use, there is no point in a lay person coming into a church to pray since the action he is performing can be conducted just as efficiently anywhere.

Interestingly, one of Johnson's reasons for urging that churches are not sacred spaces is because worship has nothing to do with the physical dimension in which our body exists, but is a matter of what goes on in the invisible realm of our head and spirit. As he writes,

the worship of Reformed Protestantism is *simple*. We merely read, preach, pray, sing and see the Word of God... True faith comes through the word (Rom. 10:17). True worship then must be primarily (though not absolutely) non-material, non-sensual, and non-symbolic.... Everything about our worship is to be simple...Nothing is to draw attention to...the beauty...

Johnson is careful to use the word 'primarily' since he does recognize that the sacraments are symbols. But, he is clear to point out that this is *all* they are. As he says in his discussion of John 4:21-24:

...it is crucial that the symbolic, typological and temporary nature of Old Testament worship be understood. Visual pictures were given to Israel of the spiritual realities that would be fulfilled in Christ...The New Testament sacraments are symbolic presentations of the gospel as well....So what is the difference? It is a difference of emphasis and proportion. The Old Testament was loaded with symbols in anticipation of Christ. These symbols are by nature *temporary*. The New Testament has only two, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Thus the New Testament worship is 'in spirit' in that it does not have the emphasis on symbols and types as did Old Testament worship.... Symbols by nature are *inferior* to verbal revelation. This is why the church has no 'dumb sacraments,' as J.A. Motyer has put it. The sacraments are always accompanied by an explanatory word. They are not self-interpreting. They depend on the word in ways that the word does not depend on them. The addition of symbols beyond the two instituted by Christ are a *distraction* from the ordained means of grace.

He then goes on to compare the sacraments to the law, which was a 'shadow' and 'not the very form of things' (Heb. 10:1). So where does this leave us? If I understand the trajectory of Johnson's thought, it leaves us somewhere as follows:

- 1) Jesus said that a day is coming when those who worship Him would do so in Spirit and Truth.
- 2) By this Jesus meant that there would be a cessation of the symbolic aspects of Old Covenant worship.
- 3) Two symbolic elements have, however, been preserved in the New Covenant, and these are the two Protestant sacraments.
- 4) These symbolic elements have been kept to a minimum of two in order that the primacy of the Word will not be displaced.
- 5) The value of the sacraments depend on them being accompanied with an explanatory interpretation, and in any other context they are 'dumb sacraments.'

I'm sorry George, but that seems to pack an awful lot into John 4 which simply isn't in the text even implicitly. But moreover, consider where it leads in practice. Since the efficacy of the sacraments do not work *ex opere operato* but depend instead on explanatory interpretation, we can assume that all children and mentally handicapped persons should be immediately excommunication. But this is to fall prey to the type of rationalist anthropology that I addressed in my previous letters.

I wish I could say that Terry Johnson's *Reformed Worship* is an anomaly, but his views on the sacraments do seem to have some resonance with the theology of the magisterial reformers. In his book *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Philip Lee explores some of the ways that reformed theology has been tainted by the Gnostic tendency to undervalue the body and the material world, leading to a low sacramentalism to which even Luther and Calvin were not immune. For example, Luther commented that "the sacrament without the word can be nothing, but indeed the word without the sacrament [can], and if necessary, one can be saved without a sacrament, but not without the Word." Elsewhere Luther made the point that the materiality of the Eucharist is unimportant because the real action is what happens in your mind: "I am able daily, indeed hourly, to have the mass; for, as often as I wish, I can set the words of Christ before me, and nourish and strengthen my faith by them. This is the true spiritual eating and drinking."

But it wasn't just Luther who occasionally colluded with the Zwinglian spiritualization of the Supper and the corollary devaluing of matter. As important as the Eucharist was for Calvin, it remained God's concession to our materiality. As Calvin himself would write: "Forasmuch as we are so ignorant, so given up to earthly and carnal things and fixed upon them, so that we can neither think, understand nor conceive of anything spiritual, the merciful Lord accommodates himself in this to the crudity of our senses." Calvin thus made himself vulnerable for later generations to suggest that left the Eucharist dangling as a kind of appendage inadequately attached to his system. At least, that is what Philip Lee argues. To quote again from his *Against the Protestant Gnostics*:

It is easy to see how Calvin's suspicion of knowing God through material things would influence his sacramental theology. Although he makes every attempt to keep Word and Sacrament together, to handle them in a parallel way, there is never the slightest doubt in his mind as to which is preeminent. If necessary, the Gospel could stand by itself and indeed would do so were it for our human weakness, which makes us dependent on these more primitive means of grace....

"In maintaining a distinct dualism between...spirit and flesh, he would always be on guard against awarding too much dignity to the visible Church as Church, and he would always be suspicious of the externals of religion.

Lee's concerns about Calvin's spiritualized approach to the Eucharist were echoed in by William Dyrness 2011 publication *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*. Dyrness discussed Calvin's conviction that God's word could only flourish in an environment that was first emptied of materiality. "Calvin" he writes, "wanted to...empty the worship space, so that it could be filled with God's word. Although in his understanding of signs Calvin sought to counter the minimalism of Zwingli, in the end nothing external can be essential to this process.... As a result, though Calvin probably did not intend this, over time it became the case that people, especially in the Pietist stream of this tradition, had no way of finding any substantial theological meaning in any external object or act." For Calvin, Dyrness contends (quoting now from his book *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*) the objects of the sacraments have no intrinsic importance, either aesthetically or theologically -

these aspects have been stripped away. Rather the performance of the preached word enacted in the sacraments becomes a unique mediation of grace, and it is the theological center of Calvin's cultural-aesthetic identity.”

I'm glad you gave me *Reformed Worship* because it serves as a useful example of this Calvinist suspicion of externals, even an implicit hatred of the physical realm. Not surprisingly, the author is also tainted with Puritanism, having written that “our worship is to be...liberated from the calendar and nature's cycles.” But that is a subject for another letter.

Fondly,

Canterbury Chris

21

The Liturgical Year

Dear Geneva George,

I promised to take up the question of the church calendar but it seems you have already beat me to it.

Of course, you are right on the historical front. It is true that the amount of obligatory feasts and saints days was becoming cumbersome in late medieval Europe, creating a drain on the finances of the poor. But I would suggest that the reformers, and especially the Puritans, went too far when they dispensed with even the cardinal feasts of the church year like Advent and Christmas. When Oliver Cromwell turned England into a Puritan commonwealth, the Puritan leaders made sure that Christmas day was an obligatory work day. Jonathan Gifford reminds us that “troops roamed the streets looking for signs of inappropriate feasting: mince pies and plum puddings were seized.” John Calvin would have been pleased by this, since he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the leaders of Geneva to ban Christmas. In his book *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture*, William Dyrness explains how “All pilgrimages were forbidden, all paternosters, keeping of feasts, even treating one another to drinks in the tavern....He proposed further to do away with Christmas, New Year, Annunciation and Ascension....”

The argument of your last letter that the church calendar is a throwback to paganism seems a curious move to make. Looking at it historically, there is credence for thinking that the shoe may actually be on the other foot. It was when the Protestant church abandoned the church calendar that they inadvertently opened the door to certain pagan influences.

Think about what happened with the North American Puritans. By getting rid of the church year and all Christian holidays, the Puritans and their descendants left a vacuum that would ultimately has been filled by the non-religious ordering of time. Such non-religious ordering has helped to reinforce the idea that there exists a secular world that functions separately from spiritual categories.

I appreciate that the Puritans were animated by noble motives. Their rejection of the cycle of Christian holidays was rooted in the notion that the *entire* year was sanctified, that every day is a holiday unto the Lord. Even so, by relinquishing the church year as one legitimate way to tell the story of redemption, the Puritans and their descendants inadvertently underscored the sense of religion being disembodied, detached from the space-time continuum. This would ultimately reinforce a duality in North American culture that emerged under the Puritan's canopy, including a false dichotomy between the sacred and the

secular. Moreover, the vacuum created by the evacuation of the church year would eventually be filled by those American holidays that celebrate civic regeneration, integrating Americans around the liturgies of their common political life.

The irony of this can be pressed one step further. Evangelicals who would never dream of making the sign of the cross at the end of a prayer are quite comfortable putting their hands on their hearts every morning to say the “Pledge of Allegiance,” with liturgical devotion. (“Francis Bellamy, author of the Pledge of Allegiance, understood the Pledge’s liturgical component, and commented that it was meant to sink into the hearts of schoolchildren through ritual repetition, adding, ‘It is the same way with the catechism, or the Lord’s Prayer.’”) Or again, American evangelicals who have long ceased to tell the story of redemption through the yearly cycle of ecclesiastical holidays are comfortable celebrating Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Memorial, Veteran’s and Independence Day with quasi-religious regularity. In place of the rejected church year, these holidays become public festivals of a new civic order celebrating the achievements of American nationalism. The term ‘nationalism’ is justified to the degree that this drama involves subliminal assent to what William Cavanaugh perceptively termed “certain stories of nature and human nature, the origins of human conflict, and the remedies for such conflict in the enactment of the state itself.”

On the other hand, a robust embracing of the church calendar can act as an antidote not just to these types of civil idolatries, but also to the types of crypto-Gnosticism and rationalism that we discussed in earlier letters. As one walks through the cycle of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Pentecost, Lent and Easter, we are reminded that what matters most is not *ideas* but *events*. And the events that are important are not just the death and resurrection of Jesus, but the *whole* cycle of His life. As children participate in these holidays year in and year out, it helps them internalize the fact that the story of redemption is something that they themselves are participating in. Living through this macro-story of redemption, and all the little micro-stories that make it up, is more formative than thousands of hours learning correct doctrine. As Michael O'Brien has put it, “Most children do not learn their metaphysics from theologians. Their understanding of dimensions and forces beyond the physical and beyond reach of the senses is usually derived from stories.”

Don’t think I am making a false dilemma between story and doctrine. While the church year helps to underscore the fact that our redemption is first and foremost a story, it also provides wonderful opportunities for emphasizing the doctrinal aspects of our faith. But the doctrine comes all packaged up in the story rather than in a disengaged form. In my own home I have found that each of the church’s feasts provides its own unique insight into the work of Christ. Every holiday we revisit the cycle of fall, redemption, continuation and consummation, noting the particular place this holiday holds within this sequence. We’ve had some great Bible studies together, but I always try to keep it fun with plenty of treats and surprises (the exception is that there are no treats for the children during Lent, since Lent is not supposed to be fun).

The rhythm of the liturgical year is one way to inculcate a metanarrative into the fabric of society and then transmit it to the next generation. We see this same dynamic at work in pagan societies: the recurring rituals connected to the seasonal cycles and the harvest gods help to instill the narratives of the pagan culture into the next generation. If this suggests anything, it is that human beings are innately liturgical. It is in fact impossible to attain the ideal that Terry Johnson proposed in *Reformed Worship* when he spoke of being “liberated from...nature’s cycles.”

It is not so much a question of *whether* human beings will celebrate a religious calendar, but *what* religion they will celebrate. We invariably organize the year into rhythmic structures that reflect our priorities. If our year is not organized by the great feasts of the

church calendar, then by default our year will probably end up being structured around secular holidays that tell the story of political redemption or else holidays that pay homage to the god of hedonism, such as vacation time. (I have no problem with vacation time, by the way, but I do question the tendency to structure one's priorities around vacation instead of around the church year.)

I'd like to end by leaving you with two quotations from books dealing with this subject. The first comes from *Common Worship: Times and Seasons*, a book I use with my children during family worship. In the introduction the authors have this to say about the importance of the church's liturgical year:

“The liturgical year thus provides a structure for the Church's collective memory, a way of consecrating our human experience of time in the celebration of God's work – in Christ and in human beings made holy through Christ – a work which is both unrepeatable in time and incomprehensibly beyond time. It asserts a Christian understanding of time as a context of God's grace, against the world's purely functional reckoning of time....

“The rhythm of the Church's times and seasons...is one of the primary ways in which Christians learn, and are strengthened in their grasp of, the story of Christ – just as Jesus himself was familiar with the Jewish festivals, and with the way that the annual remembrance of Passover shaped the identity of the chosen people.”

The second quotation comes from Tom Wright's excellent little book *For All The Saints? Remembering the Christian Departed*:

“The church's liturgical year is rooted in ancient custom. It follows the story of the key events in the life of Jesus: his birth at Christmas, his death on Good Friday, his birth at Christmas, his death on Good Friday, his resurrection on Easter Day, his Ascension forty days later, and his sending of the Spirit at Pentecost (‘Whitsun’).

“Into this sequence, again in ancient custom, the church inserted Advent and Lent. Advent offers four Sundays of preparation before Christmas, recalling simultaneously the preparation of Israel and the world for the coming of Jesus at Christmas and the preparation of the church and the world for his final second coming. Lent, the forty penitential days leading up to Holy Week, which itself climaxes in Good Friday, recalls the forty days Jesus spent fasting in the desert at the start of his ministry. Advent and Lent have traditionally been seasons of penitence and preparation for the awesome events to which they point.

“Other key moments have also been added. Epiphany (the showing of Jesus to the non-Jewish world) commemorates the coming of the Wise Men to the boy Jesus in Matthew 2. Candlemas (Jesus' presentation in the Temple) picks up the theme of ‘light’ from the song of Simeon (‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’) in Luke 2. And so on. At a different level, the western churches have for a long time kept the Sunday after Pentecost as Trinity Sunday, celebrating the complete revelation of God which has been granted through the events of Jesus' life and his sending of his own Spirit.

“...many churches have found that by following the liturgical year in the traditional way they have a solid framework within which to teach and live the gospel, the scriptures, and the Christian life. The Bible offers itself to us as a great story, a sprawling and complex narrative, inviting us to come in and make it our own. The

Gospels, the very heart of scripture, likewise tell a story not merely to give us information about Jesus but in order to provide a narrative we can inhabit, a story we must make our own. This is one way in which we can become the people God calls us to be. The traditional Christian year is a deep-rooted and long-tested means by which that biblical aim can be realised.”

Last night I finally got a chance to listened to your sermon on justice. In my next letter I'll try to interact with some of your points.

Blessings,

Canterbury Chris

P.S. Thanks for sending me your sermon on justice. Unfortunately I've been too busy to listen to it this week, but hope to get to it soon.

Is Evil Necessary?

Dear Geneva George,

I'm glad to learn that we are in substantial agreement on the issues I raised last week. I was especially heartened to learn that you are considering using *Common Worship: Times and Seasons* with your family. Do let me know what you decide to give up for Lent next year. Something must be wrong if you and I are actually agreeing with each other for a change! On that positive note, it is probably time to turn to something more controversial, namely your sermon on divine justice.

You said in the sermon that without evil we could never appreciate goodness by contrast and you quoted Herman Hoeksema who wrote, "Reprobation exists in order that election may be realized. Reprobation is necessary to bring the chosen to the glory which God in His infinite love has appointed for them..."

When I first heard you say that I was shocked, but as I began reading around the issue I found that Saint Augustine advocated a similar position, having written that

...if all had remained condemned to the punishment entailed by just condemnation, then God's merciful grace would not have been seen at work in anyone, on the other hand, if all had been transferred from darkness to light, the truth of God's vengeance would not have been made evident.

If we adapt this position then we are forced to believe that God's love, grace, goodness, etc. are only intelligible in a world marred by evil. On a purely practical level this doesn't make sense. Consider, I don't need to go down to the local dump and gaze upon the garbage there in order to appreciate the beauties of our town's nature reserve. I don't need to feed on putrefied fruit and rotting bread for breakfast in order to enjoy a bowl of strawberries and cream for lunch! Similarly, I'm sure that the members of the Blessed Trinity were fully capable of appreciating each other's love prior to the advent of evil.

I'll be straight with you, George, I was rather disturbed by your comment that God leaves some people in their sins in order to demonstrate His justice. I looked up the passage you referenced from *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, and I'd like to quote from it because it seems to encapsulate the basic problem inherent in the position that you and many other reformed thinkers have adopted on this issue:

"It is a proper and excellent thing for infinite glory to shine forth; and for the same reason, it is proper that the shining forth of God's glory should be complete; that is, that all parts of his glory should shine forth, that every beauty should be proportionably effulgent, that the beholder may have a proper notion of God. It is not proper that one glory should be exceedingly manifested, and another not at all. . . .

Thus it is necessary, that God's awful majesty, his authority and dreadful greatness, justice, and holiness, should be manifested. But this could not be, unless sin and punishment had been decreed; so that the shining forth of God's glory would be very imperfect, both because these parts of divine glory would not shine forth as the others do, and also the glory of his goodness, love, and holiness would be faint without them; nay, they could scarcely shine forth at all.

If it were not right that God should decree and permit and punish sin, there could be no manifestation of God's holiness in hatred of sin, or in showing any preference, in

his providence, of godliness before it. There would be no manifestation of God's grace or true goodness, if there was no sin to be pardoned, no misery to be saved from. How much happiness soever he bestowed, his goodness would not be so much prized and admired. . . .

So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature, and the completeness of that communication of God, for which he made the world; because the creature's happiness consists in the knowledge of God, and the sense of his love. And if the knowledge of him be imperfect, the happiness of the creature must be proportionably imperfect."

I have always been uneasy with that type of reasoning since it seems to implicate that there are unrealized potencies within the godhead. Consider that the Triune God is completely self-sufficient and doesn't need to have evil to demonstrate His character any more than He needed to create the world, let alone redeem it, to demonstrate His personality. (Saint Augustine makes this latter point lucidly in his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*). God could have left our first parents in a state of bondage, He could have chosen for less or more people to be redeemed, He could have chosen not to create at all. The only things God cannot do are those things which contradict His nature.

The implication of saying that if God didn't have a group of people to be angry with for all eternity that one whole side of his character (namely His hatred of sin) would not be able to be demonstrated and expressed, is essentially to say that God requires an opposite in order for Him to be good, or at least for such goodness to be fully actualized or manifested? A corollary of this is that throughout all eternity, the goodness and justice inherent in the blessed Trinity was always incomplete. On the other hand, if the members of the Trinity are completely self-sufficient and could fully appreciate their own justice independent of creation, then presumably it would also be possible for God's redeemed and glorified children to appreciate God's goodness and justice apart from the existence of evil, unless you can first produce an *a priori* argument to the contrary (which, of course, neither you nor Jonathan Edwards have done).

Consider further, if evil is necessary in order for God's goodness to be manifested, and if the manifestation of such goodness is a crucial part of what it means for God to be Lord (since otherwise God's hatred of sin couldn't find an outlet), then it follows that creation is necessary in order for God to be Lord since creation is itself a precondition to evil. In that case, God would not be Lord prior to creation. Ergo, creation is not an overflow of God's abundance but something that was necessary in order to realize a certain aspect of His character. This lands us uncomfortably close to what some Arians have proposed. I have met Arians who said that in order for God to be Lord, He must eternally be Lord *over* something; ergo, the Son must be eternally subordinate to the authority of God the Father.

In your sermon you referenced John Piper's work *Desiring God* and *The Pleasures of God*, Piper seems to go even further than Edwards, suggesting that the pain, evil and the misery of some are a necessary pre-condition for the ever-increasing enjoyment of the saints. This seems to leave us with a kind of dualism since it makes goodness eternally dependent on evil. Again, if taken to its logical consequence, this would entail that evil must be just as eternal as the blessed Trinity.

Using your own analogy of the potter, I want you to try to imagine a certain scenario. There is a potter who labors continually until he has created a number of excellently wrought vessels of great beauty and delicacy. But he is not satisfied with that - he must also construct a second class of vessels in order to smash them into a hundred bits. This proves to everyone that he has strength. Now if I correctly understand what you are saying, God is like this potter

and must have two classes of people, one group on which to demonstrate His love and mercy, and another group on which to demonstrate His wrath and hatred of sin. But in the end doesn't this amount to saying that God hates sin so much that He wanted it to enter His creation eternally so that He could always be punishing it? But consider carefully what this actually means. It means that it is precisely *because* His hatred of sin is so great that He must create it and that it must go on existing eternally in those subjects He is punishing (for to say that they cease being evil is akin to the universalism you reject). According to such a theory, if God had chosen to prevent the existence of evil in the first place this would have been a worse state of affairs than the endless perpetuation of evil in an everlasting hell since there would then have been no way for us to know that God is just. Hence, what it amounts to saying is that God hates evil so much that He must ensure its eternal existence. Even my eight year old would be able to see the absurdity in such a position.

Suffice to say, the idea that a cosmic torture chamber is necessary in order for God to actualize otherwise unrealized potencies in His character, is an idea I find most disturbing. Your sermon notes gave a link to some of Douglas Wilson's articles. I looked up the posts and Pastor Wilson makes essentially the same error, saying:

In a world without sin, two of God's most glorious attributes—His justice and His mercy—would go undisputed. This, obviously, would be horrible....

“In a world without sin and evil, at least two attributes of God would have gone unrevealed and unmanifested, those attributes being wrath and mercy. Since this is obviously intolerable, God determined to direct our affairs the way that He did.”

Now evil exists, so there must be some explanation for it that does not compromise the attributes of God, seeing as terms like goodness, justice and love can have no meaning apart from God. However, if what I wrote above is correct, then the explanation given by you, Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and Pastor Wilson must be false. But even apart from the falsity of that explanation, there is another more practical difficulty raised by such theories.

Consider: what these theories amount to is essentially that God has two sides of His character, a side that delights to show mercy and a side that delights in punishing sin. Both these sides need to be expressed. By redeeming the elect, God's love and mercy are demonstrated. But lest the Father's wrath be completely pacified and we forget how much He hates sin, He needs to have another group on which His hatred of sin can be expressed. Now if this is true then I would struggle with knowing how to have a positive relationship with such a God. I am reminded of how the Greek writer Xenophon recorded that he had been assisted by Zeus in his capacity as the god of safety and god of kings but had then fallen foul of Zeus in his capacity as god of propitiation. Similarly, the God presented by the aforementioned argument has two sets of self-contained attributes that must both be expressed in order for God to be completely Himself – attributes which are antithetical to each other. Our task is presumably to get on the side of God that needs to express love and be thankful that we aren't a target of the side of Him that needs to express His hatred of sin, just as Xenophon had to get on Zeus's side as god of safety and not god of propitiation. Now here's the problem: I can go through the motions of worshipping such a God and I can try to be on His good side and I can recognize that however things appear He must be good since phrases like goodness, justice and love have no meaning apart from God as the ultimate standard, yet on a purely existential level I don't know how to love such a God or to feel anything other than horror when contemplating Him. That doesn't make such an idea false, but it does render it problematic on a purely existential level for me.

Psalm 5:4 declares in no uncertain terms that God does not take pleasure in wickedness. Why then does He allow evil? I am not God, so I do not presume to know the answer to this question. I also do not presume to know why He chooses to leave some people in their sins. It is a mystery, and I can only say that God must have a morally sufficient reason for everything He chooses to do or not do. I can even say that evil somehow furthers God's glory because everything furthers His glory in some way. But that is as far as I'm willing to go because that's as far as the Bible goes. We should leave these matters with God's mysterious council instead of trying to plumb the depths of the decrees and turning God into a cosmic sadist as a result.

Okay, I got a bit carried away there. I guess that means it's time to stop.

Blessings,

Canterbury Chris

Fate, Necessity and Evil

Dear Geneva George,

I appreciate you coming back to me with scripture. From what I can make out, your whole understanding about evil being necessary hinges on Romans 9:22. I want to interact with your exegesis of Romans 9, but that will have to wait for another letter. In this letter I want to clear up some misunderstandings.

First, you spend quite a while trying to show that the reformed view of the decrees is not fatalism, as if that answers the arguments in my last letter regarding necessity. Yet even if you are correct, that seems to be a separate issue to the specific concerns I raised about the necessity of evil. However, with regard to the issue of fate, I find it interesting that while apologists like yourself have attempted (legitimately) to distance the reformed view with the pagan concept of fate, if you read what Luther said about predestination in *The Bondage of the Will*, it differs very little from the pagan concept of fate. In fact, Luther specifically appealed to the pagan concept of faith to prop up his views. For example, he wrote:

But why should these things be difficult for we Christians to understand, so that it should be considered irreligious, curious, and vain, to discuss and know them, when heathen poets, and the common people themselves, have them in their mouths in the most frequent use? How often does Virgil alone make mention of Fate? “All things stand fixed by unchangeable law.” Again, “Fixed is the day of every man.” Again, “If the Fates summon you.” And again, “If you will break the binding chain of Fate.” The aim of this poet is to show that in the destruction of Troy, and in raising up the Roman empire, Fate did more than all the devoted efforts of men. . . . From which we can see that the knowledge of predestination and of the foreknowledge of God was no less left in the world than the notion of divinity itself. And those who wished to appear wise went so far into their debates that, their hearts being darkened, they became fools. (Rom. 1:21-22) They denied, or pretended not to know those things which their poets, and the common folk, and even their own consciences, held to be universally known, most certain, and most true.”

I actually agree with much of what you wrote in your last letter, though I dispute the conclusions you draw. Keep in mind that there is a huge difference between saying:

1. (a) The final judgment reveals God’s wrath, and this somehow mysteriously shows the Lord’s glory/character because everything God does shows His glory/character; or (b) because all things work together for good for God’s children, it follows that all the pain and suffering of the world, including the sin and damnation of some, will somehow further God’s good purposes for His children.

versus saying

2. (a) It is necessary that evil eternally exist so that God’s wrath can be displayed in forever punishing it; or (b) a world without sin would have been horrible because then we wouldn’t know that God hates sin; or (c) without evil there would be no way to know that God is just.

If the arguments you presented in your last letter prove anything, they only prove 1 and not 2. To articulate the former, as you did in your last letter, is not to redeem your previous articulation of the latter. Although 1 and 2 may seem to be saying the same things, and although 1 may seem to logically entail 2 in your mind, there is an important difference. Jonathan Edwards' thought clearly falls into the category of 2 when he says "So evil is necessary, in order to the highest happiness of the creature", as does Piper when he argues that the evil and misery of some are a necessary pre-condition for the ever-increasing enjoyment of the saints. Similarly, when Douglas Wilson says it "would be horrible" if there had never been any sin, we are going way, way beyond 1. The difference may be subtle, but the difference is crucially important. Romans 9 and Proverbs 16:4 get us to 1, but they can only take us to 2 if we ignore many other passages of scripture and the Bible's meta-themes about the character of God.

The reason it is important not to conflate 1 and 2 is that it ends up making goodness eternally dependent on evil, leading to the type of functional dualism that we find in St. Augustine where evil has to balance with good to achieve a type of metaphysical symmetry. As he writes in *City of God*,

"God would never have created a man, let alone an angel, in the foreknowledge of his future evil state, if he had not known at the same time how he would put such creatures to good use, and thus enrich the course of the world history by the kind of antithesis which gives beauty to a poem. 'Antithesis' provides the most attractive figures in literary composition: the Latin equivalent is 'opposition,' or, more accurately, 'contra-position.' The opposition of such contraries gives an added beauty to speech; and in the same way there is beauty in the composition of the world's history arising from the antithesis of contraries—a kind of eloquence in events, instead of in words.

Or again Augustine writes,

"And thus evils, which God does not love, are not apart from order; and nevertheless He does love order itself. This very thing He loves: to love good things, and not to love evil things—and this itself is a thing of magnificent order and of divine arrangement. And because this orderly arrangement maintains the harmony of the universe by this very contrast, it comes about that evil things must need be. In this way, the beauty of all things is in a manner configured, as it were, from antitheses, that is, from opposites: this is pleasing to us even in discourse."

You seemed to come pretty close to Augustine's view of evil being a metaphysical necessity in your last letter when you wrote, "God's wrath is just as much a part of Him as His love....These two dimensions of God's nature need to be embraced in tandem....God's justice/righteousness meant that the only kind of creation that would reflect the totality of His nature would be one in which his justice would be justice indeed, full-orbed with both sides of the equation being equal." Now maybe all you are saying is nothing more than what I articulated until #1 above. But it does seem to veer pretty close to #2, with creation and evil being necessary to reflect a certain side of God's nature. And, of course, if God's nature includes these two dimensions - that is, if wrath is something God *is* like love rather than something He *does* (which seems to be the corollary to thinking that only a world marred by evil can "reflect the totality of His nature") - then one might ask how God's character could be fully expressed before creation if the members of the Godhead weren't wrathful against one another.

Another reason it is important not to move from #1 to #2 is because it slides us down the slippery slope to having to affirm that God is the author of evil, a position you come precariously close to in your last letter while discussing Proverbs 16:4. But to do justice to that issue, I will have to wait until my next letter.

Sincerely,

Canterbury Chris

Is God the Author of Evil?

Dear Geneva George,

You asked, "Within your Arminian system, how do you reconcile evil with the existence of a sovereign God?" Well, to start with, I never advocated anything like an Arminian soteriology when I disputed your explanation of evil. That is a different question altogether. However, on the question of how I explain evil, I do not try to explain it. All I can say is that for some mysterious reason, God has seen fit to allow evil and work good out of it, and this somehow fits together within His sovereign plan.

But while I do not attempt to explain evil, I do reject all explanations which make God the author of evil. I promised in my last letter to respond to that, so let me have a shot at it now.

To start with, if God is the author of evil, then He fosters wickedness in people's hearts. But if so, then God is sinful by the Biblical definitions of sin and evil. Consider that in the Proverbs the ones who incite and tempt to evil, like the fool's friends or the prostitute, are just as morally guilty as the simple man himself who falls prey to those temptations. James says that God does not tempt us, but if God is the author of evil then He is doing a lot more than merely tempting us: He is fostering the evil in our hearts and inciting us to sin. If God does this, then the words "God is good" are no longer intelligible because God is violating His own self-revelation of what constitutes goodness.

Consequently, if God really is the energizing principle behind both the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent then we would have to conclude that the Biblical categories used to describe God are ultimately non-descriptive. Moreover, it would make a mockery of the anti-thesis that we find throughout the war-Psalms if God is the causal force behind both sides. This would be similar to how the Rothschilds secretly financed both sides of the American civil war.

Moreover, if God is the author of evil then we would have to conclude that evil is just as much an intrinsic part of God's character as His goodness. But in that case, we are left without a standard for distinguishing between good and evil. Using God's character as the standard for distinguishing good and evil would then be akin to using a tape measure in which inches and centimeters were all mixed up. God can only be the standard for distinguishing between good and evil if the former and not the latter is fundamental to His character.

(Check out chapter 3 of Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* on some of the necessary preconditions to goodness behind intelligible. While Lewis doesn't put enough emphasis on the noetic effects of sin, he makes some good points which relate to this question.)

It is on these grounds that I would object to the position taken by Gordon Clark in his book *Religion, Reason and Revelation*, and the whole Superlaspasian tradition that he was part of. Clark writes:

"God is the sole ultimate cause of everything...The men and angels predestined to eternal life and those foreordained to everlasting death are particularly and unchangeable designed... Election and reprobation are equally ultimate... There was never the remotest possibility that something different could have happened.... God is neither responsible nor sinful, even though he is the only ultimate cause of everything. He is not sinful because in the first place whatever God does is just and right. It is just and right simply in virtue of the fact that he does it. ... Since God caused Judas to betray Christ, this causal act is righteous and not sinful. By definition God cannot sin.

At this point it must be particularly pointed out that God's causing a man to sin is not sin. There is no law, superior to God, which forbids him to decree sinful acts."

I have always found it problematic when thinkers like Clark appeal to God's actions rather than His character as the source of justice. Biblically, the standards of justice and goodness as well as God's actions proceed from the same common cause: God's own nature. C.S. Lewis pointed out that if "good" means only "what God wills", then the statement "God is good" means merely "God wills what God wills", which is meaningless, for the devil also wills what he wills.

But there is a deeper problem with Clark's position. While there is some truth mixed into this quote (error usually has truth mixed with it), it does seem to trivialize evil. When Job or the Psalmists (i.e., Psalm 73) are asking God "Why, oh why are you letting the wicked prosper in his way?", the answer, according to Clark, would be simply "Evil exists because God makes people sin because God wants them to sin. End of story." This trivializes the very personal and agonizing prayers that we find in the Bible in general and the Psalms in particular. This is one of the reasons I don't think it's helpful to go down that road, because it is not the road that the Biblical writers go down.

This same trivialization of evil is apparent in other less extreme supralapsarian thinkers. Just today someone shared with me a Facebook status posted by a well-known reformed teacher who said that because God is sovereign, even those things which are not as they ought to be really are just as things ought to be. He went on to say that there are ultimately no bad things, since God is completely sovereign. Now if all he meant is that even bad things work out ultimately for good, then I have no problem with that. But there is a great difference between saying, on the one hand, that God works good out of evil, vs. saying that that since God is the author of all things that evil isn't really bad, or that everything which happens ought to be.

To say that God created and authored evil is a reductionistic approach that removes a necessary paradox from Christian theology. Any theological framework that takes seriously God's goodness, His control over all things and the reality of evil in the world is going to have some degree of tension resulting from the interplay of these realities. That tension (which is not just intellectual, because many of the Psalmists struggled with this tension in an intense personal way) is necessary, not least because all the great heresies throughout history have arisen from a person or a group extrapolating the implications of one principle and, in the name of consistency, overriding other foundational doctrines. Put somewhat more technically, all heresy arises from a failure to preserve dialectical tension. The early Christological disputes are a perfect example, with different heretics defining the relation between Christ's humanity and His divinity in a way that failed to do justice to both. Other examples would be the relationship of Christ to the Eucharist or the relationship between the one-ness and the three-ness of the blessed Trinity. On all such questions we have to preserve a significant aspect of paradox and mystery. Where the Bible remains mysterious, we ought to remain mysterious.

Your comments about Proverbs 16:4 seem to ignore what the verse actually says. It says that God has made all for Himself including the wicked, but it doesn't say that He creates their wickedness. Even if the passage did say that, we would be obligated to interpret it in a way consistent with the Bible's meta-themes about God's character.

It seems that part of the problem may be that Calvinists have a tendency to be rationalistic, so they will extrapolate principles to their logical extension rather than letting things be fuzzy at the edges to maintain the dialectical tension necessary for preserving important meta-themes about God.

Of course, this raises the question: if God is not the author of evil, where does it come from? Again, I'll be upfront with you and say I don't know what causes evil. Nor is my overall position undermined by my ignorance on this point. In fact, my position wouldn't be undermined even if someone could present a seemingly airtight argument to the contrary, such as: if God created everything *ex nihilo*, then if we trace everything back far enough He would seem to be the cause of everything like clockwork; ergo, God is the author of evil. Although such an argument has a certain logic about it, John Byl has rightly pointed out in *The Divine Challenge* that "if the falsity of the conclusion is more plausible than the truthfulness of the premises, then it is rational to reject the premises...The advantage of this method of refutation is that one need not pinpoint exactly where the initial error occurred."

At this point an atheist could say that this simply proves that the existence of evil is incompatible with a good God, but the problem here is that without God as a standard the very concept of evil is meaningless. If God's goodness is not our starting point then there is not a problem of evil because there is no ultimate standard in which the categories of good and evil can have any legitimacy. And that is a crucial point, for many atheists and skeptics throughout the history of Western philosophy have used the problem of evil as grounds for concluding that God is either not all-good or not all-powerful or not all-knowing. Hume's famous formulation of the difficulty remains the most iconic of such arguments. The difficulty here is that the philosophical problem of evil assumes a neutral framework in which we can meaningfully critique God's actions in the world and conclude things about his character, ability or omniscience as a result. But in reality, once any or all of these attributes are doubted, we no longer have a framework in which we can meaningfully talk about moral values at all, or the privation of such values in the existence of evil.

There is a big difference between the problem of evil that the Psalmists struggle with (see Psalm 74 and Job 21) vs. the standard philosophical formulations of the problems. The former rightly assumes that God is good and in control no matter what happens and even if what is happening is difficult to reconcile with God's faithfulness. (Here again C.S. Lewis is most helpful, in particularly the last paragraph of his chapter "The Rival Conceptions of God" in *Mere Christianity*). Thus, either we have God, with evil as a problem, or we have no God and no evil at all since without God the concept of good and evil is meaningless.

OK, I've kind of wandered off topic. I guess that means it's a good time to end.

Warm regards,

Canterbury Chris

25 Secondary Causes

Dear Geneva George,

I'm sorry it's been such a long time since my last letter. As you know, I've been getting ready for my European tour, which my wife and I leave for next week. I still don't have time to write at length, but I wanted to just let you know that we seem to be a lot closer in our thinking than I realized. At least, that's what I thought until I got to your discussion on the third page about secondary causation. You say you agree that God is not the author of evil in the sense that He uses secondary means to accomplish his decrees. But that is not the sense that I meant it when I said God is not the author of evil, so you are affirming agreement with a position I didn't advocate.

Before I explain why I didn't use the popular secondary causation argument, let me make sure I understand your terminology correctly. If I am hammering a nail into a piece of wood, I am the primary cause of the nail going into the wood, while the hammer is the instrumental or secondary cause, right? Similarly, for all of God's decrees, He is the primary cause while the instruments or means by which He accomplishes those decrees are the secondary causes. Have I understood?

Assuming I have understood correctly, here's why I don't find that explanation particularly helpful. If the statement that God is not the author of evil means merely that God determines evil through secondary causation, then by the same logic we would have to say that God is not the author of salvation, since He uses secondary causation in the work of redemption, such as the work of missions and preaching the Word (Romans 10:14). During your discussion of evil you said that God does not get the credit for what happens through secondary means, so it hardly seems consistent to reverse this when we are dealing with the secondary means leading to salvation. You can't have it both ways and are going to have to pick.

I looked up the Jonathan Edwards passage you referenced and I was surprised to find that most of it is actually 100% consistent with everything I argued, particular where he writes,

“But if, by ‘the author of sin,’ is mean the permitter, or not a hinderer of sin; and, at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy, and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted or not hindered, will most certainly and infallibly follow: I say, if this be all that is meant, by being the author of sin, I do not deny that God is the author of sin (though I dislike and reject the phrase, as that which by use and custom is apt to carry another sense). And, I do not deny, that God being thus the author of sin, follows from what I have laid down; and, I assert, that it equally follows from the doctrine which is maintained by most of the Arminian divines.”

If that is all you meant, and all that Jonathan Edwards was saying, then there would be no difficulty. The problem is that this is not all that has been said, as I showed in my previous letters.

The next letter you receive from me will hopefully be from Europe.

Blessings,

Canterbury Chris

From the Eucharist to the Pulpit

Dear Geneva George,

I'm sorry I never wrote from Europe like I promised. To be honest, George, during the whole trip my wife and I hardly came up for air!

The high point for us was being able to tour numerous ancient churches. I was struck by the fact that many of these churches were built directly on top of the graves of martyrs and saints, often with the altars (or, as us Protestants would say, the communion tables) situated strategically right over the bones of these holy men and women of the faith.

I was particularly moved when we visited St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Here one is able to look through a steel grate behind the altar down three floors to the very tomb of St. Peter. Another moving experience was when we visited the Roman Catholic church of Saint-Leu-Saint-Gilles in Paris France, where the bones of St. Helena (Constantine's mother) are situated in a small prayer chapel directly beneath the altar.

These churches reflect an ancient tradition. Ever since the time when Christians met in the catacombs, the liturgy of the Eucharist was celebrated, quite literally, on the tombs of the martyrs. When the early Christians were able to start building churches, they carried on this tradition, communion tables directly over the tombs of the martyrs and saints who had gone before. This was to proclaim physically what we know to be true spiritually, that the blood of the martyrs are the seed of the church.

But it also proclaimed that the blessed Eucharist is the heart of the Christian life, and thus the worthy location for those whose bones we wished to honor. The idea that our burial rites acknowledge a certain location or activity as being central to life is presupposed in secular burial rituals. It is typical that people ask to be buried, or to have their ashes scattered over, those places they identify with as being central to their life. By burying saints under the Eucharist table, the early Christians were proclaiming that the Eucharist is the central activity in the life of the church.

It is interesting that in many Eastern Orthodox churches this practice still continues, with relics of saints and martyrs embedded within their altars of their churches.

On our way back from Europe we stopped to visit a friend in Massachusetts before flying back to the West coast. He took us to visit Old South Presbyterian Church, where George Whitefield is buried. Now Whitefield asked to be buried, not under the communion table, but under the *pulpit*. As I reflected on this, I was struck by the fact that Whitefield's request seems to represent an important paradigm shift that occurred throughout the 18th century as the 'center' of Christian worship (or at least Protestant worship) was migrating from the Eucharist to the Pulpit.

During the time of Whitefield, and actually stretching earlier into the era of the Puritans, Protestant worship was coming to be increasingly more about preaching and doctrines, with the celebration of the Eucharist increasingly occupying a secondary role. I found that extremely interesting and so I have been doing some research on some of the factors leading to this shift.

In my next letter I hope to share some of the factors that led to this paradigm shift from the Eucharist to the pulpit.

Faithfully,

Canterbury Chris

27

Emptied Worship

Dear Geneva George,

I agree that the heightened valuation of preaching is indicative of the reformed tradition's greatest strength. Reformed theology has always emphasized the importance of the cognitive dimensions of our faith, offering a robust theology that takes seriously Christ's mandate to love God with all our minds (Mt. 22:37). However, whenever a good thing is emphasized, there is the risk that it will be elevated to the exclusion of other equally important dimensions.

In his book *The Communion of Saints: radical puritan and separatist ecclesiology, 1570-1625*, Brachlow suggests that this overweighting of the cognitive or scholastic dimensions of the faith occurred when Beza mediated Calvinism to the larger Protestant world, leading to "a serious though subtle transformation under the impact of the rationalizing process of protestant scholasticism." One of the corollaries to this rationalizing process was a devaluation of the Eucharist within the Protestant traditions touched by Calvin's canopy. This canopy involved investing the sacred with what Mellor and Shilling have described as "a linguistic and textual character" resulting in "the 'discursive symbolisation' of religion." In their book *Re-forming the Body* Mellor and Shilling suggest that within the reformed communities, the prioritization of "the cognitive commitment of individuals...rendered profane those embodied social bonds the Catholic Church had sacralised", resulting in "an altogether more abstract" conception of religion.

This heightened premium on states of cognition dovetailed with the rise of new ecclesial communities throughout Europe that were held together, not primarily through ritual eating (administered through the Eucharist table) but through cognitive assent to doctrinal formulations (administered through the pulpit). In *Re-forming the Body*, Mellor and Shilling describe this paradigm shift:

"Centred upon an essentially individual and cognitive engagement with a radically transcendent God, Protestantism made the sacred sublime insofar as it could only be apprehended indirectly, through the Word of God, and not directly through the fleshly body.... Protestantism abstracted religion from much of people's everyday lived experiences by dislocating faith and the sacred from ritual forms encountered through the sensuous body, and turning them into *cognitive ideals*."

This emphasis on the cognitive over the physical that came to characterize reformed theology would be marked by the tendency for the cerebral to swallow up the sacramental, for the invisible to absorb the incarnational. Sermons became the *de facto* "ordinary means of salvation," with longer and more didactic preaching needed to convince the Puritans that their faith was really genuine.

This more abstract concept of religion found expression in a dephysicalizing impulse. The Swiss reformer had no hesitation invoking the distinctly Platonic idea of the body being a prison, thus making the integration of spirit and matter deeply problematic. In his *Institutes*, Calvin wrote, "And when Christ commended his spirit to the Father and Stephen his to Christ they meant only that when the soul is freed from the prison house of the body, God is its perpetual guardian." In the same section Calvin writes, "It is of course true that while men are tied to earth more than they should be they grow dull..." Elsewhere Calvin made a particular point of pointing out that "it is not necessary that Christ or for that matter his word be received through the organs of the body", thus giving a degree of credence to those scholars who have identified a Platonic drift to Calvin's approach to the material world.

One of the areas where this Platonism played out was the approach that Calvin and his followers took towards the church building. For Calvin, who did not recognize physical spaces as being sacred apart from the use, there was no point in a lay person coming into a church to pray during the week since the action he is performing can be conducted just as efficiently anywhere. Calvin thus urged that places of worship be locked during the week, only to be opened during times of public worship. He wrote, “If anyone be found making any particular devotion inside or nearby, he is to be admonished...”

Though correlation does not imply causation, there may be some credence to William Dyrness’ suggestion that the disembodied approach to matter which became a feature of Cartesian dualism should be understood as an outgrowth of Europe’s Calvinist heritage. In his 2011 publication *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life*, Dyrness compares the way Calvin “wanted to...empty the worship space, so that it could be filled with God’s word” with the way Descartes attempted to empty his mind of all material encumbrances. Dyrness continues, noting that

“If any external mediation is unnecessary [within Calvin’s theology] and the Spirit only works within, there is a threat to traditional understandings for what the church had known as sacraments (or sacramentals). To put it another way, the sacraments now can only picture this inward work. Although in his understanding of signs Calvin sought to counter the minimalism of Zwingli, in the end nothing external can be essential to this process. We are not encouraged, as with Bonaventure, to move from mediation on the beauty of creation to the reflection of that beauty within and above us. (Incidentally, as near as I can tell, it was around this time that people began to close their eyes during corporate prayer to better focus their minds.) As a result, though Calvin probably did not intend this, over time it became the case that people, especially in the Pietist stream of this tradition, had no way of finding any substantial theological meaning in any external object or act. There was no longer anything for their eyes or their feelings to hold and indwell.

“Descartes was key here. I believe that one can argue that he was working in the shadow of this Calvinist heritage when he said in 1642, ‘I am certain that I cannot have any knowledge of what is outside of me, except by what is in me.’ The view that we should have more confidence in what is in our minds than what is before our eyes led to what Charles Taylor calls a ‘mediational epistemology’ (the notion that knowledge is mediated through ideas in our minds), and to the split between public and private religion, seen perhaps in its earliest form in Descartes. This distrust of the unity of sense and spiritual knowledge was surely one of the conditions, if not the cause, of his splitting inner and outer knowledge. Such a view tends to privilege the ear over the eye, and, as a result, language over other symbolic forms.”

In reviving the descendants of the Puritans in the American colonies, Whitefield was able to draw on this shared narrative which the Eucharist had become merely an adjunct to the preaching of the Word. Whitefield’s request to be buried under the pulpit is symbolic of the important paradigm shift that had occurred. The Church for 1,500 years had built countless Altars, where the sacred offering of the body and blood of Christ was consecrated, over the graves and tombs of Martyrs and Saints. But now, by the mid 18th century a profound shift was taking place in the Protestant West. Where the offering of the Eucharist had previously been the center of Christian Worship, preaching and teaching had now become the primary focus with Eucharistic celebration being merely an adjunct to that.

Since the age of the revivals, much of the hyper cognitivism would migrate from the intellectual to the subjective. While contemporary evangelical culture (especially within the

self-consciously non-traditional evangelical churches) has been shorn of the intellectual integrity that was integral to the scholasticism of the reformers, they have retained the basic rationalistic impulse. This is best seen in the salvific role that knowledge is thought to play within different sub-traditions of the American evangelical community. In some groups, this is felt in the assumption that in order to be saved by the gospel one must first understand the gospel. There is also the tendency, especially in churches that are self-consciously 'reformed', to make doctrinal exactitude on certain key doctrines a necessary condition for salvation. Perhaps the most common manifestation of this is when the ability to articulate justification in broadly *sola fide* categories is elevated to being a necessary condition to salvation. In other groups, one finds this rationalism at work in the Wesleyian assumption that one cannot be saved if one does not possess personal assurance of salvation, thus rendering deeply problematic the salvation of children or mentally handicapped individuals.

This type of heady, abstract rationalism mitigates against us being able to see material objects as being sacred. Even though both the Old and New Testaments are full of numerous examples of material objects that are sacred, reformed Protestants like yourself tend to be deeply uncomfortable with the concept.

As the concept of sacredness was stripped from all material reference points, the pulpit would come to be occupy the evacuated center, not because the material pulpit was seen to be sacred, but because it represented the invisible doctrines mediated to Christians by the sermon. It is significant that reformed theology has made much of the fact that such preaching reaches us invisibly through the mind independent of bodily organs. Calvin himself would note that

“In the preaching of the word, the external minister holds forth the vocal word and it is received by the ears. The internal minister, the Holy Spirit, truly communicates the thing proclaimed through the word that is Christ to the souls of all who will, so that it is not necessary that Christ or for that matter his word be received through the organs of the body, but the Holy Spirit effects this union by his secret virtue, by creating faith in us by which he makes us living members of Christ.”

Similarly, Jonathan Edwards shared the Calvinist antipathy to physically engaged worship. While he allowed that the physical body could be involved in the worship of God, since “there is an indissoluble, unavoidable association, in the minds of the most rational and spiritual, between things spiritual and things bodily”, Edwards argued that the more mature we become, the less involved our physical body must be in worshipping God:

“I acknowledge, that the more rational a person, the less doth his disposition of mind depend on anything in his body; and that if he practises gestures of body in worship, where there is no necessary and unavoidable association, it tends to make him, or to keep him less rational and spiritual.” ...Wherefore the weak and beggarly elements are rejected, and the childish bodily ceremonies cashiered, as being fit only for children, and unworthy of those who are come to riper years; and the worship that is now required of [us] is only that which is manly, rational and spiritual.”

The logic of believing that “it is not necessary that Christ...be received through the organs of the body” (Calvin) or that “the more rational a person, the less doth his disposition of mind depend on anything in his body” (Edwards) could only be realized in a sacramentalism that either downplayed the centrality of the Eucharist or else reinterpreted it in purely cognitive terms, or both.

It is precisely this shift from the bodily to the cognitive that, I suggest, helps us to understand why Whitefield asked that his relics be placed under the *pulpit* of Old South Presbyterian Church, instead of underneath the Eucharist table.

Love,

Canterbury Chris

Sacred Spaces and Times

Dear Geneva George,

What, no sacred spaces in the Bible? I expected better of a Bible scholar like you! I am truly shocked to hear you say that since that the Old and New Testaments are literally peppered with examples of material objects being holy.

Perhaps the most prominent example in the Bible is God's temple. In ancient Hebrew theology, the temple was the place where Heaven and Earth intersect, where the spiritual and the material merge together and become one. We find this notion implicit in passages like 2 Samuel 7:12-17, as well as the various Psalms which speak of God literally dwelling in the temple in a way that God, though omnipresent, does not dwell in other places. The temple foreshadows the intersection of heaven and earth in the God-man and later in the church, both of which anticipate the final Eschaton when Heaven and earth are finally reconnected together in fulfillment of the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:10).

In these passages we are confronted with the notion that the ordinary materiality of our world can, under certain conditions, be taken up and transformed into something higher. We find this same reality operative in other sacred spaces in scripture, such as the Ark of the Covenant, Elisha's relics (2 Kings 13:20-21) the garments of the apostles (Acts 19:12), or the transfiguration event (Mark 9:2-28), to name only a few. The point is that while all of the material world is good (Genesis 1:25) and in some sense spiritually-infused, certain sacred spaces can become conduits of spiritual power that sets them apart from ordinary material objects.

If this is true of sacred spaces in scripture, it is also true of sacred times. In the Bible, God set certain times apart from the normal flow of linear time. These times become sacred in a way that ordinary time is not. The primary example of this is, of course, the Sabbath. But in addition to the Sabbath God also instituted numerous feasts that His people were commanded to observe annually. The significance of these sacred times is not that they simply remember a past event. Rather, these feasts link the people of God back to the original event so that, in a mystical sort of way, the people celebrating the feast can participate in the event. The memorialized event comes rushing into the present and we, in a sense, are able to relive it.

Consider a few examples. When Jews celebrate the Passover meal of Exodus 12, the youngest child at the table asks the father, "why is this night different from all other nights?" and the father replies by explaining how God rescued our forefathers *on this night*. This idea is enshrined in the Mishnah where we find the teaching that in every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt. There is a sense in which the feast of Passover allows each generation to become the generation of the Exodus. The same principle applies in the feasts of the Christian era. Every Good Friday, there is a sense in which we are reliving the darkness of the hours that Christ hung on the cross. Every Easter there is a sense that Christ is risen *today*. That is, after all, why it is appropriate to sing 'Christ the Lord is risen today' in a way that would have felt wrong the Friday before. Every Advent there is a sense that we are transported back to join the saints of Hebrews 11:39-40 waiting for the Christ-child to come. Every Christmas there is a sense that this is when the Christ-child is being born in Bethlehem. This is presupposed in the text of much of the hymnology which accompanies these occasions.

This sacred way of conceiving time challenges the empty and homogeneous time of the secular calendar in which everything is a linear and uniform sequence of cause and effect, measurable by the clock and calendar. The story that the church has historically told through

its six seasons, like the story the Hebrews told through the Old Testament feasts, understands time in the present through its proximity with events that are typologically significant within the Divine Plan. Such proximity operated on what you might call a different axis to that of 'ordinary time' (though to call it 'ordinary' is already to reveal our modern presuppositions). This is why, to borrow the example that Charles Taylor used in *A Secular Age* when making the same point, "Good Friday 1998 is closer in a way to the ordinary day of the Crucifixion than mid-summer's day 1997." The great events of the church's life, whether the anticipation of Christ's birth during Advent or the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, were occasions in which the people of God could, so to speak, participate in the original event, which comes rushing into the present as the church provides the vital link between heaven with earth.

This spiritual understanding of time is very much related to the spiritual understanding of space and matter. "Certain sacred places - a church, a shrine, a site of pilgrimage - are closer to higher time than everyday places" suggests Charles Taylor. "Really to capture this complexity, or rather to capture the hierarchy here, one has to disrupt space, or else make no attempt to render it coherently. This latter is the option enshrined in the iconic tradition, which strongly influences pre-Renaissance church painting."

What makes me suspect that Taylor is right is that it jives with the way I have tried to show that the Bible treats both sacred times and sacred spaces or material objects, though this may strike as peculiar those for whom quantitative time has become their only frame of reference. We have bought into secular notions of time, so that we treat events like Christmas and Easter as mere anniversaries of an event that is further away from us every year, rather than the type of spiritual juxtaposition that Biblical categories invite us to invoke. Christmas is treated as if it were simply Jesus' birthday with the wrong date. I have known some Christians who were in such bondage to the absolutism of secular time that they refused to celebrate Christmas on December 25 because it was the wrong date. However, instead of letting the secular ordering of events swallow up the church's higher understanding of time, it ought to be the other way round.

A corollary to this purely profane or secular way of looking at time is that we are progressing further and further away from events like Christ's birth, sacrifice or resurrection. The ever moving stream of secular time – what Cavanaugh calls "the uniform, and literally end-less, progress of time" – carries the events of Christ's life further away from us in the present. It was precisely this sense of temporal remoteness that medieval through Renaissance painters rejected when they represented Biblical figures in medieval garb. In his book *Torture and Eucharist*, William Cavanaugh comments on this by pointing out that "medieval Christians did not imagine they were separated from the past by a wide gulf of ever-advancing time." Indeed, their constant repetition of the events in the seasons of the church year kept these events close at hand, an ever-present reality.

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches (and some Anglican churches) have retained something of this idea in their understanding of the Eucharist. In the best of their sacramental theology, the Eucharist is not a mere repetition of a past historical event, but a mystic participation in the original event in much the same way as the Passover celebration linked our forefathers with the original event. The original event becomes an ever-present reality, not in a crude mechanistic way, but in a way that is no less real and substantial.

Regards,

Canterbury Chris