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The Holy Spirit and Presbyterians

A Livelier History Than Many Have Imagined

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The history of Presbyterianism is more but not less than a history of the interpretation of the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a history of actions and reactions, movements and countermovements in response to the work (or presumed work) of the Holy Spirit, or, more specifically, a history of efforts to redress perceived excesses or deficiencies in its own teachings and in the teachings of others on the Holy Spirit. That Presbyterians have such a history is not surprising. John Calvin not only systematically expounded the work of the Holy Spirit but also emphasized it as much if not more than any theologian before him, leading B.B. Warfield to call him “pre-eminently *the theologian of the Holy Spirit*.” Whereas “the doctrine of sin and grace dates from Augustine, the doctrine of satisfaction from Anselm, the doctrine of justification by faith from Luther,” Warfield claimed, “the doctrine of the work of Holy Spirit is a gift from Calvin to the Church.”¹ Whether always properly understanding the person and work of the Holy Spirit or wishing to receive this gift from Calvin, it is the doctrinal seed from which Presbyterians rose.

Calvin propounded the Holy Spirit’s free agency according to Scripture against various efforts to contain, control, or usurp it. This emphasis is reflected in the teachings of his progeny. Nowhere, for example, is Calvin’s Eucharistic teaching more precisely recapitulated or the Spirit’s work deemed to be more decisive than in the Scots Confession (1560). Against Ulrich Zwingli and Anabaptists, “who affirm the

sacraments to be nothing else than naked and bare signs” and the “transubstantiation of bread into Christ’s body, and of wine into his natural blood, as the Romanists have perniciously taught,” the Scots Confession teaches that “the right use of the sacraments is wrought by means of the Holy Ghost, who by true faith carries us above all things that are visible, carnal, and earthly, and makes us feed upon the body and blood of Christ Jesus.” The Spirit’s work is in believers, not the elements, and —“notwithstanding the distance,” which so concerned the Lutherans—it is the Spirit who mystically unites Christ’s “glorified body in heaven and mortal men on earth.” By providing a separate chapter on the Holy Spirit, extensive treatment of his work in regeneration and sanctification, and a devastating description of the depravity from which he saves human beings, the Scots Confession demonstrates why “the Spirit of the Lord Jesus” has been so important to Presbyterians from the beginning.

Having taken root in Scotland, this seed bore the fruit of much revival preaching. Beginning, for example, with the General Assembly at St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, in 1596, John Davison preached, and purportedly, “the

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Holy Spirit pierce[d] their hearts with razor-sharp conviction” and “a spirit of deep repentance” broke in upon them. “Caught by surprise and overwhelmed by the Spirit, those present” were “used by God to carry the torch of revival fire from this place, igniting a blaze that will sweep across the Scottish landscape.”² Such fire spread through the preaching of John Welch and Robert Bruce. Many witnessed the “down-pouring of the Spirit” at the Kirk o’Shotts Revival of 1630. Revival also spread to Ireland through the preaching of John Livingston, Josias Welch, and Robert Blair. Passionate outdoor preaching, celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and subsequent testimonies of personal conversions and renewal were standard. “This dependence upon the Holy Spirit’s moving within individual souls and the resulting religious emphasis upon emotionally charged piety,” Marilyn Westerkemp claims, “dominated Scottish Christianity since the early seventeenth century.”³

1. The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

English Puritanism also influenced the development of Presbyterian pneumatology. The Westminster Confession maintains Calvin’s emphasis on the Holy Spirit, but nowhere more explicitly than in its teaching on “the inward illumination of the Spirit.” Readers of Scripture may hold it in “high and reverent esteem” and be convinced it is the Word of God by many arguments, “yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority, thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” Throughout the seventeenth century, however, one sees “a perceptible shift towards an overly rationalist type of theological thought which risked reducing the inward illumination of the Spirit to a largely formal assent to the authority of Scripture or of the teaching of the *Confession*.”⁴ Resisting the pressure of the age to collapse the truth of revelation into truths of reason, John Owen wrote his *Pneumatologia*, which “was in part directed against the idea that God’s Spirit should be regarded simply as an ethical quality of human life, a ‘spirit’ of natural morality, rather than as a ‘spiritual principle’ engendering new spiritual life in us.” Owen’s teachings on the Spirit influenced generations of English and Scots-Irish Presbyterians, as did those of other learned doctors of the church, for example, William Perkins, Thomas Goodwin, and Thomas Watson.

Yet learned doctors were scarce—as were ministers trained by them—when large numbers of Scots-Irish Presbyterians migrated to America in the early eighteenth century, prompting William Tennent to establish the Log College in 1727. The Synod’s ruling in 1739, that its education was inferior set the stage for the Old Side-New Side Controversy, which was fueled by Gilbert Tennent’s sermon, “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” (1740). Representing the New

Side, Tennent charged that many “orthodox, letter-learned and regular Pharisees” were merely “natural men,” while few were truly “spiritual.” John Thomson, representing the Old Side, responded with “The Doctrine of Convictions Set in a Clear Light” (1741), about which Tennent said: “Hardly anything can be invented that has a more direct tendency to destroy the common operations of God’s Holy Spirit, and to keep men from Jesus Christ.”⁵

Thomson was troubled by Tennent’s claim that he could so readily distinguish between converted and unconverted ministers and that “all true converts are as sensibly assured of their converted State, of the Grace of God in them and the Love of God unto them and of the Spirit’s working in them, as they can be of the Truth of what they perceive by their outward Senses.” Was this not judging by appearances? Rejecting Tennent’s inference of separate works of grace, Thomson insisted that the Holy Spirit “does not, first work one Grace and afterwards another, and again a Third, viz. he doth not first work Faith and afterward Repentance, and again Love, and then good Resolutions, &c. but rather that the very first Beginning of true Grace consists of one intire radical Grace.”⁶

Thomson’s contention that the New Side’s understanding of the Spirit’s work was not radical enough was not the last time Presbyterians identified as “Old” would insist on calling the Spirit’s work “radical.” And the notion of empirically identifiable signs of the Spirit’s indwelling and a separate, “second blessing” or work of grace, and debate over which specific work was the most radical, would resurface again through Pentecostalism. Both Tennent and Thomson supported revival. But they differed over how the Spirit worked. These differences persisted among Presbyterianism throughout the Great Awakening. George Whitfield’s preaching directly impacted Presbyterians in Scotland and the American middle colonies. But the Great Awakening’s most enduring impact upon American Presbyterianism was that presbyteries began requiring ordination candidates to provide testimony about God’s work of grace in their own lives.

No theologian prompted American Presbyterians to focus more on the Holy Spirit’s work than Jonathan Edwards. “The work of the Spirit of God in regeneration is,” Edwards wrote, “giving a new sense, giving eyes to see, and ears to hear.” It “is compared to a raising the dead, and to a new creation.” While eschewing the emotional excesses associated with revivals, Edward insisted that the experience of regeneration stirs the emotions and transforms the affections. He also made a sharp distinction between the Spirit’s work on the minds of “natural man” and his work in the lives of “his saints.” “The Spirit of God, in all his operations upon the minds

of natural men, only moves, impresses, assists, improves, or some way acts upon natural principles; but gives no new spiritual principle.” Such was the case with Balaam, to whom he even gave visions. “But the Spirit of God in his spiritual influences on the hearts of his saints, operates by infusing or exercising new, divine and supernatural principles; principles which are indeed a new and spiritual nature, and principles vastly more noble and excellent than all that is in natural men.”⁷

As the fires of revolution waxed and the fires of revival waned in colonial America, many Presbyterian clergymen directed their attention on civic concerns. After the Revolution, however, and particularly after the upheaval following the French Revolution from 1789 to 1794, many lamented that America was becoming decadent, especially in its western expansion. Many longed for another awakening, but the spiritual and intellectual landscape had changed significantly.

Common-sense realism now well established in American higher education, led many New Englanders to wonder if the human condition were quite as bad as earlier Calvinists claimed. Samuel Hopkins had implied as much to “New Divinity” clergymen, who estimated man’s natural capacity for God more highly. But Nathaniel Taylor, who was deeply committed to common-sense philosophy with respect to revival, went further. Though claiming to be Edwards’ disciple, Taylor considered Edwards’ distinction between the Spirit’s work on the minds of natural men and his regenerating work to be too sharp. Taylor asked, “If salvation were entirely the work of the Holy Spirit, how could the evangelist exhort his audience to turn from sin to a new righteousness? If men were totally depraved and unable by themselves to do any good, how could he urge them to accept the offer of the Gospel?” George Marsden claims that this is the central question in “The Rise of New School Evangelicalism.”⁸

2. The Early Nineteenth Century

Other factors contributed to the Old School-New School split in 1837. The 1801 Plan of Union that brought Congregationalists and Presbyterians together formalized various practical arrangements but also forged a theological ethos. At its core were commitments to revival and social reform. These bore fruit. Reaping the harvest of revivals throughout the 1830s, the New School’s growth far exceeded the Old’s. But what the latter found disturbing was the New School’s willingness to adopt “new measures,” perhaps not as extreme as Charles Finney’s “anxious bench,” but calculated, nevertheless, “to increase the pressure on the individual to make a self-conscious and immediate choice to accept Christ. This emphasis on the sinner’s active choice, the Old School asserted, implicitly denied the role of the Holy Spirit as the exclusive agent of

regeneration.” It went back to the Old School’s question: “Was the Holy Spirit merely an influence on man’s free will as Taylor suggested, or did the Holy Spirit supply the whole transforming power in regeneration?” Before the smoke from the 1837 General Assembly that divided the denomination had cleared, the New School responded to the Old School’s accusations, insisting that they, too, believed that “regeneration is a radical change of heart, produced by the special operations of the Holy Spirit, ‘determining the sinner to that which is good,’ and is in all cases instantaneous.” This, however, did not heal the rift.⁹

Controversy also erupted in the Church of Scotland in the 1830s, when, rejecting cessationism—the belief that miracles and certain gifts of the Spirit have ceased—Edward Irving and John McLeod Campbell sought more Spirit-filled preaching and worship that had a place for signs and wonders, healing, and tongues. Similar rumblings occurred among American Presbyterians, but rarely among the mainstream. By then, Presbyterians had become more established and respectable, especially compared to their immigrant ancestors. Although wary of their excesses, most Presbyterians supported revivals throughout the Second Great Awakening.

Beyond the Presbyterian world, however, a powerful movement was emerging among Protestants in Germany, Switzerland, and Holland. Many progressive European pietists and New School Presbyterians had similar views of revival and social reform. They also shared considerable interior focus and doubts about the adequacy of language, confessions, and doctrine. To Old Schoolers, it looked like a “revolt against the intellect.”¹⁰ Instead of objective knowledge, faith risked being defined primarily as feeling, mere trust, an ineffable experience, the object of which was inherently nondiscursive, non-propositional, and devoid of cognitive content.

There was warrant for concern. Some labeled this movement “New Haven theology.” Others called it “mediating theology.” No one yet called it “liberalism.” Charles Hodge called it “mysticism” and knew its greatest champion, Schleiermacher, who, Hodge said, “is regarded as the most interesting as well as the most influential theologian of modern times.” Hodge forever admired Schleiermacher’s Christological-focused piety. For those who assign “more importance to the feelings than to the intellect” and assuming that “the senses and reason alike are untrustworthy and inadequate, as sources of knowledge” when it comes to receiving knowledge of “God, and our relation to Him,” “Schleiermacher’s system,” Hodge wrote, “is the most elaborate system of theology ever presented to the Church.”¹¹ Recognizing its attraction, Hodge elaborated an extensive pneumatology. Nevertheless, he doubled

down in seeking to ground the truth of Christian revelation “objectively,” basing it on evidence or facts contained in Scripture as interpreted through the lens of common sense. But as higher criticism increasingly called some of this evidence into question, Warfield and A.A. Hodge were compelled to publish the essay “Inspiration,” in 1881.

3. The Late Nineteenth Century

When Charles Briggs, a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, suggested that their appeal to original manuscripts was a poor substitute for the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, Francis Patton, the president of Princeton, responded, “Dependence of the soul upon the Holy Ghost is, of course, to be fully acknowledged. But we are not authorized to draw a line of distinction between faith which is due to reason and faith that is caused by the Spirit, in such terms as to make the former worthless.” “We address arguments to the intellect, desiring to produce conviction,” he added, “and we recognize the need of the Spirit’s cooperation” to obtain this result. “But it is one thing to say that the result cannot be secured without the Spirit and another thing to say that if secured without the Spirit it is of no value. The Bible calls for faith, but it does not require the man who has it to give an account of its genesis.”¹² Patton sought to safeguard faith from collapsing into subjectivism, but his approach raised questions: Is faith “secured without the Spirit” faith? Granted, the Bible may require no account of *how* we came to faith, but does it not require us to acknowledge from *whom* faith comes—namely, from the Spirit, as a pure gift? And is “securing” the right “result” the Spirit’s primary work in establishing faith? This suggests why Presbyterians wanted to clarify the Holy Spirit’s role.

During the late nineteenth century, the Princeton Seminary faculty vigorously opposed efforts to revise the Westminster Confession. Deeply concerned about subjectivism, they wanted the role of the Holy Spirit to be carefully circumscribed. No one understood this better than Warfield. Yet far from de-emphasizing the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, as critics later claimed, Warfield elaborated it more fully than any Presbyterian in this period. But his contribution was primarily defensive. Those wishing that the Westminster Confession said more about the Spirit, he insisted, missed the forest for the trees. The Confession is itself “a treatise on the work of the Spirit.” No “meager summary” or chapter on the Holy Spirit could say better what the Confession already said. Overtures calling for confessional revision were defeated in 1893, but within a decade, Old Princeton’s arguments against revision no longer persuaded most Presbyterians.

Old Princeton’s influence waned as the common-sense consensus among American intellectuals collapsed.

Warfield, who championed Christianity as “the Apologetic religion,” destined “to reason its way to dominion,” was bewildered that his Dutch Calvinist friends, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, did not concur. Reviewing Bavinck’s book *The Certainty of Faith*, Warfield wrote: “It is a standing matter of surprise to us that the school which Dr. Bavinck so brilliantly represents should be tempted to make so little of Apologetics.” Warfield agreed that “‘faith’ is the gift of God. But it does not follow that the ‘faith’ that God gives is not grounded in ‘the evidences.’” Bavinck asserted that arguments cannot establish faith; at best, they lead only to a “historical faith.” Warfield replied, “This is true. But then ‘historical faith’ is faith—a conviction of mind; and it is, as Dr. Bavinck elsewhere fully allows, of no little use in the world. The truth therefore is that rational argumentation does, entirely apart from that specific operation of the Holy Ghost which produces saving faith, ground a genuine exercise of faith.”¹³ Yet, in claiming that “‘historical faith’ is faith,” Warfield asserted what earlier Calvinists had denied. For Calvin, there was no “conviction of mind” “about faith” or “of faith” worth having apart from the Holy Spirit.

Warfield later recapitulated his long-standing concern that “many had been tempted to make faith not a rational act of conviction . . . but an arbitrary act of the sheer will” or a mere matter of trust (*fiducia*). Yet he acknowledges, “Protestant theologians have generally explained that faith includes in itself the three elements of *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*”; and “to protest against the Romish conception which limits faith to the assent of the understanding,” they have stressed “the fiducial element.” He also acknowledges that “the divine giving of faith” involves “the creation by God the Holy Spirit of a *capacity for faith under the evidence submitted*” (italics mine), which sounds like Calvin and Edwards. However, Warfield continues, this capacity is not “something alien to [our] nature”; rather, it “belongs to human nature as such, which has been lost through sin and which can be restored only by the power of God. In this sense, faith remains natural even in the renewed sinner.” “There is not required a creation of something entirely new, but only a restoration of an old relation and a renewal therewith of an old disposition.”¹⁴

Yet is the Spirit’s work only reparative or restorative? Is it primarily supplying confirmatory aid in our intellectual assent, providing a supplement to enhance natural brain functioning, thereby making faith essentially an optimal form of human cognition? Does the Spirit simply authenticate what the mind ought to recognize as true if it is functioning properly and presented with sufficient evidence? There is no question here about the necessity of the Spirit’s work. The question is: What is the miracle? If there is one, it appears to be that boost in mental acuity that enables the mind to move

from possibility to probability to, finally, certainty, after the evidence has been “duly apprehended, appreciated, [and] weighed,” as Warfield says.

4. The Early Twentieth Century

Most of those calling for confessional revision were unaware of these distinctions. They simply felt Old Princeton had overintellectualized faith and thought it “desirable” to express more fully the doctrine of the Church concerning the Holy Spirit.” When the new chapter on Holy Spirit in the 1903 revision underscored that the Spirit “urges” the gospel “upon the reason and conscience of men” and “prepares the way for it, [and] accompanies it with his persuasive power,” it sufficed. Surprising to many, however, Warfield did not object. Instead of correcting anything in the Confessions, he said, “this section may fairly be accounted a contribution “toward the augmentation of the Confession.”¹⁵

Yet Warfield had reason to worry. With the Holiness and Higher Life movements in full swing, Wesleyan perfectionism, Restorationist movements, and doomsday premillennialism on the rise, and Pentecostalism about to erupt, Warfield knew that powerful forces were at work in the name of the Spirit that could influence, if not deceive, even the elect. Growing up thirty miles from Cane Ridge, Warfield knew about the excesses of spirit-filled religion and hoped they would not spread. When they did, he wrote his last major work, *Counterfeit Miracles* (1918). Marsden says when the Keswick conferences were held at Princeton, in 1916, “true to the Princeton tradition,” the lion of Princeton “spotted a major doctrinal innovation and pounced.” In publishing his landmark defense of cessationism, Warfield repudiated not only glossolalia and faith healing but, theoretically, every miracle since the apostles.¹⁶

Not all Princeton Seminary professors were as suspect of modern movements that emphasized the Spirit’s work, however. Warfield’s younger colleague, Charles Erdman, with his deep Holiness and New School roots, defended them. Many of these movements have involved “extravagances and misconceptions,” Erdman acknowledged, but they “draw attention to elements which ... need to be recognized and developed continually if [the Christian] life is to be maintained in purity and developed in power.”¹⁷ Because these movements had promoted personal holiness, peace, hope, and power for service, social righteousness, ecumenical unity, and education, Erdman argued, the power behind them was indispensable for renewal. Knowing the suspicions of fellow Presbyterians, he interpreted “the gifts of the Spirit,” being “filled with the Spirit,” “the baptism of the Spirit,” and other such phrases in their most positive, nonsectarian light; and did the same in his analysis of John Wesley, Finney, Dwight Moody, and the Young Men’s Christian

Association, Keswick conventions, and Pentecostal movement. Although he critiqued their excesses, Erdman was too sanguine about them for Warfield.

Yet moderate evangelicals were not the only Presbyterians seeking to march under the Spirit’s banner. Liberals had long cited: “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor. 3:17). Although they suffered defeats in the latter nineteenth century, their fortunes began to turn in the early twentieth century. The General Assembly passed resolutions affirming five fundamentals of faith in 1910, but such measures could not stem the rising tide of dissent. Henry Sloane Coffin, incensed that his teachers, Charles Briggs and Arthur McGiffert, had been driven out of the denomination, successfully defended dissenters. “We dare not curtail freedom of conscience,” Coffin wrote in 1915. “We look for an organization of the Church of Christ that shall exclude no one who shares His Spirit, and that shall provide an outlet for every gift the Spirit bestows” and give people the “liberty to think, to worship, to labor, as they are led by the Spirit of God.”¹⁸ Later, Coffin declared, “To acknowledge that a man possesses the Spirit of God and is equipped to serve the Kingdom, but to hold him unfit to minister in our select theological club because he does not wholly share the views of the majority, seems to me perilously like blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.”¹⁹ Robert Hasting Nichols, a drafter of the 1924 Auburn Affirmation, agreed: “The Holy Spirit, not the church, was the final authority for Protestant ministers.”²⁰

J. Gresham Machen rebutted the charge that his brand of orthodoxy “quenched the Spirit” by emphasizing the Spirit’s work. Against moralistic preaching, he implored, “Let us not try to do without the Spirit of God.” Against charges of upholding a “dead orthodoxy,” he declared, “At the very center of Christianity are the words, ‘Ye must be born again.’” “This work of the Holy Spirit is part of the creative work of God. It is not accomplished by the ordinary use of means” or “merely by using the good that is already in man. On the contrary,” he added, “it is something new. It is not an influence upon the life, but the beginning of a new life; it is not development of what we had already, but a new birth.”²¹

Nevertheless, liberals such as William Merrill responded that the real conflict was between “a religion of authority” and “a religion of the spirit.” The faith of evangelical liberals, Merrill said, “rests on spiritual conviction, rather than on compulsion of logic or of ecclesiastical authority.” “Fundamentalists” and “ultra-conservatives,” he claimed, rely on the latter. “For them, there must be something tangible, physical, material, substantial, if anything is to be real. Undoubtedly, that is one powerful reason why [they] contend so inflexibly for ... the errorless original manuscripts of the Bible”

and worry when liberals claim their Bible is “equally inspired whether in the form of original manuscript or copy or translation, a trustworthy and authoritative guide simply because of the Spirit which is manifest in it.” Beyond the “high regard” for Scripture that rational proofs “may” yield, Merrill cited the Westminster Confession, “Yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts,” as the only way one “rests fully and wholly on spirit, not on force; on truth, not on dogma.”²²

Seeking to heal the breach, Erdman preached “The Power of the Holy Spirit” as Moderator of the 1926 General Assembly, admonishing: “Some of us also may be failing to remember the relation between the Spirit of God and the revealed will of God, and we may not be giving to the written Word a large enough place in our lives.” “Others of us may be ‘grieving the Spirit,’” Erdman said, “by bearing false witness against our fellow-Christian, by our bitterness and suspicion and envy and malice, and by not ‘speaking the truth in love.’”²³

However, as the Social Gospel gained hegemony among liberals, controversial claims about “the Spirit of Christ” followed. “Ministry to the secular needs of men in the spirit of Christ is *evangelism*, in the right use of the word,” declared one author in *Rethinking Missions* (1932). Another proclaimed, “Whether carried on by Confucian or Christian, this movement spread abroad that quality which we have come to think of as the spirit of Christ.”²⁴ Although *Rethinking Missions* was not an official Presbyterian publication, enough Presbyterians praised it, (notably, Pearl Buck) to suggest that the “Spirit of Christ”—interpreted as the personality, character, or values of Jesus—was serving as a sieve for syncretism or, at least, a concept untethered from its Trinitarian moorings. Coffin had asserted earlier that the Spirit of God is “in non-Christian faiths” and “the Spirit is God’s Life in men, God living in them. To possess His will to serve, His sense of obligation, His interest and compassion, is to have the Holy Spirit dwelling and regnant in us.” Now Coffin’s convictions resonated more widely. “Men and women who are molding homes and industries, towns and nations, so that they embody love, and influencing for righteousness the least and lowest,” he argued “are helping build the habitation of God in the Spirit.”²⁵

Without calling it a movement of the Spirit, a less triumphalistic Social Gospel movement was emerging in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). Seeking to overcome its “doctrine of the spirituality of the church,” which had sanctioned silence on “social issues” such as slavery, the General Assembly appointed the Committee on Moral and Social Welfare in 1934.

The next Assembly adopted the committee’s report, which reinterpreted the concept of spirituality: “The church in fulfillment of its spiritual function must interpret and present Christ’s ideal for the individual and for society” in all areas of life—“in the home, in the school, in the church, in industry, and in politics, in racial contracts, and in international affairs.” Moreover, it approved measures to consider revising the Confession of Faith, which it did in 1938, adding chapters, “Of the Holy Spirit” and “Of the Gospel,” that were identical to those of the PCUSA.²⁶

Although many Presbyterians still expressed concern that many non-Presbyterians misunderstood the Holy Spirit, few expressed concern about misunderstandings within their tradition. Walter Williamson Bryden, the principal of Knox College, Toronto, was an exception. Criticizing modern Protestants for seeking to “domesticate” the Spirit, Bryden emphasized “the utter discontinuity” the Spirit brings between the old and new, “between God and sinful man, between the Divine Spirit and Human spirit.” “He brings to an *end* the old Adam and creates the new man which is in Christ.” Pagan religions, “despite much talk about holy men and holy things,” Bryden said, “know no Holy Spirit, Who alone judges man to the roots of his being, cleanses him, thus delivers and comforts him.” “All true Christian believing, thinking and living, originate in Him.”²⁷

The “spurious understanding of the Holy Spirit and His work” in the reactionary movements of rationalism and enthusiasm that oscillate throughout history, Bryden argued “have not served the church well.” But now, he warned, “there is the more characteristically modern and much more dangerous ‘idealistic’ misunderstanding of the Spirit’s function.” “The idealistic challenge consists” in turning the Spirit into a “so-called ‘higher’ rational-principle, immanent in man and in the world, presumed to be the sole creative agency of all there is of worth in civilization, culture and religion.” The Spirit serves to “‘advance’ in material welfare, intellectual and cultural pursuits” in times of peace and in war, calls us “to protect natural interests and to justify the righteousness of our cause,” and, “above all things, [to] be respectable, decent and in order.” “The equation of this activity with the work of the Holy Spirit has proven almost disastrous to Christianity,” Bryden asserted at the outset of World War II. “The specific sin against the Holy Ghost in this age is” that people “substitute for the unique gifts of God’s Spirit their alleged national virtues and accustomed modes of living” and “count the possession of the latter somehow adequate for their salvation.”²⁸

5. The Mid-Twentieth Century

Few topics concerned Presbyterian leaders in American theological education after World War II more than the Holy Spirit. As a Latin American missionary John

Mackay had contended in 1929 “that the greatest need of our time is to re-discover the Holy Spirit.” As the president of Princeton Seminary, Mackay wrote increasingly in the post-war period about the Holy Spirit.²⁹ Likewise, Henry Van Dusen, the president of Union Seminary in New York, reflecting upon recent encounters with Pentecostalism abroad, predicted that future historians would “assess the most significant development in Christendom” in the second half of the twentieth century to be “the emergence of a new, third major type or branch of Christendom” alongside Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Both Presbyterians recognized “the portent and promise” of this “Third Force,” as Van Dusen called it, but Mackay interpreted the Spirit along the lines of his own Reformed, ecumenical “Evangelical Catholicity,” whereas Van Dusen picked up where his predecessor Coffin left off and interpreted the Spirit along lines more common to religious studies departments.³⁰

Seeking in *Spirit, Son, and Father* to emphasize the “neglected” former, Van Dusen stated, “The Holy Spirit should be a central and vital factor in the individual Christian’s thought and life; it is also of immense importance for Christianity’s relations with other religions, the whole world of religion in general.” “The fact is the Christian Church has never been altogether clear and consistent as to what is meant by the Holy Spirit.” “This fuzziness and inconsistency root back in the Bible itself.” “That vagueness and confusion persisted through the early centuries,” he insisted, “and have continued down to our own day.” “The Holy Spirit has guarded Christians’ thought of God from too precise formulation and too definitive limitation” and “kept Christians’ thought of God ‘open-ended’ toward new discoveries of God” and “new revelations of Himself by God.” However, the Holy Spirit “is not a uniquely or even distinctively Christian belief,” but is pervasive throughout religion, especially “the higher non-Christian faiths.” Because “we are on the right lines to employ the method of human analogy, anthropomorphisms, reading God’s nature in terms drawn from human experience at its noblest,” Van Dusen affirmed “the Trinity of Experience” rather than “the Trinity of Speculation” or “Dogma.” He also rejected the “provocative treatment” of interpreters who “maintain that Christians know nothing of the Holy Spirit apart from Jesus Christ,” such as Princeton Seminary professor, George Hendry.³¹

Hendry acknowledged long-standing “problems” with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, especially the church’s “meager” efforts to clarify the Spirit’s relation to Christ and the church. But they are “gravely defective” not because of the “diversity” of biblical testimony, but “by the standard of the New Testament.” Contrary to “the majority of recent works on the Holy Spirit,” Hendry

argued, “the Church did not begin with a general conception of the Spirit in the context of the relation between God and the world or God and man; it began with an endeavor to understand the distinctively Christian experience of the Spirit as a gift in the context of the mission and work of Christ.”³² Simply put, “There is no reference in the New Testament to any work of the Spirit apart from Christ. The Spirit is, in an exclusive sense, the Spirit of Christ.” “The New Testament knows no work of the Spirit except in relation to the historical manifestation of Christ” and “contains no trace of the conception of the Spirit as the principle that animates the life of man as God’s creature.” Defending the filioque—the doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and the Son*—Hendry asserted, “While the association of the Spirit with Christ prevents the dissolution of Christian faith into a general religiosity, it also conserves its essentially personal character” against, for example, the temptation of mysticism, which often reduces the Spirit to “merely a divine influence or force.”³³ Other Presbyterian theologians critiqued contemporary pneumatologies (notably, Arnold Come). But powerful winds were blowing against them.

American churchmen throughout the 1960s identified the Spirit of God as the wind behind many social, political, intellectual, and spiritual movements. From civil rights to the charismatic movement, women’s liberation to the student, peace, and environmental movements, God’s Spirit was claimed to underwrite each. Hendry had warned against the wedge Nels Ferré, Paul Tillich, and others drove between the Spirit of God and the Holy Spirit, leaving each to “remain forever distinct.”³⁴ But such concerns were increasingly dismissed as passé. In 1963, the year the American Academy of Religion was reconstituted, Van Dusen published *The Vindication of Liberal Theology*, wherein he said that Jesus “offers an illustration of a life lived wholly in fidelity to the Divine Purpose.” Jesus serves men, primarily “as a tuning-fork by which their souls may be attuned to the Divine Spirit.”³⁵ This implied that more important than indwelling the Son through the Spirit is *indwelling the Spirit* through—or perhaps at least by means of—the Son.

Upon the union of the United Presbyterian Church North America with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) in 1958, the newly formed United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA), appointed a committee to prepare a “Brief Contemporary Statement of Faith.” Rocked by increasing social unrest, the committee focused on the “need of reconciliation in Christ” and produced the Confession of 1967. It affirmed that “God the Holy Spirit fulfills the work of reconciliation in man” by creating a community that seeks “the good of man in cooperation with powers and authorities,” but must also

“fight against pretensions and injustices when these same powers endanger human welfare.” Indeed, “congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God.”

Some Presbyterians found this language too political. Others worried more about the neo-Pentecostal movement and the Presbyterian Charismatic Communion, founded in 1966. Edward Dowey, Princeton Seminary professor and chairman of the Confession of 1967 drafting committee, spoke for many Presbyterians: “The name ‘Holy Ghost’ sounds occult or wispy. The descent of the Spirit at Pentecost produced strange behavior. Ecstatic speaking, quakings, healings, and emotional excesses have often been attributed to the Spirit, especially in sectarian movements, throughout Christian history. The more staid, formal churches appear strangely uncomfortable about the one whom the Fourth Gospel calls the Comforter.”³⁶ Dowey was not speaking for all Presbyterians, however.

6. The Late Twentieth Century

Mackay had warned that “neo-Pentecostalism is a rebirth of primitive, First-Century Christianity.” Protestants who “look down their noses at Pentecostal Christianity” do so “at their peril.”³⁷ However, the Confession of 1967 largely ignored Mackay’s warning. Moreover, in his “personal” “commentary,” Dowey regretted “that the relation of the Holy Spirit to creation was omitted in the final version of the Confession. The first published form had said, ‘God the Holy Spirit is active in the creation working to achieve the purposes of his love.’”³⁸ For some, at least, this was an insufficient description of the Spirit’s relation to creation. However, by 1968, their concerns were not considered so urgent. But the concerns raised by neo-Pentecostalism were considered urgent. So the UPCUSA General Assembly appointed a committee to study “the work of the Holy Spirit with special reference to glossolalia and other charismatic gifts.”³⁹

The committee reported in 1970 that small but significantly growing numbers of UPCUSA clergy and laity were “involved in charismatic experiences” and that this had “sometimes led to dissension within our Church.” After examining the exegetical, theological, and psychological dimensions of these practices and interviewing people with both “positive and negative experiences of charismatic phenomena,” the committee rejected the position “of some theologians that the purely supernatural gifts ceased with the death of the apostles.” This assumption was deemed exegetically unwarranted. Instead, Christians should “‘test the spirits to see whether they are of God,’ since each one of the charismatic gifts had its counterfeits and frauds.” Therefore, “the practice of glossolalia should be neither

despised nor forbidden; on the other hand, it should not be emphasized nor made normative for the Christian experience.” Acknowledging the dangers of “misuse and misrepresentation,” the report critiqued theories reducing charismatic practices to mere “psychological dynamics” and diagnosing participants as “neurotic,” “emotionally unstable,” “disturbed,” or “maladjusted individuals.” The report warned, “It will be a dark and tragic day in the life of Christianity if psychological norms become the criteria by which the truth or the untruth of religious experience is judged.”⁴⁰

The UPCUSA “Report on the Work of the Holy Spirit” addressed healing, demon possession, baptism of the Holy Spirit, and other issues. Measured in what it affirmed and rejected, it articulated a “position of ‘openness’ regarding the Neo-Pentecostal movement.” It recommended practical guidelines for six specific groups: ministers and laity, those both having and not having Neo-Pentecostal experiences; sessions; and presbyteries. It exhorted everyone to “be tolerant and accepting of those whose Christian experiences differ from your own” and to “remember that like other new movements in church history, neo-Pentecostalism may have a valid contribution to make to the ecumenical Church.” Finally, the report affirmed: “We believe that those who are newly endowed with gifts and perceptions of the Spirit have an enthusiasm and joy to give and we also believe that those who rejoice in our traditions of having all things done in ‘decency and order’ have a sobering depth to give. We therefore plead for a mutuality of respect and affection.”⁴¹

Other Presbyterian denominations also wrestled with neo-Pentecostalism. Adopting many of the guidelines in the UPCUSA report, they reflected a similar openness. More circumspect in its 1965 report, “Glossolalia,” a PCUS report in 1971 further examined issues surrounding the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit.” Though warning against problems associated with charismatic experiences, such as “divisiveness, judgment (expressed or implicit) on the lives of others, an attitude of pride or boasting,” the report concluded, “Where such an experience gives evidence of an empowering and renewing work of Christ in the life of the individual and the church, it may be acknowledged with gratitude.” The Church of Scotland adopted a report in 1974 that concluded, “There is a legitimate place for Neo-Pentecostals in the Church of Scotland, so long as they exercise their gifts for the benefit and spiritual enrichment of the whole Church.” The Presbyterian Church of Canada adopted a report in 1976 that concluded, “Neo-Pentecostalism is not itself a threat to the life of the Church,” rather, “despite its imperfections, is an evidence that God is at work in his Church.”⁴²

To some conservative Presbyterians, this openness signaled theological drift. However, even the newly formed Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), despite its portentous pastoral letter of 1975, did not defend total cessationism. Rather, warning that some spiritual gifts “have received undue prominence in recent days, such as ‘tongues,’ ‘working of miracles’ and ‘healing,’” and “against an obsession with signs and miraculous manifestations which is not indicative of a healthy church, but of the opposite,” it recommended “a charitable spirit in the whole church.”⁴³

Finding a more “censorious spirit” than a charitable one regarding such matters in the PCA, yet wary of plans and policies for reuniting the UPCUSA and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), other Presbyterians founded the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) in 1981.⁴⁴ With a sizeable charismatic constituency and being “asked if [it was] a ‘charismatic’ denomination,” the EPC adopted the “Position Paper on the Holy Spirit” in 1986, stating that some require Christians to “manifest a particular gift, such as speaking in tongues, as evidence of a deeper work of the Spirit within.” Others insist that “such a gift is no longer available or acceptable.” The EPC’s belief in the sovereignty of God, “does not allow us either to require a certain gift or to restrict the Spirit in how he will work.” “Is the EPC charismatic?” the report asked. “If you mean are we Pentecostal, the answer is no. If you mean are we open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the answer is yes.”⁴⁵

The Plan for Reunion between the UPCUSA and the PCUS called for a committee to prepare “a brief statement of Reformed faith for possible inclusion in the *Book of Confessions*.” A committee appointed after the reunion took place in 1983 eventually produced “A Brief Statement of Faith,” which received final approval in 1991. The first Reformed confession to devote more words to the Spirit than to “the Father” or “the Son,” the Brief Statement included actions traditionally credited to the Spirit, such as inspiring the prophets and apostles and justifying believers by grace through faith. But it also attributed actions to the Spirit never before asserted in a Reformed confession, such as “The same Spirit ... sets us free to accept ourselves” and “calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.” It also affirmed, “the Spirit gives us courage ... to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.” Since most Presbyterians affirmed justice, freedom, and peace—like most citizens in Western democracies—so long as they remained abstractions, few disputed such claims. Yet was it “the same Spirit” behind these words and actions as others traditionally affirmed or were other spirits speaking in them as well? Some were unsure, but many suspected theological drift. Yet identifying its exact source was difficult. With the

popularity of “spirituality,” politicians and religious leaders alike preaching “empowerment,” and the burgeoning of religious studies departments wherein “the Spirit” was considered a catalyst for interreligious dialogue, testing the spirits was difficult because there were so many. This was not new. Liberationists had long claimed the Spirit was behind many movements and causes in the church and world. But in 1993, at a “Reimagining Conference” in Minneapolis sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (PC(USA)), the official name of the church since the union of the UPCUSA and the PCUS in 1983, a different spirit was manifest when prayers were repeatedly addressed to Isis, Osiris, Sophia, and the “Great eagle Spirit.”⁴⁶

Such invocations raised questions. “Theologians of the traditional Churches have,” the 1970 UPCUSA report claimed, “been sensitive to any loosening of the ties between the Spirit and the historical Christ or between the Spirit and the institutional church life. In modern times, a certain kind of theological liberalism has been rejected because it seemed a mere extension of the human spirit and lacked a Christocentric foundation.”⁴⁷ Yet had theological liberalism as such been rejected? Most mainline denominations and seminaries appeared to embrace “the Spirit” it invoked more enthusiastically than ever—though less tied to God the Father and Christ the Son—and precisely because it seemed so attuned to the human spirit. Whether it was so attuned and is the Spirit about which the Bible speaks or a *Zeitgeist* in a wide-ranging culture war—or even deeper spiritual conflict—has been the battle fought within the PC(USA) and the largest Presbyterian churches in Western democracies ever since.

Although Christianity has grown explosively in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America and more Presbyterians now live in Kenya or South Korea than in North America, no major study of the Holy Spirit among Presbyterians internationally has been written. Generally speaking, the Holy Spirit’s role is considered more prominent among Presbyterians globally than in Western democracies, or, at least, his presence and power are more openly sought and commonly acknowledged. The “Pentecostalization” of Presbyterianism is often discussed today,⁴⁸ but not the Presbyterianization of Pentecostalism. Either way, it appears the most important chapter in the history of the Holy Spirit among Presbyterians has yet to occur.

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Ministry During a Time of Great Change

by Clay J. Brown

Our lives will bear signs of the new COVID realities for some time. Since this is so for all, not least pastors, lay leaders, and church members, we are asking one another important questions as we seek to practice ministry during a time deeply marked by a world-wide pandemic.

Some of our questions are: “Do we go ‘all in’ on virtual church? Will Zoom forever be my new best friend? Have attendance patterns changed irrevocably? How do we respond to those who cannot or will not get vaccinated? Or who cannot or will not attend in person? Can financial contributions sustain congregational life as we have known it? What does church membership mean for people in Australia watching our live-streamed services? What if live-streaming is not sustainable for us?”

As cataclysmic as COVID has been, it is not the only change occurring. We face incredible cultural upheavals over identity, race, gender, sexuality, and politics, etc. The amount of change we are dealing with is staggering. In the midst of such change, we also seek to remember what is constant. We want to be faithful servants of the Crucified and Risen One. So, what to do? What does ministry look like during a time of great change?

1. My Theological Mentor

The best of times for religion is now. The predictions of Marx and Nietzsche have not proved to be true. Mighty changes in society effected by the Industrial Revolution, and the more recent theological and communications revolutions, have not eliminated religious hunger in the souls of human beings. Augustine’s ancient analysis of the human situation has proved to be true. “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”

These are also the worst of times for religion and for Christian faith. For five centuries the Christian church in Western Europe dominated the worldwide Christian community. Today it is in radical decline. ...¹

When I began pastoral ministry, wise mentors advised me to do two things. One was to find a book of the Bible that spoke to me and then to hone-in on it—not to the exclusion of others, of course. But I should have a long-term interest in that book so that I would keep up with scholarship, acquire the best commentaries, and study the book again and again, so I might gain a level of knowledge and proficiency in it.

The other was to do the same thing with a theologian and to focus on that theologian’s body of work—again, not exclusively, for there are many worth reading (and some who are not). But as I reached a level of knowledge and proficiency with “my” theologian, it would help to provide me with a theological framework for growth.

Romans was the book I chose (or should I say chose me?) and I have tried to keep up with Romans, and I read and teach it as often as I can. My theologian also chose me in a way that will soon become clear. His name is John H. Leith. Who was John Leith? He was a professor on the faculty of Union Seminary (Richmond) from 1958-1990.

I did not study under Leith at Union—I attended Austin Seminary—nor did I read Leith in my first few years of pastoral service. Instead, Leith “chose” me through a booklet surreptitiously placed in my church mailbox in 2001, when I was an associate pastor at Grace Presbyterian Church, Houston, Texas. The title? The ponderous but accurate *The Best of Times and the Worst of Times for Religion, Especially Christian Faith*. In fifteen short pages, it named one of the elephants in our living room—the crisis of faith and theology at the beginning of the twenty-first century—and then it described cogent, thoughtful steps to respond to the crisis in light of historic Reformed faith and practice.

As was said about Karl Barth’s Commentary on Romans, so Leith’s *The Best of Times* exploded like a bombshell on my theological and pastoral playground. I began to read Leith. In particular two works, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*, and *From Generation to Generation: The Renewal of the Church According to Its Own Theology and Practice*, continue to speak to me as I think about ministry during a time of great change.

2. Difficult Lessons Learned

Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.²

Church growth strategies are the death gurgle of a church that has lost its way.³

Before I encountered Leith, I had an experience that was life-changing theologically, ecclesiastically, professionally, and personally. I came of ministerial age in the mid-to-late 1980s as the Church Growth Movement ascended to its glory. Books by Donald McGavran, Peter Wagner,

Win Arn, Elmer Towns, Bill Hybels, and Rick Warren flooded the marketplace. Willow Creek Church, Saddleback Church, Cathedral of Joy, and other large congregations were showing us all how it was done.

I was ordained in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, a denomination born out the Second Great Awakening with an unusual perspective for Presbyterians: Arminian theology married to Presbyterian polity. After serving a short period as a solo pastor and then a denominational staff member, I “pursued” (in a business-like way) and received a call to be a church planting pastor or “new church development” pastor. A new congregation in a fast-growing Dallas suburb, near where I grew up, needed someone. The organizing pastor left because of alleged sexual indiscretions. Twenty people remained from the original two-year planting effort.

Devoted to the Church Growth Movement and convinced I was uniquely qualified for the position (I was young, energetic, articulate, and reasonably attractive—all stated here with great humility), I leaped into my new pastoral call. No robe, but open collar and shirtsleeves? Check. No hymnals, but lyrics on overheads instead? Check. Praise choruses instead of hymns? Check. Meet in a shopping center? Check. A more relaxed, casual style of worship? Check. Take homemade cookies to the residences of first-time visitors to show how welcoming and eager we are? Check. Send mass mailings as often as we could afford? Check. Focus on middle-class families with two kids and a mortgage? Check. Talk to the session and presbytery committee about changes needed to grow us into the medium-sized church, as a prelude to changes needed to move us into our destiny as a large church? Check. For two years I toiled away in one of the fastest growing suburbs in the country. Surely we would bring in the people! But the people stayed away in droves.

When people did visit, we were as friendly, welcoming, and savvy as we knew how to be, as all the books, seminars, and conferences had taught us. But the desperation oozing from our pores no doubt frightened most away. A few hung around. In two years, we increased our group from twenty to fifty, which was not a bad outcome for two years, considering how truly dysfunctional we were.

But at the time, our growth was nothing like the stories we had heard—okay, I had heard—and nothing near where we needed to be according to our preliminary mission design’s goals. We needed more people and we needed them quickly, for we had a first phase of a multi-phase building plan the denominational leadership was pressing us to begin. So, with our somewhat chaotic church leadership, we engaged an architect, looked at preliminary drawings, and stared googly-eyed at each other over the prospect of owing a six-figure bank note.

As we neared the edge of the precipice, I began to doubt whether a fifty-member congregation should owe such a large sum of money. I also began to doubt the validity of the entire enterprise. My concern was not just that the church growth strategies I had been applying were not working to the extent we needed. But I began to doubt the theological premise of the Church Growth Movement as a whole. I was diligently applying the techniques. The results were not what I thought was promised. So, what if the problem was not my knowledge and application of growth strategies, but the theological foundations on which those strategies were built? What if my theological house was built on sand instead of solid rock?

Thus, I began to examine what I believed and why, and how my theology and practice should better intersect. The process took five years of study, prayer, and reflection. The result? A more classically Augustinian and Calvinist faith, tethered to the practices of centuries.

So, I have given in to faddishness in faith and practice before, and I have seen the results. The pressure to go with the latest, greatest thing can be immense. I have no desire to follow a similar path again as we move into whatever future God has designed for us. The words of C.S. Lewis mean more and more to me each year I serve: “All that is not eternal is eternally out of date.”⁴

3. Three Essential Forms of Ministry

The church is renewed by preaching, teaching, and pastoral care as they have been traditionally practiced in the church. ... Hence the renewal of the church rests upon two foundations. The first is the renewal of faith, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that enables us to say that Jesus is the Christ, that enables us to experience the Bible as the Word of God, that makes us sensitive to the activity of God in nature and in history. The second foundation is the act of remembering and recovering our identity and persuasively proclaiming it in the life of the church, especially in the ministries of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care.⁵

The Reformers were engaged in theology as retrieval long before it became trendy. ... At the same time, retrieval does more than repeat: it reforms. And it reforms not according to the standard of a past formula but according to the living and active Word of Scripture... As the Reformers retrieved the gospel to meet the challenges of their time, so I want to retrieve certain aspects of the Reformation to meet present challenges. ... *To retrieve is to look back creatively in order to move forward faithfully.*⁶

How do we minister in the wake of such great change? How do we deal with the cultural, theological, and ecclesial crises we face because of COVID and a com-

plex stew of other factors that COVID exacerbates, not to mention other societal tsunamis we are encountering?

I hold that we should emphasize three central ministries of the church, as Leith describes and as classically defined: preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. Simply put, we preach the gospel of Christ as we explicate Scripture on Sundays and at other times. We teach the Faith as we share both what we believe and what we do because of our belief. We care for people both inside and outside the church as shepherds look after sheep. We acknowledge that all this is done only through the superintending guidance of the Scriptures and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean preaching Calvin's sermons verbatim or a didactic, running commentary style of preaching. Nor is it a teacher-centric pedagogy of lecture to the exclusion of other methods. Neither am I advocating for more pastoral counseling. I do not want to *repeat* the past but to *retrieve* it. To *retrieve* preaching, teaching, and pastoral care as our theological core entails three things.

First, we are called to preach sermons that are rhetorically simple. They open up the meaning of a passage in a competent way and address at least one implication with integrity, skill, and passion. The significance of this approach to preaching is manifold: 1) there is not merely truth, but Truth; 2) this Truth is knowable and communicable; 3) this Truth is, in the words of Alvin Plantinga, "properly basic"⁷; 4) Scripture as illuminated by the Holy Spirit is sufficient for revealing this Truth, and; 5) "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God," according to the Second Helvetic Confession.

Second, we are called to teach the foundations of Christian faith and practice as provided in Scripture and through our sharpest theological minds, and not to assume we are past needing them and thus can move on. Among the many implications of this understanding are two. First, we can and must pass on to others a coherent and cohesive narrative of the Christian faith primarily through Scripture, and to a lesser degree through our history, experience, tradition, and theological discourse. Many congregants, much less most North Americans, do not know the Story. They believe Christianity is about keeping rules and regulations; we must disabuse them of this error. Second, we must develop some theological muscle within our congregations, especially as centered in the best of the Reformed tradition. Theological illiteracy is even more pronounced than biblical illiteracy. Most church members have little knowledge of what makes us distinctively Presbyterian and Reformed.

Third, we are called to address the whole person. We share the gospel as we develop relationships. We pray for and with people. We reach out to those in need with acts

of service and communicate that we do this because Jesus wants us to. We seek justice and reconciliation for and with those marginalized by society. We practice ordinary deeds of mercy, listening and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. Two implications of this principle are noteworthy. First, saved by the gospel, we are to live by the gospel, so legalistic and moralistic mindsets are to be repudiated. Second, since words and deeds go hand in hand in bearing witness to Jesus, if our care and conduct are found wanting and hypocritical, our preaching and teaching will not be heard.

4. Overcoming Our Love of Technique

Management skills, understanding of goal-setting processes, therapy, public relations, [and] conflict management do not gather and build churches. Churches that serve basic human needs sometimes thrive without much theology, and modern communication techniques can turn ministers without education into excellent entertainers. I know of no evidence that these skills gather and build congregations of faith. The Protestant churches that endure are those that emphasize preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. There are no shortcuts.⁸

Leith's scathing indictment of uncritically received technique loses none of its resonance thirty years later. In fact, we may add more techniques to his very American-sounding list of management skills, goal setting, therapy, public relations, and conflict management.

Two strong possibilities for inclusion? First, our current fascination with technology in general and the Internet in particular, with little constructive guidance provided for both how to use it and how not to use it in ways that shape our witness. Second, our deeply entrenched habits as consumers of religious goods and services, both in terms of receiving them ourselves and of packaging them for others to receive, and the great difficulty we encounter in escaping this perspective in twenty-first century America. Here, the law of unintended consequences is a severe one, and unless we think deeply, biblically, theologically, and ecclesiastically about how we will use technology and how we will address our incessant consumerism, these consequences will come around to bite us.

I know I could use more instruction in many techniques. I remember situations when better knowledge of conflict resolution, for example, would have been quite helpful. But my point is that as helpful as they may be, techniques will not renew or strengthen the church. As I look back, there were many occasions when I know I wasted time on such endeavors as retreats focused on mission statements and goal setting, conferences to make preaching and worship more user-friendly, staff meetings and seminars based on the latest business best-seller, and workshops and books on better non-profit management practices.

I have not arrived at the Promised Land. I still grapple with how to maintain this historic focus on preaching, teaching, and pastoral care in my ministry. A term often used within my own denomination, reveals a challenge here. The phrase “best practices” is ubiquitous. When sessions meet with one another or pastoral covenant groups gather, we are to share our “best practices” with one another. The phrase is borrowed with little hesitation from business. It sounds helpful, objective, and clinical. Who could argue with seeking the “best”? Do we not want to give God our very best? Of course!

But how do we define what is best? We often assume that we all know and agree. Yet it usually comes down to our definition of success, popularity, or positive response from the intended audience. Much of the time in ministry, we think of “best,” if we are honest, in pragmatic or utilitarian terms. If something “works” or “gets results”—and by that we usually mean increased attendance, participation, commitment, or giving—then it becomes a “best practice” that we commend to others.

Yet so much of the Kingdom’s work is directly opposed to what many today think is “best.” What if what is “best” in some cases is a ministry that strips away rather than adds participants, that winnows down the nominal to a committed cohort, as with Gideon? Can the “best” include this possibility? I wonder. Yet my vision of what is “best” leaves open the possibility that God may work differently than by twenty-first century business models.

Even if we wish to honor the three-fold emphasis on faithful preaching, teaching, and pastoral care, we can be led astray if we are not attentive. For example, when it comes to what a good sermon is, many say, “Well, we know it when we hear it.” But there is little recognition of what our tradition has historically considered faithful, competent preaching. Instead, today’s encouragement is toward a much more listener-centered approach.

Some say a sermon relevant to today should be more like a TED talk.⁹ By the TED standard, a good sermon possesses: 1) extemporaneous and noteless delivery; 2) a casual, conversational tone; 3) adept use of multimedia;

4) focus on a topic or story of great human interest; 5) the TED talk typical plot or structure, and, perhaps most emphatically; 6) holding to an eighteen-minute time limit. Individually, perhaps, there is nothing inherently wrong with most, if not all, of the characteristics. Some of them I wish I could pull off well: I would like to preach without notes, for instance, but my attempts flounder. But when these characteristics are assembled, the popularity of the TED talk’s standard for preaching is almost a lead pipe cinch. Reflect on the comments you have likely heard: “Don’t you love it when the preacher speaks from the heart and doesn’t use notes?” “Didn’t you like that personal story in the sermon?” “That movie clip was awesome!” And who in our congregations will advocate for sermons longer than eighteen minutes? Nationwide, I suspect that group can meet weekly in a booth at Denny’s!

But what is left out of TED Talk criteria? Responsible biblical interpretation. Theological integrity and rigor. The scandal of the gospel. The power of the resurrection. The good news of grace through faith. In other words, what makes a good sermon is defined by non-biblical, consumeristic standards that are designed to appeal to non-biblical, consumeristic people. Technique prevails.

Therefore, amid COVID and other challenges in this *kairos* moment, I am more convinced than ever that what we do must be rooted in the three-fold practice of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care. It comes from the best of our heritage. We preach the gospel as we explicate and show the implications of the Scriptures Sunday in, Sunday out. We teach the Faith as we study the Bible’s grand Story and learn central theological truths. We care for people as we love them in Christ and share the gospel in word and deed. We seek to do this all under the Bible’s authority, direction, and guidance, and through the Holy Spirit’s power, encouragement, and leadership. This is how I will seek to practice ministry in the midst of great change.

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¹ John H. Leith, *The Best of Times and the Worst of Times for Religion, Especially Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corp., 2001), 1.

² Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 198.

³ Stanley Hauerwas, inside front cover blurb for *Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture* by Tim Settle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960), 188.

⁵ John H. Leith, *From Generation to Generation: The Renewal of the Church According to Its Own Theology and Practice* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 14–16.

⁶Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), pp. 23–24. Italics original.

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 258.

⁸ Leith, *From Generation to Generation*, 14–16.

⁹ “Ten Things Pastors Should Learn from TED Talks,” <https://www.propreacher.com/10-things-pastors-can-learn-ted-talks/>, Brandon Hilgemann; “If Sermons Were Like TED Talks,” <https://emc3coaching.com/if-sermons-were-like-ted-talks/>, Eddie Pipkin,

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