

Trammel, Madison. *Fundamentalists in the Public Square: Evolution, Alcohol, and Culture Wars after the Scopes Trial*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2023. 133pp. + 30pp. (front matter) + 37pp. (back matter).

Trammel does remarkable yeoman research for the years 1920–1933 in the newspaperarchive.com database that includes Illinois, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and uses important published primary sources. Previous studies on fundamentalists have relied on published theological works, periodicals, and manuscript collections. Trammel’s case study provides evidence, although limited by the geographical focus, for the conclusion that the Scopes Trial did not mark a defeat or decline for fundamentalism. The author’s “central question” is whether the antievolution crusade and Prohibition efforts square with retreat from the culture. His conclusion is that “cultural engagement” continued after the Scopes Trial (123).

Efforts against evolution, less visible before events in Dayton, Tennessee, intensified afterwards, based on newspaper coverage—in a number of articles and content. In coming decades, despite the ultimate legislative failures in states, a creationist movement sustained the long-term fight against Darwinism. Newspaper interest in fundamentalism and Prohibition peaked after the Scopes Trial.

The constituencies opposing evolution and alcohol were not synonymous; furthermore, Prohibition counted less toward fundamentalist identity than antievolution. While the book concludes that theological conservatives were the “strongest core of support for Prohibition” (61), it does provide nuance. For example, prominent Baptist leader Edgar Young Mullins equivocated on evolution, but he eventually joined forces against alcohol. Aimee Semple McPherson, Los Angeles Pentecostal evangelist, also serves as evidence for fundamentalist Prohibition efforts.

The book uses Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of Dallas Theological Seminary, an advocate of dispensational theology, as a case study on fundamentalist social action for the era. It concludes that this theology was inconsistent: it both encouraged social action (legislation banning evolution and alcohol) while theoretically focused on the second coming of Christ, who would bring the perfect society. The author concludes that “dispensational activists began to chart a practical theology of cultural engagement at the grassroots level by entering the public fray” (123). Integrating Chafer into the antievolution and Prohibition narratives—rather than presenting him in a separate chapter—would have improved the organization of the book.

The inclusion of Chafer, McPherson, and Mullins in the study raises the important question: should historians use them as evidence although they deliberately did not self-identify as fundamentalists? McPherson was Pentecostal, and few fundamentalists at the time cooperated with her. Many opposed her ministry. J. Gresham Machen, cited in the book, avoided the label *fundamentalist* but found common cause with them. Chafer and Mullins, more so, resisted the association. Their inclusion is appropriate for understanding context, but the “identity” issue needed to be addressed.

One of the best features of the book is the expansive meaning of *fundamentalist* and *evangelical*. The author borrows notions about “cultural engagement” (xxi) and the parameters of fundamentalism and evangelicalism from David W. Bebbington, a British historian who gives an international

understanding to the religious contexts. In addition, chapter 1 provides an overview of fundamentalist historiography.

The founding generation of fundamentalists between the wars opposed evolution and alcohol, but what did they support? They had diverse views on creation and time—literal, long-day, and gap theory. Some were Republicans and others Democrats. The newspapers covered omit the South and the West Coast. Prohibition Party candidate Robert Shuler was active in California. The Reformed wing gets minimal attention; Presbyterian James O. Buswell of Wheaton College was a staunch Prohibitionist. Machen opposed Prohibition, and it cost him a promotion at Princeton Seminary.

Fundamentalist cultural engagement post-Scopes is not a new idea. Several historians have focused on such a participation. Virginia Brereton concentrated on religious education and Tona Hangen on radio. David H. Watt and others (the author of this review included), see a more complex relationship to modern culture, from adaptations to psychology, consumerism, film, and political pluralism, as well as cooperation among denominations. A commitment to the standards of the modern university helps explain the movement's resilience. Keith Bates's *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism* on John R. Rice (missing in Trammel's book) is an example of the modern "book culture."¹ Daniel Bare's *Black Fundamentalists*, on minority participation,² is also absent in Trammel's study, as are women in the books by Margaret Benroth and Arlin C. Migliazzo.

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¹ Keith Bates, *Mainstreaming Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and Fundamentalism's Public Reemergence*, America's Baptists (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2021).

² Daniel R. Bare, *Black Fundamentalists: Conservative Christianity and Racial Identity in the Segregation Era* (New York: New York University, 2021). For a review of this work, see *JBTW* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 103–5.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Revelation*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023. 771pp. + 22pp. (front matter) + 102pp. (back matter).

Thomas Schreiner, a professor of NT interpretation and biblical theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, contributed this commentary on Revelation as a replacement for Grant Osborne's commentary in the Baker Exegetical Commentary series.

While Osborne identified his commentary as prioritizing the futurist, rather than the idealist or preterist approaches,¹ Schreiner prioritizes idealist perspective (though he does read chapters 19–22 as predicting the future). Within that framework Schreiner has produced an excellent commentary. G. K. Beale's commentary in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series has been, and remains, the definitive idealist commentary since its publication in 1999. Schreiner notes, "I have not attempted to write the kind of in-depth commentary that we find in Aune (1997, 1998a, 1998b), Beale (1999), and Koester (2014). My hope is that my commentary is substantial enough for serious exegesis but short enough for the busy pastor to read. I have tried to write in an accessible style for readers so that they can grasp what is being said in scholarship" (xi). Schreiner succeeded in these goals. Thus, while this commentary does not displace Beale, it presents the idealist position in sufficient depth but with greater clarity than Beale. In addition, Schreiner at times exercises more restraint in his interpretation of the symbolism of the book. For instance, in the fifth trumpet judgment Schreiner notes, "Beale (1999: 494) says the darkness symbolizes deception, but that is likely an overreading and too specific. Darkness symbolizes the evil atmosphere pervading the scene" (338). Finally, unlike Beale and most other idealists, Schreiner does not adopt an amillennial position but instead proposes new-creation millennialism as a mediating millennial view. In short, for those looking for a commentary on Revelation in the idealist vein, this would be an excellent purchase.

Most readers of this journal likely subscribe to a futurist approach to Revelation.² The remainder of this review will therefore examine Schreiner's objections to a futurist approach, evaluate his idealistic approach, and examine his new-creation millennialism.

First, Schreiner is correct to critique the claim that Revelation "must be read as literally as possible" (45). The goal of literal interpretation is not to be as literal as possible but to discern what the author intended. Those advocating an "as literally as possible" approach have conflated two senses of the word *literal*. *Literal* in the sense of author-intended meaning as discerned by grammatical, historical, theological exegesis should be affirmed. Accurate reflection of authorial intent does not exist on a spectrum. One either does this or does not do it. *Literal* in the sense of without metaphor or symbolism is not the standard that the futurist ought or need aspire to. If the author employed symbolism or metaphor, the careful futurist will want to recognize this fact and interpret accordingly. Thus, this critique is not against futurism per se but against particular futurist interpreters. Second, Schreiner is correct to critique "newspaper eschatology" but wrong to link it with futurism (5). Those doing "newspaper eschatology" are practicing a species of historicism, not futurism. At best they are fusing

¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 21–22.

² For a defense of a futurist reading of Revelation, see Brian Collins, "The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue," *JBTW* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 33–52.

the two, and the “arbitrary and capricious” nature of their interpretations is due to their historicist approach. Their errors should not be used as an argument against futurism.³ The true futurist believes that the events of the ultimate Day of the Lord described in the book could begin to happen at any time—tomorrow or millennia hence—and that they will happen in such a way as to catch people completely unawares. Therefore, the approach of the Day of the Lord cannot be discerned by looking for signs of the times in the news. Third, the argument that futurism negates the book’s significance to all but the final generation of readers is a curious claim (5). The OT is full of prophecies about the coming Day of Yhwh. Are those passages irrelevant to all believers from the time they were given until the final generation? Schreiner recognizes that at least the final chapters of Revelation are about the Second Coming and the new creation. Are those chapters irrelevant to believers throughout history? I do not think Schreiner would say so. Thus, while some of Schreiner’s critiques are valid, they are not necessarily critiques of futurism; his direct critique of futurism is not valid.

The adequacy of the idealist approach can be tested by examining Schreiner’s treatment of the trumpet judgments. First, the idealist approach involves a tension between the symbolism employed and the proposed referent. Schreiner, like all idealist interpreters, recognizes that the trumpet judgments allude to the plagues of the exodus. Indeed, Revelation presents the trumpet judgments as intensifying and universalizing the Egyptian plagues. The idealist, however, must place these events in the inter-advent period and must locate the referents within the normal range of human experience. Thus, the idealist interpretations are much less intense than the plagues on Egypt even as Revelation presents the judgments as intensifications of the exodus plagues. Second, idealist interpretations are often very general: “Life on earth is constantly beset by danger,” “Life on the seas isn’t what it could be and what it would be if it were not for human sin,” “The spatial realm is also touched by God’s judgment so that life isn’t all that it should be for the flourishing of the human race. The fall touches every part of the created order” (329, 330, 333). For all the energy of the imagery and language in Revelation, these are fairly banal conclusions. Again, there is a mismatch between what Revelation says and what the idealist says it means. Third, when Schreiner’s referents become more specific, they do not escape the problems of “newspaper exegesis.” The newspaper exegetes he criticized saw, for instance, the locusts as representing attack helicopters (imagery that made sense against the background of the Vietnam War). However, identifying water pollution as the referent of the third trumpet and psychological issues as the referent of the fifth trumpet also reads the imagery in light of modern concerns and experiences. The futurist interpretation is less strained and more faithful to John’s original context: bitter waters are bitter waters. And a scorpion-like sting is a sting that brings physical pain. These interpretations are also more consonant with the Exodus narrative to which they allude. Fourth, idealist interpretations run counter to the analogy of Scripture. Plausible interpretations of Revelation should align with the ways that similar kinds of symbolism were used in the OT. When the OT interprets imagery like that found in Revelation, the symbols refer to specific historical persons, kingdoms, and events. For instance, the goat in Daniel chapter 8 is identified as the

³ To be fair to Schreiner, the error of confusing “newspaper exegesis” and futurism occurs among professed futurists as well.

king of Greece (now known to have been Alexander the Great). Neither the goat of Daniel 8 nor the beasts in chapter 7 represent abstract ideals. The historicists were not wrong to think that the symbolism of Revelation should be applied to concrete historical events. Their error was in attempting to relate that symbolism to the events of the inter-advent period. The futurist follows the lead of the OT in seeing the referents as concrete, historical persons, institutions, or events.

Finally, something must be said about Schreiner's approach to the millennium. In his first commentary on Revelation, he spoke highly of both premillennialism and amillennialism, but he gave the edge to amillennialism.⁴ In this commentary, Schreiner opts for a third way between premillennialism and amillennialism—new-creation millennialism. In this view, the millennium is the first stage of the new creation. There are no unglorified people living during the millennium. The nations who attack the saints at the end of the millennial period are the resurrected unrighteous dead, who will subsequently be judged and condemned to the lake of fire.

The claim that the millennium is the first stage of the new creation fits well with the biblical evidence; however, the claim that there are no unglorified sinners living on earth during the millennium is difficult to square with Isaiah 65:17–25 or Zechariah 14:16–19. Further, Schreiner's interpretation of Revelation 20:7–10 is not entirely convincing.

Schreiner's commentary on Revelation provides readers with a well-executed commentary on Revelation from an idealist perspective. It also presents readers with an intriguing interpretation of Revelation 20, which gestures in the right direction on many points but which ultimately fails to satisfy. The commentary is worth buying as the now clearest in-depth exposition of the book from an idealist perspective. However, for those who believe a futurist perspective is correct, Grant Osborne's contribution to the Baker Exegetical Commentary (which remains available) and Buist Fanning's recent commentary in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series are to be preferred.⁵

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⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, "Revelation," in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 724–25.

⁵ See Brian Collins, review of *Revelation*, by Buist Fanning, in *JBTW 2*, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 98.

Vlach, Michael J. *The New Creation Model: A Paradigm for Discovering God's Restoration Purposes from Creation to New Creation*. Cary, NC: Theological Studies, 2023. 405pp. + 6pp. (front matter) + 15pp. (back matter).

Michael Vlach's *The New Creation Model* argues that eternity involves nations, culture, government, and more as mankind fulfills God's mandate to rule the earth. The book interacts with theological journal articles and monographs, but Vlach keeps a direct, first-person tone and intends this book for a wider Christian audience than scholars and seminarians.

The book unfolds in five parts. The first explains the two models, and the second further expounds the New Creation Model and contrasts it with the Spiritual Vision Model. The third traces the models through church history. The fourth and fifth parts trace how the models interact with millennial views and with various theological systems.

Vlach begins part one by tracing Scripture's use of new-creation language, which he divides into three categories. First, Scripture describes redeemed persons in terms of new creation (2 Cor 5:17; cf. Rom 5:12–21; Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–10). Second, Scripture describes the church with new-creation language (Gal 6:15; Eph 2:11–3:6; Col 3:10–11; cf. Isa 19:16–25; Zech 14; Rev 21:1–3, 24, 26). Third, the Bible speaks of the restoration of the physical world with new-creation language (Isa 43:19–20; 65:17–25; Matt 19:28–30; Acts 3:21; Rom 8:19–23; Col 1:20; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1, 5, 24, 26). In chapters 5–9, Vlach argues that Christ's office of King means that he will rule over all nations (Ps 2:8–9; Isa 2:2–4; Zech 9:10; 14:9, 16–19; Rev 19:15) and will be "*Restorer of creation*" (Isa 11; Hos 2:18; Rom 8:19–20) (59). Christ's priestly role is also not limited to spiritual salvation—it brings about the resurrection of the body and the restoration of all creation (Col 1:15–20). This comprehensive nature of salvation is also needed because of the comprehensive nature of sin. Sin afflicts the individual, but it also has effects on the family, society, and the natural world. Thus, salvation must extend as far as the effects of sin. In chapters 6 and 7 Vlach outlines sixteen elements of the present creation that will characterize the new creation: "1. Earth as Man's Destiny," "2. Resurrection of the Body," "3. Restoration of Earth," "4. Nations and Ethnicities," "5. Israel," "6. Land," "7. Governments," "8. Society," "9. Culture," "10. Eating/Drinking/Celebration," "11. Houses and Farms," "12. Economic and Agricultural Prosperity," "13. Relationships and Friendships," "14. Animals, Birds, Fish," "15. Natural Resources," "16. Time" (112). Vlach turns to survey key texts in chapters 8 and 9. These include foundational texts about the purpose of creation, such as Genesis 1:16–28; texts about the Messiah's reign, such as Psalms 2, 8, 72; and texts that speak directly about the new creation, such as Romans 8:19–22, Colossians 1:15–20, and Revelation 20–21. In the end he surveys almost forty texts from all parts of the Old and New Testaments.

Vlach's exegetical case for the New Creation Model was helpful, but it also fell short in several areas. The interpretation of several of the texts surveyed is disputed. Engaging those disputes would have made Vlach's case stronger. Second, many of the texts surveyed were millennial texts, and a premillennialist holding to the Spiritual Vision Model could argue that those texts apply only to the millennium. Some indication in this part of the book about how the millennium and eternal state relate would have helped address those concerns. Third, Vlach did not engage with texts used to argue

against his position. Even among those who hold to the New Creation Model, there is debate about whether the present earth will be destroyed prior to the new creation. Engaging with the texts relevant to that debate and with other texts that are used to argue against the New Creation Model would also have been helpful.

Vlach introduces the Spiritual Vision Model in chapter 2 and then circles back to further expound it in chapters 10 and 11. He seems to poison the well by identifying the Spiritual Vision Model with Hinduism and Buddhism—before granting, “Christian versions of the Spiritual Vision Model are less severe and less dualistic than those of the eastern religions.” Instead of connecting the Spiritual Vision Model to Hinduism, why not engage with fellow dispensationalist John Feinberg’s arguments for a heavenly eternity? A failure to engage with Spiritual Vision proponents directly is a deficiency of Vlach’s treatment. He quotes only from secondary sources already aligned with his viewpoint. A final problem in Vlach’s presentation is a tendency to present what he acknowledges to be a spectrum of viewpoints as a binary. The Spiritual Vision Model is often presented in extreme forms not held by any evangelical scholar (e.g., evangelicals who hold to the Spiritual Vision Model do not embrace “cosmic dualism,” cf. p. 165), while the New Creation Model is presented in an idealized version (e.g., many who hold to the New Creation Model do not hold to a millennial kingdom or to the future importance of national Israel).

Part three is a historical survey. The most significant aspect of this survey for Vlach’s argument is his claim that the roots of the Spiritual Vision Model are “(1) Non-Christian influences—eastern religions, Platonism, and Neo-Platonism; (2) Gnosticism and Marcion; and (3) Augustine” (173). While repeatedly raising Hinduism and Buddhism as exemplars of the Spiritual Vision Model, Vlach does not demonstrate that these religions influenced Christians. His case is more plausible with Platonism and Neo-Platonism. Vlach notes that Plato influenced Philo and Neo-Platonism influenced Augustine. Through these significant figures the Spiritual Vision Model entered the bloodstream of Christian theology. There may be truth to what Vlach is arguing, but he did not make his case. General claims about Platonism’s influence on early Christian theologians are not helpful; they are used in many different ways to further many different theological agendas. The effort to discredit certain teachings due to the alleged influence of Greek thought can be traced back to Adolf von Harnack’s claim that orthodox theology had abandoned the “Hebraic” thought of the Bible for “Hellenistic” thought. Von Harnack’s argument has not stood the test of time. More careful scholars note that Neo-Platonic thought did influence the church, but they also argue that Christian theologians adapted and transformed Greek thought in light of Scripture. Thus, any charge of a Platonic infection or early Christian theology—or, on the other end of the spectrum, any claim that Christians must embrace Platonism—needs to be tested by the details of what Platonism taught, what the church fathers in question taught, and what the Scriptures teach. The closest Vlach approaches to this is in chapter 15, which claims that Neo-Platonic influences led Augustine to see heaven as the eternal destiny of believers, to reject premillennialism, to remove “the kingdom of God from history and the physical realm” (208), and to engage in allegorical interpretation. But these claims are not rooted in Augustine’s writings, countervailing factors in his theology are not mentioned, and no link to Platonism is demonstrated. Vlach’s claims regarding Platonic influence are too sweeping and are ungrounded in

data. This does not mean Vlach is wrong about a Platonic influence; it does mean, however, that he did not present evidence to demonstrate that his claims are true.

In part four Vlach turns to millennial systems. He observes that there are four different ways of relating the millennium and the eternal state: “1. Spiritual Millennium and Spiritual Eternal Kingdom (Thomas Aquinas; medieval scholastics) 2. Earthly Millennium and Spiritual Eternal Kingdom (Jonathan Edwards; some Puritans) 3. Spiritual Millennium and Earthly Eternal Kingdom (New Earth Amillennialists; Hoekema, Poythress) 4. Earthly Millennium and Earthly Eternal Kingdom (Revised and Progressive Dispensationalists; Historic Premillennialists)” (261). From this enumeration, it would seem that both positions 3 and 4 would fall within the New Creation Model. Vlach grants that many modern amillennialists have a new-creation view of eternity. He asserts, however, that they still fall short because they do not have a place for a restored Israel or (in the case of Poythress, who does have a place for a restored Israel, do “not assert a unique functional role for Israel in the future, as dispensationalists do,” 295). In addition, Vlach alleges that they cannot see a fulfillment of Genesis 1:26–28 in the new creation because they have spiritualized the kingdom of Christ. He concludes that dispensational premillennialism is the most consistent with the New Creation Model. He does not, however, reckon with contemporary dispensationalists, like John Feinberg, who hold to the Spiritual Vision Model of eternity. He will grant in the next section that classical dispensationalism did hold to a heavenly destiny for the church.

In the final section, Vlach relates the New Creation and Spiritual Vision models to the theological systems of dispensationalism, covenant theology, progressive covenantalism, and New Christian Zionism. Vlach concludes that dispensationalism (apart from classical dispensationalism), non-Laddian historic premillennialism (e.g., some at the Westminster Assembly, the Bonar brothers, Robert Murray M’Cheyne, and J. C. Ryle), and New Christian Zionism are the most consistent with the New Creation Model. He raises the issue of new-earth amillennialism, but he argues that it falls short in its view of the millennial kingdom (though he grants that it holds that “many physical promises will be fulfilled in the Eternal State”) and in not interpreting prophecies about Israel. He concludes, “A system cannot be consistently new creationist if it spiritualizes Israel” (387).

As one who holds to a new-creation eschatology, I found this book a disappointment. First, the exegetical case of the New Creation Model could have been stronger. Second, Vlach did not engage primary sources arguing for the Spiritual Vision Model. He did engage Michael Allen’s book *Grounded in Heaven* in an appendix, but Allen, while critical of certain presentations of the New Creation Model and while seeking to place more emphasis on God himself and the beatific vision, does not reject the New Creation Model. Third, Vlach worked too hard to tie the New Creation Model to dispensationalism. This is difficult to do since classical dispensationalism, key revised dispensationalists such as Ryrie and Walvoord, and important contemporary dispensationalists such as John Feinberg all held (or hold) to the Spiritual Vision Model. On the other hand, important non-dispensationalists such as Herman Bavinck, Anthony Hoekema, Vern Poythress, Michael Horton, Russell Moore, N. T. Wright, Richard Middleton, and others hold to the New Creation Model. One can argue, as Stephen James does effectively in *New Creation, Eschatology, and the Land*, that a consistent New Creation

viewpoint should have a place for nations and a restored Israel in its land.¹ However, it is difficult to argue that these theologians do not adhere to the New Creation Model when some of them have been some of the most significant promoters of the model. Furthermore, Vlach's attempt to link millennial views to the New Creation Model is not successful. As he notes, there are premillennialists who hold to a Spiritual Vision viewpoint and amillennialists who hold to the New Creation Model. It is only by defining the New Creation Model idiosyncratically as including a millennium and a restoration of Israel within the land that Vlach is able to exclude new-creation amillennialists from his New Creation Model. It is with some regret that I register these critiques. I have greatly benefited from Vlach's other writings, and I am in agreement with his positive articulations of the New Creation Model.

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¹ See Layton Talbert, review of *New Creation Eschatology and the Land: A Survey of Contemporary Perspectives*, by Steven L. James, in *JBTW* 1, no. 1 (Fall 2020): 108–10.

Austen, Lucy S. R. *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. 515pp. + 7pp. (front matter) + 83pp. (back matter).

It is a mark of human nature to want heroes—people who are, perhaps, bigger than life; people who, while not perfect, always beat the “bad guys” and win in the end. Similarly, believers often want their Bible characters to be such heroes—Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Moses parting the Red Sea, David fighting Goliath. However, God’s presentation of these and other characters rejects the hero-worshipping motif. Instead, God shows us the flaws and failures along with the victories and triumphs. So it is in Lucy S. R. Austen’s *Elisabeth Elliot: A Life*. Austen paints a vivid picture of a complex woman whom God greatly used, showing both her triumphs and her flaws.

Austen is a wife, mother, and writer from the Pacific Northwest. She earned a B. A. from the University of Washington and wrote *British Christian Authors* and *American Christian Authors* for Hewitt Homeschooling Resources. The latter book led Austen to write a short biography of Elisabeth Elliot, but she soon realized that while much had been written about Jim Elliot and his missionary companions, very little had been written about Elisabeth herself.¹ This discovery launched Austen on a years-long intensive dive into Elliot’s writings, along with interviews of her friends and family. The result is this comprehensive and compelling biography (perhaps surprising since Austen’s book is not an authorized biography).² Undoubtedly, however, Austen’s contribution will be a foundation for future works on Elisabeth Elliot.

Austen was unable to access most of Elliot’s journals, instead relying “heavily on Elliot’s published work in surveying her thinking over the course of her life” (1). Other source material comes from *Devotedly: The Personal Letters and Love Story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot* by Valerie Shepard (Elliot’s daughter) as well as materials found in the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton University, Elliot’s alma mater. Finally, interviews with Valerie Shepard and Elliot’s third husband, Lars Gren, are referenced, as well as personal recollections by friends and family members. Austen skillfully weaves these source materials into an engaging whole, though at times she tries to fill in the gaps that result from missing information. In such instances Austen acknowledges those attempts, and, for the most part, seems to draw the best conclusions possible.

Austen organizes her work into three sections. Chapters 1–3 comprise the first section, covering Elliot’s life from her birth until she leaves for Ecuador (1926–1952). The second section (1952–1963) details Elliot’s time in Ecuador and is the most thorough and compelling; clearly, the “Betty” who went to Ecuador was not the same as the one who returned to the United States. The final section, covering the years 1963 until her death in 2015, shows the results of these life changes. Throughout these sections, key emphases emerge and merge—among them literary pursuits, missions, grief, and divine guidance, which will be the focus of this review.

¹ Lucy S. R. Austen, interview with Nick Fullwiler and Peter Bell, “Guilt, Grace, Gratitude” podcast, June 29, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/gggpodcast/episodes/Lucy-S--R--Austen--Elisabeth-Elliot-A-Life-e2684je>.

² Elisabeth Elliot’s authorized biography is written by Ellen Vaughan in two volumes: *Becoming Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville: B&H, 2020), and *Being Elisabeth Elliot* (Nashville: B&H, 2023).

Elisabeth “Betty” Howard was born into a happy and highly literate family. Both her grandfather and father were editors of the *Sunday School Times*, and “the Howard household revolved around books and writing” (19). As a result, Elliot read widely from both sacred and secular materials. Amy Carmichael’s writings were a favorite throughout her life, and her younger brother, Tom, frequently recommended books for her to read. In God’s providence, this laid the foundation for and enhanced her later writing ministry. Austen, an avid reader and gifted writer, spends considerable time on Elliot’s writings, providing invaluable information on the background, process, and reception of these various books and articles. For example, while many people familiar with Elisabeth Elliot have read her first book, *Through Gates of Splendor*, fewer are aware that she was not the originally intended author, and Austen’s account of how the book came to be is fascinating. Another of Elliot’s early works, *The Savage, My Kinsman*, blacklisted her for a time among her fellow evangelicals. In addition to helpful background information, Austen provides invaluable and insightful analyses of Elliot’s works. A helpful chronological bibliography appears at the end of her book. This love of books and reading of both the author and her subject highlights the value of extensive reading among Christians.

Elliot was also born into a missions-minded home. Austen traces Elliot’s path toward missions beginning in the book’s first section but makes it the primary focus of the second. In this section, more familiar episodes emerge, particularly Elliot’s time at Wheaton, but Austen also references other interesting yet lesser-known events, such as Elliot’s time at the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Kansas immediately after graduation, followed by more training at the Prairie Bible Institute. Austen skillfully weaves together these influences, along with Elliot’s marriage to Jim Elliot, but her chapter titled “Where Is Rehoboth?” serves as the vital transition between Jim’s martyrdom and Elisabeth’s eventual departure from Ecuador, and it lays the groundwork for the many changes in her life that follow. This chapter title comes from Genesis 26. Here, Isaac and his servants dig well after well, only to have others come and claim them. Finally comes the well at Rehoboth, one that was not fought over, leading Isaac to declare, “For now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land” (Gen 26:22 ESV). Here Elliot saw a parallel to her own situation after Jim’s death. While her willingness to take her young daughter to live among the very people who had killed her husband (the Waorani) usually elicits awe and admiration, it was a time of both growth and frustration as all of her earlier missionary efforts seemed to dry up. Her training as a linguist seemed to go nowhere, and her relationship with Rachel Saint, with whom she worked while living among the Waorani, was never smooth. And while others thought of the Waorani as ignorant and backward, Elliot began to see that their way of life was actually well adapted to their environment and that she had much to learn from them. Even so, it became clear that living among them was not a viable long-term option, particularly given the relationship with Saint. In a letter to her mother written while she lived among the Waorani, Elliot wrote, “It sort of makes me chilled when I think that possibly I’ve been here just to write a book [*Through Gates of Splendor*] and get my name identified with this heroic effort! . . . It does seem strange that I’ve really done almost nothing else but write books, when I’m supposed to be a missionary”

(344). This letter to her mother is one of many windows into her evolving view of missionary work,³ making Austen's work a must-read for those either interested or involved in missions. Elliot learned early in her experience that missions was not about transferring American culture elsewhere, an outgrowth of 1950s American optimism, which viewed missions "as an excellent vehicle for spreading democracy and winning the Cold War" (295). Rather, as Austen points out, "for Elliot, this missed the point entirely. It was not American culture for which she had risked losing Jim. It was not American culture she was risking her life and Valerie's to spread. It was the love of God for people, expressed in Jesus Christ. She wanted to present Christ in context," that is, the context of whatever group of people being reached with the gospel (295–96).

No doubt, Elisabeth Elliot's life was marked by intense grief. Her marriage to Jim lasted only two years and three months, but its effects lasted the rest of her life. An intensely private person, Elliot had to contend with *Life* magazine reporters documenting a tragedy not yet confirmed. Elliot then decided to continue the work she and Jim started, but she had no sending church, not even a mission board to give her guidance and support. Austen relates the early challenges of well-meaning people who added to Elliot's workload (all while she mothered a young child). Others would not talk about Jim at all, and still others felt sorry for her, "an attitude she found almost unbearable" (226). Perhaps if Elliot had known more about trauma and its effects, her response to Jim's death (and even her second husband's death) would have been different, but she approached grief with a form of stoicism typical of her generation. I, too, have experienced loss, widowed at the age of thirty-two, and I have learned that grief changes a person and motivates reevaluation of core beliefs and life direction. While Austen does not overtly link the changes in Elliot's life direction and beliefs to grief, she demonstrates it as she traces Elliot's redirection toward a writing ministry, her return to the United States, and her changes in theology.

Divine guidance, another major theme, emerges in the book. Elliot was deeply influenced by, among other things, Keswick theology that emphasized deep heart-searching as one pursued God's calling. This may have influenced Elisabeth's relationship with Jim, which is honestly portrayed in the book. Austen writes, "Betty and Jim were afraid that the easier or more comfortable path must be deceptive, second best—and that second best was the same thing as *wrong*. Although they were genuinely in love with each other, there was perhaps also a part of them that was in love with being in love, and with the idea of a glorious sacrifice, of giving up their one true love for Jesus" (77). After Jim's death, "she felt that if she could get her response right [to his death], her obedience would facilitate the good things God planned to bring out of the situation; if she got it wrong, it would prevent those good things and waste Jim's death" (232). Her introspection, Austen contends, caused her to internalize her grief and suppress her emotions. Over time, however, Elliot came to recognize "that her emotions were not signs of sin or failure" (301). In addition, Elliot turned from her initial belief "that when faced with two otherwise acceptable paths, the follower of Jesus is obligated to choose the more difficult" (303) to understanding "that God was not a hard taskmaster; that where her desires

³ Austen also mentions another shift in Elliot's thinking about missions after studying Isaiah 43:10: "Perhaps to be a missionary was ultimately to be a witness to the nature and character of God. A witness observes and reports. This she could try to do. The discovery of this verse in this context produced a lifelong paradigm shift for her" (310).

were not proscribed in Scripture she could do what she wanted and still be within his will; that God could be trusted to see that she did not stray from the narrow path” (374). This change in thinking eventually led Elliot to leave Ecuador and pursue writing. The earlier introspective thinking seeped back into Elliot’s second and third marriages, however. Her third marriage to Lars Gren was a mistake—or so Elliot related to some of her friends (481, 501). That, along with Elliot’s battle with Alzheimer’s, provides some of the most painful and poignant moments of the book.

While believers would prefer a Genesis-24-type life—one where God clearly directs and quickly answers specific prayers for guidance—*Elisabeth Elliot: A Life* demonstrates that the Christian journey is often one of wondering, “Where is Rehoboth?” Throughout this book, Austen traces the journey of a beloved, influential believer along with the ups and downs, the triumphs and mistakes, that her journey entailed. “Elliot had weaknesses and strengths,” Austen concludes. “She got things right and she got things wrong, and she did not necessarily know which were which. Nor do we. We are too small to see very far” (525). Elisabeth Elliot’s story, as related in this book, should cause us not only to examine our own failings but also to rejoice in the God that she clung to throughout her journey. She was loved with an everlasting love, and always, underneath were the everlasting arms (525).

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Irwin, Brian P., and Tim Perry. *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2023. 297pp. + 23pp. (front matter) + 107pp. (back matter).

In *After Dispensationalism*, Irwin and Perry suggest that three distinct areas of study—church history, ancient Near East (ANE) culture and hermeneutics, and biblical theology and exposition—combine to influence modern popular beliefs about the end times. Part I presents an essentially historical survey of end-times beliefs from the early church to the present, from the sensational to the staid, and from the unsystematic to the heavily systematized. This section addresses everything from doomsday cults to standard orthodox views, and it strolls through history, theological beliefs, and an explanation of the distinctives of dispensationalism. Part II shifts to ANE culture. It argues the authors' positions on genres and hermeneutics and asserts that dispensationalism blends prophecy and apocalypse. Part III purports to expound the meaning of apocalypses in the Scriptures.

The authors do not clearly identify their own theological position, but the reader gleans the following from the tenor of the text. (1) They admit the value of dispensationalism as a catalyst for serious Bible study, as an impetus for significant evangelistic and missionary activity, and as an encouragement to serious theological application of Scripture to life, while mischaracterizing it as essentially provincial, unscholarly, and hermeneutically ignorant. (2) They seem to hold eclectic views on prophecy—blending futurism, preterism, and idealism. (3) They seem to wish to be viewed as conservative evangelicals, given their insistence on the authority of Scripture; however, their acceptance of a second-century date for Daniel (the book was not written by Daniel, who was not demonstrably a prophet, and the book has no *prophetic* value; 159, 162–63) and their ready acceptance of the assertions of liberal scholars in regard to the nature, type, and prevalence of apocalypse, the integrity of Isaiah, and the integrity of the Pentateuch give the reader pause. Additional research shows that one author is an Anglican priest and the other teaches at a liberal seminary—both in Canada.

In spite of the book's forty-three pages of endnotes and thirty-four-page bibliography, the reader will observe that it exhibits an almost studied refusal to engage dispensational academics of the past forty years. Thus, the book feels incredibly dated—as though the writers are sparring with theologians and a theological system from the nineteenth century instead of their theological and academic peers. *After Dispensationalism* characterizes dispensationalism by its fringe representatives (like Harold Camping) and avoids substantive research in the realm of actual dispensational thought. All conservative theological systems suffer the infelicity that if they are to be characterized by their oddest and least orthodox representatives, they can be construed as nearly heterodox. To proffer a purported answer to current dispensationalism by engaging only old and extreme representatives (and even these on a superficial level) disappoints.

The book itself is difficult to classify. Is it supposed to be historical? If so, the reader will be puzzled that it overlooks crucial facts of church history, especially those that touch the pronounced chiliasm (an early and unsystematized form of premillennialism) of the early church. Readers will also be surprised to learn from the authors (contra 2 Kgs 25:7) that Nebuchadnezzar killed King Zedekiah (the biblical text explicitly says that Nebuchadnezzar kept him alive).

Is *After Dispensationalism* supposed to be theological? If so, the reader will wonder at demonstrably false statements such as, “In almost all cases, biblical prophecies were *fulfilled during the lifetime of the original audience*” (27, emphasis original). Perhaps the writers have merely forgotten the protoevangelium, the hundreds of specific prophecies concerning the coming of Messiah, or the hundreds of prophecies not yet fulfilled regarding Israel’s restoration, but to assert or imply that prophecy is (nearly) always short-range is, itself, short-sighted. Similarly, the authors *frequently* repeat the theologically odd dictum that unless prophecies were fulfilled in the days of the original audience, then it had no meaning for them (158).¹ Adam and Eve would be shocked to discover that the promise of a Descendant who would reverse the curse had no value for them since he would not appear for another four thousand years. King David must have been profoundly ignorant of the assured results of such modern scholarship to mistake the Messianic prophecies of the Psalms as having any value of encouragement or blessing for himself. It would seem that the authors of *After Dispensationalism* overlook the fact that the value of Scripture prophecy stems not from fulfillment in the lifetimes of the immediate listeners, but from divine intent.

While quite willing to entertain the unfounded assertions of theological liberals, the authors take shots at fundamentalism in ways that have no bearing on the argument (e.g., 33–34). They make historically specious claims (e.g., that fundamentalists refused to cooperate across denominational lines—a fact provably false in that fundamentalist schools of the 1940s frequently represented nearly fifty denominations simultaneously) (35).

The book asserts that “pseudonymity is a literary strategy that was common in the ancient world” and “that ancient authors used pseudonymity not to claim authority through deception, but to serve the overall message through a device well-known to the audience” (162–63). This statement is both exaggerated (as Metzger has demonstrated, anonymity was common; pseudonymity was not; moreover, pseudonymity was regarded as a fraud) and demonstrably false when it comes to the Scriptures. The early church was highly critical of the *falsarius*. Given the propensity of the authors to credit highly the assertions of theological liberals, perhaps their waywardness on this point is understandable.

Finally, the book offers few advances historically, theologically, or hermeneutically, especially regarding the hermeneutics of prophecy (and apocalypses). The reader will not find a summary that brings the theological conversation up to its current situation. *After Dispensationalism* omits both recent dispensational scholarship and recent studies that question the assertion that Revelation and its OT counterparts are apocalypses. It claims to offer a new thesis (that “prophecy is primarily God’s word of hope for his people”) without proving the “primarily” aspect and without recognizing that the people of God have *always* known and confessed that prophecy expresses hope. Those who enjoy reading subjective speculation on the symbols of Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation will find ample fodder for their imaginations in the third part of the book.

The summary theses for the book (285–95) offer mixed value. Some of the statements are clearly true (numbers 2, 3, 4, 7, 11, 12), and some need to be qualified to be true (numbers 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10,

¹ This is one of the demonstrably false claims of amillennialism that appears frequently in published works.

13). The authors' definition of "literal sense" assumed in the fifth thesis ("When reading apocalyptic and prophetic genres, a good reader will always read the text in its literal sense.") is so plastic as to allow any preferred reading whatsoever to be designated as literal. To them, "literal sense" equals whatever meaning *they* decree that the "original hearers or readers" held, even if that meaning is entirely symbolic and entirely the subjective assertion of the authors' own theological tradition.

Those who are determined to disagree with dispensationalism will find the book concurring with their desire. Those who are committed to the "assured results" of liberal scholarship will similarly find many rallying points. Those wishing to investigate dispensationalism more fully will be better profited by reading Vlach's *He Will Reign Forever*,² since it comes from a dispensationalist who is explaining the system from inside the camp, or perhaps the recent "views" book *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*.³ Dispensationalists will find *After Dispensationalism* a frequent mischaracterization of their beliefs. Interpreters who grasp the basic biblical reality of long time lapses between prediction and fulfillment will find the book's counter assertions to be both puzzling and unorthodox.

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² Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (n.p.: Lampion, 2017).

³ Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, eds., *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, Spectrum Multiview Book Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022). For a review of this work, see *JBTW* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 95–98.

Prior, Karen Swallow. *The Evangelical Imagination: How Stories, Images, and Metaphors Created a Culture in Crisis*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2023. 289pp. + 10pp. (back matter).

Because this book is essentially a personal ramble through contemporary notions, it is best to begin with a biography of the author.

Karen Swallow Prior, born in 1965, was reared in a conservative home by parents who were adult converts to evangelical Christianity, the sort who read Chick tracts and Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Nevertheless, Prior was educated in secular schools, "read what I wanted to read, got to date boys and make mistakes, was encouraged to ask questions, and was never told my life or value would be ruined or lessened by any of those things" (230). At nineteen, she married Roy Prior, a guitarist in a local rock band, who became a high school vocational education teacher. Although the Priors are childless, they have been married for nearly forty years.

After earning a PhD in English literature at SUNY Buffalo, Karen Prior taught English—her specialty, Victorian literature—at Liberty University from 1999 to 2019, before resigning to take a position as a research professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 2018, while assuming a "public role in fighting the mistreatment of women by the leadership and culture of my Southern Baptist denomination," Prior was literally hit by a bus and spent some months recovering.¹ Then, shortly after publication of this book, she resigned from Southeastern, stating only that "the institution and I do not share the same vision for carrying out the Great Commission."²

Reporters have repeatedly queried Prior about the nature of her evangelicalism, and she has continued to declare herself "orthodox." Even so, controversy swirled around her at Liberty after she participated in an attempt to create "safe space for dialogue about faith, gender and sexuality through the arts." On campus, she was known as a "gay magnet" because of the number of students who confided to her their sexual proclivities.

The Evangelical Imagination reflects Prior's life and career. According to the publisher's blurb, the book "analyzes the literature, art, and popular culture that has surrounded evangelicalism and unpacks some of the movement's most deeply held concepts, ideas, values, and practices." Non-Christian historian Henry Reichman praised the book because it called "on evangelicals to examine their fundamental assumptions and to shed their faith of unwanted elements more cultural and political than religious."

Obviously, choosing the title *The Evangelical Imagination* required Prior to define "evangelical," and her attempt to do so launches the book into confusion from the get-go. Though she identifies evangelicalism as a Protestant movement originating with Wesley and Whitefield in the eighteenth century, she focuses mostly on the Victorian era and, when so inclined, reaches back to John Bunyan

¹ Karen Swallow Prior, "Thoughts on my 5-year anniversary of getting hit by a bus," Religion News Service, May 24, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://religionnews.com/2023/05/24/thoughts-on-my-5-year-anniversary-of-getting-hit-by-a-bus/>.

² Jeff Brumley, "Prior explores the origin of evangelicalism's 'empire mentality,'" Baptist News Global, September 19, 2023; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://baptistnews.com/article/prior-explores-the-origin-of-evangelicalisms-empire-mentality/>.

in the seventeenth century, and even the Reformers in the sixteenth. Prior never tells us why Bunyan and the Reformers do not officially qualify as evangelicals even though they fit the oft-noted formula of evangelical historian Thomas Bebbington. Bunyan and most of the Reformers emphasized conversion, missionary activity, the authority of the Bible, and the sacrifice of Christ as necessary to salvation. After all, Luther called his church the *evangelische Kirche*, and *Britannica* says that Bunyan had a gift for clothing “evangelical theology with concrete life.”

Prior notes that use of the word *evangelical* declined during the Victorian era but then was revived, with different connotations, in the mid-twentieth century following “the rise of Billy Graham and his decision to adopt the term as a way of distinguishing his ‘big tent’ Protestantism from the increasingly separatist fundamentalists” (26). Evangelicalism (more accurately, in my view, “new evangelicalism”) then became synonymous with a middle way between mainline liberalism and (says Prior) “the anti-intellectualism that characterized the fundamentalist movement” (26)—a change in meaning that would have baffled Wesley and Whitefield.

The remainder of the book runs riot with similar sloppy definitions and loosely organized ideas, liberally cribbed from secular academics. Their use trumpets the author’s intellectual bona fides. (I’d give a list, but the book has no index, a failure for which I hold the publisher responsible. A non-fiction book without an index is book just asking to be treated as ephemeral.) In other words, Prior has created a work that tries to gratify non-Christian intellectuals while simultaneously convincing middle-brow evangelicals that they are reading something profound. For instance, Prior declares that the “way of Jesus is not in the power, celebrity, and corruption that has borne the fruit of sexual abuse, spiritual abuse, systemic racism, and imperialism” (232). That is, she denounces behavior condemned in the Bible but wraps it in politically correct language to score points with her academic colleagues.

Though Prior is fully aware that language changes over time, she becomes truly testy about those “asleep to systemic racism” who have altered the meaning of the word “woke,” using it “as an insult or accusation.” “To destroy a metaphor,” she scolds in a series of opaque sentences, “is to destroy more than a word. It is to destroy a likeness seen and articulated by those made in God’s likeness. To allow a metaphor to dull is to dull, too, the perceptions that allow us to make, recognize, and weigh connections. Dulled perceptions create false intuitions, and flawed imaginations construct a distorted sense of reality” (48). (Note that the actors in these sentences are abstractions rather than real people, suggesting an authorial vantage point above the common fray.)

Prior regularly quotes non-evangelicals, men like Samuel Richardson (1689–1761)—who suggested that the truly pious can be found beyond Christianity—or Charles Dickens (1812–1870)—whom Prior describes as “a Christian, although not entirely orthodox and not at all fond of evangelicals” (138)—or the agnostic Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), before claiming that their views reflect those of contemporary evangelicals. It is true that Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge experiences a transformation, but no true Christian would equate it with the sort of conversion urged on the hearers of Wesley or Whitefield or even Charles Grandison Finney. (As for Gosse’s *Father and Son* [1907], Prior is unaware that the specifics of his beautifully written and highly regarded memoir—which

depicts Gosse père as an evangelical tyrant—have been thoroughly demolished by Anne Thwaite.³) Prior reprints Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” in its entirety in order to pillory evangelical foreign missions; but she does not mention that Kipling was inscrutably unorthodox, a man who enjoyed manipulating religious themes without subscribing to any religion himself and who, at forty-two, described himself as a “God-fearing Christian atheist.”

Often Prior’s sentimentalism gets the better of her. She aptly skewers Victorian romanticism and its modern posterity while discussing Sallman’s *Head of Christ* and Thomas Kinkade’s fantastically popular paintings. (Having grown up in a more iconoclastic corner of evangelicalism than Prior, I was told that Sallman’s paintings might well depict the *anti-Christ*.) But Prior seems confident that her readers will not call her out for her own sentimentalism. For instance, she recounts Louisa May Alcott’s description of the March sisters in *Little Women* who are in the process of preparing a domestic dramatization of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Meg March says, “It is only another name for trying to be good, and the story may help us, for though we do want to be good, it’s hard work and we forget, and don’t do our best.” Prior adds, “No one more than Bunyan would have been pleased with such a result” (96). Of course, Bunyan would have been appalled at such a result. In *Saved by Grace* (1675), he wrote, “None are received for their good deeds.” God “has rejected the persons that have at any time attempted to present themselves . . . in their own good deeds for justification.”

I was half-disappointed that Prior did not tackle some of the sentimental religious lyrics of the Victorian era, but perhaps she realized that contemporary Christian music can be just as vacuous and as vulnerable to the charge of sentimentality. In a truly silly piece of writing, Prior recalls attending a rock concert where the headline band lowered the volume on its final number: “We in the audience could hear only ourselves as our voices rose above those of the band members, lifting upward and outward into the darkness, singing and pleading, ‘Awake, my soul!’ Many in the crowd held up their cell phones like prayer candles lit to an unknown god as we sang on. . . . All—drunken college boys, cutoff-clad teenage girls, aging hippies, and cool aunts—were, in singing these words, whether we realized it or not, praying” (33–34).

In the book’s introduction, Prior pleads that she is simply an English professor. “I am not a historian. I am not a theologian. I am not a philosopher” (5). A systematic student of any of those disciplines will find additional discipline-specific problems. (One for theologians: “Not only the conversion testimony itself but the retelling of it, too, helps deepen the assurance of salvation” [84].) Prior is not wrong all the time, but few serious students of Scripture will care to rifle through so many woke-wrapped commonplaces in a search for memorable truths.

While taking notes on Prior, I was also reading Iain Murray’s *Heroes*,⁴ a book of almost exactly the same size with a nearly opposite goal, to honor evangelicals of the Victorian era and present them as models for our own. One of Murray’s heroes is Charles Colcock Jones (1804–1863), an owner of three antebellum plantations and hundreds of slaves, a man of both learning and persistence who exhausted himself evangelizing the enslaved people of coastal Georgia. Jones’s unlikely ministry was no theory or

³ See *Glimpses of the Wonderful: The Life of Philip Henry Gosse* (London: Faber & Faber, 2002).

⁴ *Heroes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009).

abstraction, so I do not think Prior would be likely to accept his sacrifice at face value or could even find intellectual room for it in the misty flats of her evangelical imagination.

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Byrd, James P. *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 376pp.

Toward the end of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared: “Both [the North and the South] read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other.” James Byrd seeks to elaborate on the meaning of those words in his recent quantitative history, *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. To accomplish this task, Byrd examines over 2000 resources, including sermons, diaries, letters, newspapers, tracts, and slave narratives (15, 303). Throughout his book, Byrd chronicles the usage of Scripture by participants on both sides, starting with the secession crisis and ending with the war’s immediate aftermath. Then in the appendix the author provides three charts that identify what he believes to be the most cited texts for the Union, Confederate, and combined “Bibles” (303–7). Byrd notes: “Americans cited the Bible in various ways. Sometimes a text from Scripture was a rhetorical allusion, used to support a viewpoint but with little or no elaboration on the Scripture, its context, or its full meaning. At other times, biblical passages received extensive focus. Most often Americans looked for analogies between biblical wars and the Civil War” (3).

From reading *A Holy Baptism*, one can get the impression that people used Scripture during the Civil War predominantly “to lend divine sanction” to their political and patriotic persuasions (17). It is undeniable, as Byrd records, that Union and Confederate sympathizers (mis)appropriated the Bible to support their partisan causes and to interpret “God’s providential plan” in military and political events of that time (287). But many of these same people utilized the Scriptures for another objective, in a far greater proportion. They read it, preached it, sang it, and prayed it for the purpose of worshipping “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 KJV). American evangelicals, especially in the South, saw the Scriptures preeminently as a spiritual book; hence Chaplain J. William Jones (a Baptist) could say in *Christ in the Camp*:

I do not believe that . . . any of the missionaries or chaplains were ever able, before or since, to preach sermons of such power as they were stirred up to preach in the army [during the war]. If any man had any capacity whatever to preach, it would be developed under circumstances which would have stirred an angel’s heart; and if he knew anything about the Gospel at all, he would tell it to these congregations. . . . And so, when the preacher stood before these congregations of veterans, his very soul was stirred within him, and he “determined to know nothing among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”¹

In the same book, Methodist Chaplain J. C. Granberry “add[ed his own] testimony to that of Dr. Jones on the evangelical tone of the preaching and worship in [the Army of Northern Virginia].” Granberry said:

¹ *Christ in the Camp, or Religion in the Confederate Army*, 2nd ed. (1904; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1986), 245.

Chaplains and visiting ministers determined not to know anything among [the soldiers] save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. It was always assumed that the cause for which they contended was righteous; on it was invoked the divine blessing, and the troops were exhorted to faithful service. But the grounds of the war were not discussed; constitutional and historical questions were passed by, except a certain local coloring, such as illustrations drawn from active military life and appeals based on the perils of war. The sermons in the camp would have suited any congregation in city or country, and with even less change might have been preached to the Union armies. Eternal things, the claims of God, the worth of the soul, the wages of sin which is death, and the gift of God which is eternal life through Jesus Christ—these were the matter of preaching. . . . The man of God lifted up, not the Stars and Bars, but the cross, and pressed the inquiry, “Who among you are on the Lord’s side?”²

Robert L. Dabney, a Presbyterian seminary professor turned parson-adjutant, compiled the only known collection of army sermons from the war, which confirms Jones and Granberry’s thesis in the main. Although Dabney could drift into political statements (particularly in his commemorative discourses), the vast majority of his ministerial labors in Confederate camps were spiritually oriented.³ Unfortunately, Byrd does not reference Dabney’s compilation, *Christ in the Camp*, William Bennett’s *The Great Revival in the Southern Armies*, *The Central Presbyterian*, *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, *The New York Observer*, or any of the works of John Broadus, James Pettigrew Boyce, John L. Girardeau, Moses Drury Hoge, William Hoge, Thomas E. Peck, Benjamin Mosby Smith, C. R. Vaughan, Joseph C. Stiles, William S. White, Stuart Robinson, Samuel McPheeters, Archibald A. Hodge, George Junkin, Gardiner Spring, or William S. Plumer (regrettably, there is no bibliography in *A Holy Baptism* to assist readers; only endnotes and an index).⁴ Byrd recognizes that his book “is not flawless” and “may be subject to revision with additional information” (360); so in light of the information above, perhaps an updated edition will be forthcoming that will include these resources.

But *A Holy Baptism* suffers from a much greater malady: an embrace of postmodernism. Byrd says:

Although many Americans claimed to follow “the Bible alone,” everyone read scripture in a place and time, and those conditions influenced how people interpreted the Bible. Although Americans often thought of the Bible as their highest authority in life, they also dealt with other authorities in their lives—governments, laws, churches, parents, spouses, ministers, presidents, and (for many) slaveholders, just to name a few. To say some person, or text, has authority only makes sense when we think of the relationships between that authority and other authorities. The key, as Seth Perry

² *Christ in the Camp*, 14–15.

³ See Jonathan W. Peters, ed., *Our Comfort in Dying: Civil War Sermons by R. L. Dabney, Stonewall Jackson’s Chief-of-Staff* (Destin, FL: Sola Fide, 2021). An enlarged and updated edition is being prepared for future publication.

⁴ During the Civil War, Rev. Plumer fought hard to keep politics out of his pulpit at Central Presbyterian Church in Allegheny City, PA, and was severely criticized for it. Sean A. Scott, “‘Patriotism Will Save Neither You Nor Me’: William S. Plumer’s Defense of an Apolitical Pulpit,” in *Contested Loyalty: Debates over Patriotism in the Civil War North*, ed. Robert M. Sandow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018): 168–197.

writes, is to examine “the Bible’s *authoritative use* by individuals in their relations with others, not from the assumption that the inert book itself possessed authority.” (17, emphasis original)

Confessional Protestants, regardless of social location, would contend that this last statement is biblically and experientially untrue. The Bible is “the word of God [which] is quick [i.e., living], and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12 KJV). While some passages are harder to understand than others (2 Pet 3:16), biblical texts do have meanings (Matt 9:12–13; Luke 24:27), and “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due sense of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”⁵

Additionally, confessionalists would argue that God has also ordained certain authorities to expound his Word (Neh 8:5–8; 2 Tim 4:1–2; Titus 1:5–9), and while these finite creatures sometimes make mistakes due to indwelling sin (Rom 7:18, 23; Phil 3:12–14; 1 John 1:10), they can proclaim the Scriptures truly and authoritatively, even if not exhaustively (1 Cor 13:12).⁶

Despite the aforementioned criticisms, *A Holy Baptism* remains a good source for discovering how the Bible was used during the Civil War to justify political allegiances and to interpret God’s providence in contemporary events. After completing this work, readers may agree with Benjamin M. Palmer that “providence is always hard to be interpreted, when we are in the very current of events, drifting and whirling us along too rapidly for the comparison and thought which are necessary to scan the mysterious cypher in which God writes his will upon the page of human history” (221).

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⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, “Of the Holy Scriptures,” Chapter I, Section 7. Cf. London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, “Of the Holy Scriptures,” Chapter I, Section 7. See also Ps 119:105, 130; John 5:39; Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 3:15.

⁶ Kevin DeYoung, “Postmodernism’s revenge,” *WORLD*, December 1, 2021; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://wng.org/opinions/deyoung-on-postmodernism-1638355746>.

Brown, Austin. *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic against Limited Atonement*. Pensacola: independently published, 2022. 172pp. + 6pp. (front matter) + 26pp. (back matter).¹

“Who could ever have thought that the death of Christ, which was destined to secure peace and destroy enmity . . . could have been so fruitful in the production of strife?”²

The answer is both obvious and a little disconcerting: God. He foresaw the debates that would be engendered—for centuries, even among his own true children—by how he chose to explain in Scripture the meaning of the death of Christ. God could have circumvented virtually all such strife and put the precise implications of the atonement beyond all reasonable doubt. Many on opposite sides of the debate are convinced that he has; and there seems little doubt that those on all sides of the debate will, in glorified retrospect, recognize that God’s explanation is obvious and (glorious prospect!) agree on it.³

But in the meantime, Brown reflects, “It is the peculiar trait of men,” fallen and finite as we are at present, “to war over ideas, not least, theological ones. . . . The extent of the atonement is not a doctrine to die over, however, and yet, here we are, standing in a pool of blood, still squaring off, fists raised” (158–59). He is not talking about Calvinists versus Arminians. He is talking about Calvinists versus Calvinists.

Brown is humorous,⁴ blunt, incisive, sometimes abrasive, and certainly boisterous (strict particularists may be inclined to take that adjective in its more negative connotation). The reason for both his posture and his tone is autobiographical: “The amount of vitriol I have suffered at the hands of my fellow kinsmen is legion, and it explains why my tone is rather cheeky, if not mildly tart. The question of the extent of the atonement is a full contact sport, and I’m not going to pretend that it isn’t” (3). (He includes a bit more detail about his personal experience in Reformed circles in chapter 21, “Some Practical Implications”—a chapter worth reading twice, as a preface as well as a prologue.) Though he is not an academician or professional theologian, he is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church in America (though currently a member of a church in the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches), and deeply and widely read especially in Reformed theology.⁵

¹ Note that this work is available for free download at <https://soundofdoctrine.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/a-reformed-critique-of-limited-atonement-100.14.pdf>.

² John Davenant, the mostly seventeenth-century Church of England Calvinist theologian and proponent of hypothetical universalism, quoted by Brown (158).

³ Relatedly, see my essay earlier in this issue of *JBTW*, “Managing Our Differences: Biblical Norms for Navigating Our Inevitable Disagreements.”

⁴ One of my favorite parts of Brown’s book is his semi-facetious Catechism of Strict Particularism (98–100), along with his reference to “Make Owen Great Again” baseball caps (115). Even the book’s cover is an ironic play on the cover of limited atonement’s authoritative volume, David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013). Though Brown takes pointed issue with Carl Trueman’s particularism, I suspect he would subscribe to Trueman’s maxim: “Pomposity is antithetical to piety, and humor is the best way to avoid it.”

⁵ Some of the supplemental information included in this review has been gleaned from personal email correspondence with the author.

Brown demonstrates throughout the book what he claims on page 1: that “various stalwarts of the Reformed tradition happily embraced universal satisfaction: Calvin, Luther, Edwards, Baxter, Davenant, Charles Hodge, Dabney. The list goes on.” Indeed, the list continues in a couple of appendixes—one including a collection of quotations from a number of those stalwarts, from Baxter to Zwingli, and another containing an extensive chart listing proponents of Arminianism, Classic/Moderate Calvinism, High Calvinism, and Hyper-Calvinism. Brown himself identifies as a classically moderate Calvinist who holds “that Christ did in fact pay an objective price for the sins of humanity,” alongside the view “that Christ did not die with an equal intent for all men” (5).

Calvinists typically assert that Christ’s death is efficient only for the elect but sufficient for all. Brown, as an avowed Calvinist, questions the logic of that assertion for the strict particularist: “How could Christ’s death be *at all* sufficient outside of his dying for their sins in some sense?” On the view of strict particularism, when it comes to the non-elect, “Christ didn’t do anything for their sins. Therefore (and here’s the rub), what he didn’t accomplish on their behalf is allegedly sufficient to deal with their sin. Since Christ didn’t die in any sense for the sins of the non-elect, how is his death *presently* sufficient for them? Answer: It isn’t. It could have been, but it isn’t” (9–10).

This, of course, has ramifications for the NT’s universal gospel call. If atonement is explicitly *not* made for the non-elect, then there is no atonement available for the non-elect, leaving no basis for a universal gospel call. In short, a strictly particularistic atonement pulls the rug out from under any meaningful, legitimate universal offer (nothing new here). To illustrate his point, he entertains the hypothetical supposition that Christ made no atoning sacrifice for anyone, in which case there would be no gospel. “In order for the gospel to be truly offered, there has to be a reality behind it that legitimizes the offer” (15). Consequently, “as soon as we establish that it would be absurd to offer the gospel to a world of non-died-fors, it necessarily follows that there is no gospel for the non-died-fors” (16). It may be objected that in this hypothetical scenario there is no atonement of *any* kind to ground *any* offer; and yet, that is the point—if Christ did *not* die for the non-elect (in some sense), then no atonement exists to ground a universal gospel offer to the non-elect. Whether we know who the elect are is irrelevant to the *logical* inconsistency of trying to append “a legitimate, universal gospel offer” to a “limited expiation” (17).

From this point on, Brown’s progression spreads out into a variety of related considerations. The fact that the non-elect reject offers of eternal life—which can be offered only on the ground of Christ’s atoning death—presupposes the reality of what is rejected. Additionally, Brown asks whether the non-elect can be “held accountable for rejecting something that was never really [objectively] available to them” because it was, in retrospect, obviously never objectively made for them (34). Citing John Murray’s defense of a universal gospel offer in conjunction with a strictly limited atonement, Brown asks: “If it is strenuously objected that Christ did not, in fact, die for the non-elect, as he [Murray] does, then how is Christ’s death perfectly sufficient for the non-elect?” (38).

In addressing “The Scope of John 3:16” (chapter 8), Brown traces the descriptions of Jesus’ mission in John, and the implications of the context of John 3:16, to demonstrate that “the world of men, to which Christ came and offered himself, was unequivocally comprised of the non-elect” (49–50). Additionally, the universal language used in Numbers 21:8–9 indicates an unlimited provision of a

means of healing—an incident to which Jesus explicitly parallels his atonement in John 3:14–15 (50). Brown also devotes chapters to other key universal texts (1 Tim 2:4; 4:10; 2 Pet 2:1; 3:9; 1 John 2:2) and addresses particularistic efforts at exegetical circumvention with help from other notable Reformed thinkers.

In a chapter that may annoy some particularists as much as Arminians must be annoyed by Calvinist charges of Pelagianism, Brown highlights the fine and perforated line dividing High Calvinism from Hyper-Calvinism. One is in danger of breaching that boundary when he makes a legitimate biblical doctrine (e.g., divine sovereignty or, more specifically, election) “the absolute controlling element whereby all seemingly contrary evidence is brought into submission to this fundamental point” (81). The result is a reductionistic theology—one that concludes, for example (as one pastor whom Brown quotes says), that God obviously cannot possibly love the non-elect or else he would save them. “The fundamental problem here is an unwillingness to allow” complementary and equally authoritative “biblical data to nuance” the favored, chosen doctrine (86). It is a problem that bedevils not a little Reformed theology.⁶ In words very dear to my heart (because they echo my own teaching for years), Brown asks: “What is acceptable mystery, dear Christian, and what is not acceptable mystery, and why?” (86). Everyone agrees there is a curtain of mystery; where we disagree is where that curtain drops, and how much Scripture we allow to influence *where* it drops.⁷ Brown is hardly accusing all strict particularists of Hyper-Calvinism. “But we should be prepared to say that a person who denies God’s universal saving desire (or balks at the word ‘offer’ or is afraid to say to the unconverted that God loves them) is wading out into the unbiblical waters of reductionistic Calvinism. And they should stop. It carries the notable scent of Hyper-Calvinism” (87).

Chapter 13 (“Harmony, Not Confusion”) makes the point that skewed questions produce bad answers (e.g., the excluded middle fallacy). To construe an irreconcilable contradiction between God’s intention to secure the salvation of the elect and, simultaneously, demonstrate his love for the world, is both unbiblical and wrong-headed. “All that needs to be shown is that God has a variety of complementary reasons for doing things the way he does” (94).

Brown disarms Owen’s trilemma, along with the double jeopardy argument, citing Charles Hodge’s insightful discussion of *penal* vs. *pecuniary* substitution and the related issue of conditionality (100–1, 103) and Ursinus’s commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism (102). He also addresses “a technical component to this discussion that is often lost on strict particularists”—viz., the “idea that Christ suffered a just equivalent (*tantundem*), and not the exact penalty the Law demands of sinners (*idem*)” (108), citing Richard Baxter’s lengthy answer to the question “Is it not unjust to punish him that Christ died for, even one sin twice?” (short answer: no) and an extended explanatory illustration of these categories by Tony Byrne (109–12). Brown closes the chapter with a rather telling interview excerpt featuring Carl Trueman, in which he admitted that he generally ignores the theology of the

⁶ Granted, it bedevils Arminian theology as well, but that is not the subject under the microscope here.

⁷ For a detailed exploration of this phenomenon in a specific theological context, see my article, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh’s Heart,” *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023), 56–78.

Hodges and Dabney, and that the double jeopardy argument is not a weight-bearing component of the limited-atonement position (113–14).

Any extended argument against limited atonement worth its wood pulp would have to interact with the imposing collection of particularistic essays in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*. Brown does so, selectively but effectively. He cites and/or interacts with chapters by Schreiner, Letham, Williams, Trueman, Williamson, Haykin, Gatiss, and the editors (David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson). He interacts with Trueman's essay on Owen rather extensively to demonstrate the kind of theological tunnel vision that shapes strict particularism (115–20). Schreiner's essay figures most prominently in Brown's discussions of 2 Peter 2:1 (130–34) and 1 Timothy 4:10 (135–38).

Beneath the surface of Brown's wide-ranging polemic against the limited-atonement view of his fellow Reformed brethren is a bottom line. The bottom line of Brown's argument is not that 4-point Calvinism, or 4.5-point Calvinism, or historic hypothetical universalism are entitled to be considered and treated as legitimate expressions of Calvinism or Reformed theology. Rather, while none of these align entirely with TULIP, all of them are legitimate expressions of 5-point (Dortian) Calvinism, precisely because the ubiquitous TULIP acronym subtly distorts the statement of Dort on the atonement. And the corroboration he provides for that argument—including the venerable historical theologian Richard Muller—is compelling (161–63). Even the modern magisterial anthology defending particularism, *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, includes an essay by Lee Gatiss that makes the same concession.⁸

In detective series, the private investigator is typically the gadfly of the professional constabulary: unconventional, interfering, and annoying even (and especially) when he is right. Brown is, by any normal definition, a lay theologian—sometimes considered the bane of professional theologians and, therefore, often ignored. But as Lewis observed, we are all theologians; Brown has just taken that intrinsically human calling far more seriously than most, and his work deserves a serious reading because of it.

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⁸ See “The Synod of Dort and Definite Atonement,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, 162–63.

Naselli, Andrew David. *Predestination: An Introduction*. Short Studies in Systematic Theology. Wheaton: Crossway, 2024. 206pp. + 14pp. (front matter) + 34pp. (back matter).

A chief goal of this series—featuring a dozen titles so far, covering topics from Atonement to Trinity—is (as the editors put it, quoting Calvin) “lucid brevity.” The parameter of brevity requires that the author be selective, accurate, and simple (without becoming simplistic). Naselli’s treatment of the complex doctrine of predestination displays those qualities admirably. The book’s brevity is its genius but, at times, also its most frustrating feature. Then again, the subtitle signals that it is, after all, designed to be *An Introduction*.

In his Introduction to this *Introduction*, Naselli helpfully addresses several preliminary issues including anxiety over the topic and how to approach such a controversial but important doctrine. His definitions of the key terms are concise and (in my opinion) correct (7). Predestination: “*God predetermined the destiny of certain individuals for salvation and others for condemnation*” (emphasis original). Technically, in biblical theological usage predestination refers exclusively to God’s appointing believers to a destiny beyond salvation, including sonship, inheritance, and conformity to Christ (Eph 1:5, 11; Rom 8:29); but Naselli’s definition reflects a wider, standard systematic-theological usage that incorporates other NT terms (8). Election: “*God sovereignly and graciously chose to save individual sinners.*” Reprobation: “*God sovereignly and justly chose to pass over nonelect sinners and punish them*” (emphasis original). The definition of both “election” and “reprobation” are particularly contested by theologians. I will offer only two simple observations at this point. First, Naselli’s definition of reprobation aligns with what is usually labeled *preterition*, though that term shows up only twice (7n9, 196n14). Second, his definition of reprobation also invites the possibility of a small but worthwhile tweak to his definition of election; for election is not only sovereign and gracious but equally as *just* as reprobation, since God *chose to save individual sinners and* (it could be added for definitional symmetry) *to punish Christ instead*.

In the introduction and throughout the book, discussions are often condensed into concise charts (a total of twenty-one tables)—an enormously useful feature when discussing complex theological ideas. Such compression offers simplification and clarity, but sometimes at the expense of a fully accurate picture. For example, the comparison between key doctrinal points according to Arminianism and Calvinism (11–12) omits a significant and differing body of interpretation that resides historically within the body of Calvinism. Granted, the focus of the book precludes detailed delineation of all the shades of theological variation (11, 16); this being *An Introduction*, the presentation must necessarily be simplified. But the lack of nuance can be misleading, as though these two views (as Naselli has defined them) stake out the only available options.¹

¹ A couple of corroborating quotations from J. I. Packer in the Introduction are mildly disconcerting. “It has become usual in Protestant theology to define God’s predestination as including both his decision to save some from sin (election) and his decision to condemn the rest for their sin (reprobation), side by side” (16). One can only assume that Packer sees “Protestant” as synonymous with Reformed and exclusive of Arminianism, which seems a bit theologically myopic. Later, after presenting TULIP as a summary of Calvinist soteriology, Naselli notes that “Packer summarizes Calvinism in three

To many, election and reprobation may seem like theoretical, esoteric, top-shelf doctrines of minimal practical import except to sparring theologians. But Naselli understands that all theology has immediate, personal implications. Consequently, once the book moves into the full-bodied discussion of these doctrines, Naselli helpfully breaks down and arranges each topic according to engaging questions—the kinds of questions thoughtful Christians have about these issues.² And each chapter ends with a personalized prayer focused on how to respond to the doctrine set forth.

Part 1 takes about 130 pages to explain positive predestination (election). The discussion develops along these lines:

- What Is the Goal of Election?
- When Did God Choose to Save Humans?
- Did God Choose to Save Individuals?
- Did God Choose to Save Individuals Based on Foreseen Faith?
- Is Unconditional Election Unfair?
- Do We Have Free Will?
- Does Election Contradict God’s Desire That All Humans Be Saved?
- How Does God Accomplish His Plan to Save Individuals?
- How Do I Know If God Has Elected Me?
- Did God Elect Babies Who Die?

Naselli opens with eight scripturally grounded divine goals in election (chapter 1), a divine decision that preceded creation (chapter 2). The discussions of conditional versus unconditional election (chapter 4), free will (chapter 6), and how God accomplishes his elective purpose (chapter 8) occupy the most space. At every point, Naselli seeks to anchor his reasoning and conclusions solidly in Scripture. In chapter 3 (individual versus corporate election), he works through seven reasons to “reject the Arminian view of corporate election” (48ff). While I agree with the position he stakes out, some of the reasoning offered seems, at points, ineffective. After citing several passages that imply individual election based on their use of singular pronouns (45–47), Naselli cites Romans 8:29–30 to argue that “God foreknows, calls, justifies, and glorifies particular individuals”—even though the pronouns throughout this passage are plural, not singular. Arguing simultaneously that singular-pronoun passages *and* plural-pronoun passages prove individual election seems less than compelling. Bruce Demarest’s explanation is more convincing: since the verbs in Romans 8:29–30 are both aorist and sequential, “if the election and calling were exclusively corporate, so also would be the justification. . . . But God does not justify an empty class; he justifies individuals.”³

words: ‘God saves sinners’” (16). One can only imagine an exasperated Arminian exclaiming, “That’s not ‘Calvinism.’ That’s Christianity!”

² For a “Quick View” version of the answers to the questions that occupy each chapter, you can go straight to an Appendix on “Chapter Summary Questions and Answers.” The author confirmed, however, that the Q&A for chapter 7 contains a typographical error; the question should read, “Is election compatible with God’s desire that all humans be saved?”

³ *The Cross and Salvation: The Doctrine of Salvation*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 129.

In chapter 4, Naselli follows an argument for the decisiveness of God's sovereignty (53–56) with the magnificent observation that “the basis for election is God's forelove” (56; Naselli cites Eph 1:4–5, 1 Thess 1:4, and 2 Thess 2:13; but see also Eph 2:4–6). While the author does try to represent Arminians fairly, I suspect Arminians will think he could have tried a little harder. Naselli admits that they would never say that they are saved because they are smarter than other people, but that “they are radically depraved and thus in need of God's special grace in order to repent and believe in Jesus.” Their view of universal prevenient grace, however, implies “that a believer decisively chose God, and has a ground for boasting” (64). But then, an Arminian would never say *that* either! Naselli concedes that both “Arminians and Calvinists agree that we need God's special grace *before* we can believe because we are radically depraved. But we disagree on five key issues regarding God's special grace”—differences which he then concisely charts out. In an extensive footnote (75) quoting two Arminian theologians who insist that “the decisive factor” in salvation “is the grace of God” not human choice, Naselli nevertheless defends his insistence that the Arminian doctrine of universal prevenient grace logically entails that “man's choice is decisive” in election, not God's. It seems the two sides talk past each other by insisting on asking the same question differently: the Calvinist's question is, “Which is decisive, man's choice or God's choice?” whereas the Arminian's question is, “Which is decisive, man's choice or God's (choice to give) grace?”

The chapter on free will is superb, differentiating between natural ability and moral ability. The former is the “natural freedom to choose what I want” in accordance with my nature—a capacity all humans exercise every day. The latter is the “moral freedom to choose what God wants”—a capacity that all humans, by virtue of depravity, lack apart from the intervening grace of God. Naselli offers ten arguments in support of the idea that divine determination and human freedom harmonize (compatibilism).

Chapter 7 addresses whether the doctrine of individual, unconditional election contradicts God's desire that all humans be saved. Similar to the differentiation between two kinds of human will, Naselli differentiates between two aspects of the divine will: God's commanded or moral will, and God's decreed or sovereign will (112–16). I was puzzled by a chart that distinguishes between (a) God's command to Pharaoh (“Let my people go”) as “what God would like to see happen” and (b) God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as “what God actually wills to happen” (113); but surely both of those are God's decreed will, since both of them were divinely purposed *and* both of them actually happened.⁴ Naselli ends the chapter with a series of five real-life examples designed to demonstrate the feasibility of two competing wills in God (117–19). The problem with the examples is not so much the issue of two competing wills but (in the case of God) the utter impossibility of one of the options, depending on how one defines the atonement—which, to be fair, was not the focus of this book and is mentioned only briefly (12, 14). If God's choice not to save certain people means that he also decided *not* to provide for those people the atoning sacrifice that renders their salvation possible in the first place, it is legitimate to question the meaningfulness of saying that God desires and offers to save those

⁴ For a more thorough treatment, see Layton Talbert, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh's Heart,” *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023), 56–78.

people *on that view* (viz., an exclusively particularistic atonement). The NT does teach particularity, but it consistently locates that particularity in election not in the atonement.⁵

Chapter 8 (how God accomplishes his elective purposes) argues for the priority of regeneration (123–26), God’s use of the means of Scripture, prayer, and witness (126–28), and our obligation to obey God even if we do not understand how all this works (128–29).⁶ The final chapter on election (“Did God Elect Babies Who Die?”) offers a perspective that is biblically insightful and pastorally sensitive. Naselli concedes that though “the Bible does not directly answer this difficult question” (143), there is sufficient biblical data to conclude that it “is almost certainly true” (147). He even offers a feasible explanation for why the Bible is *not* clearer on this issue: given human depravity, “people would be more inclined to do horrible things” if the Bible’s answer were explicit (148).

Part 2 devotes about fifty pages to negative predestination (reprobation) and follows this succession of questions:

- Who Ultimately Causes Reprobation?
- How Does God Accomplish Reprobation?
- What Is the Result of Reprobation?
- What Is the Goal of Reprobation?
- Who Deserves Blame for Reprobation?

The answer to the first question is “God,” but that requires some explanation (chapter 11). To begin with, God does not reprobate neutral or innocent humans; the entire human race consists of fallen rebels who already reject God as he has revealed himself (159–60). Naselli differentiates “equal or symmetrical double predestination” (God actively chooses to work unbelief in some and faith in others) from “unequal or nonsymmetrical double predestination” (God actively chooses to save some, and passes over others), and then offers five reasons for defending the latter (160–63). Indeed, a robust biblical understanding of depravity makes the former nonsensical; why would God need to work unbelief in those whose natural disposition is unbelief? As Naselli writes, “Reprobation does not mean that God decreed to transform innocent humans into wicked ones and then damn them,” because there are no innocent humans (161). He cites corroborative statements from other theologians, including this one from Moo: “God’s mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; *his hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation*” (162, emphasis added)—a statement well worth applying to the hardness, and hardening, of Pharaoh. Naselli’s explanation of some passages, however, seems confusing and inconsistent with his view of negative predestination as preterition. For example: “First Peter 2:8 teaches that God *destined certain people to disobey* and thus stumble—that is, *he destined them to rebel against him* and thus take offense at and reject Christ the cornerstone” (156, emphasis added). How is this different from symmetrical predestination, in which

⁵ To be clear, I am not faulting the author for not addressing this issue, nor am I attributing to him any particular view of the atonement. I am simply observing that the issue that complicates the universal call rests less in the issue of the nature of God’s will, and more in the nature of the atonement. Cf. my review of Austin Brown’s *A Boisterously Reformed Polemic against Limited Atonement* immediately above in this journal issue.

⁶ It is just my opinion—as, indeed, all of this review is—but the citation of a rap song lyric that reads like a rather banal advertising cliché (122) does not contribute much to the dignity and sobriety of the subject.

God equally *actively chooses* (destines) “certain people” to not believe and to be condemned? Perhaps some would appeal to mystery here (see below). But to say that God *both* passively “passes over” the non-elect *and also* actively chooses to work unbelief in them sounds more like logical contradiction than mystery.

How does God accomplish reprobation (chapter 12)? The biblical term Naselli zeroes in on is that word *hardening*. He correctly asserts, “When God hardens individuals, he is not merely *reacting* to how they previously decided to harden their hearts for themselves” (170, emphasis original). God does not need to wait for them to decide to harden themselves; rather, when God hardens individuals he is *confirming* the *native hardness* of their already-fallen condition.⁷ After all, God did not *make* them that way; as Naselli already argued, “God does not harden or condemn *innocent* humans” (161, emphasis original; cf. 175). But how does this divine hardening work? Naselli offers examples of several kinds of hardening: God hardens (a) by withholding grace, (b) through sinful people, and (c) with the truth. The first category is the clearest; in the cited words of A. A. Hodge and R. C. Sproul, “God *withdraws* from sinful men . . . and *leaves* them to the *unrestrained* tendencies of their own hearts, and to the *uncounteracted* influences of the world and the devil,” and he “*lets them have their own way . . . and lets them do their own will*” (173, emphasis added).⁸ Later, Naselli also quotes Michael Horton at some length: “Scripture does speak of God hardening hearts. . . . Yet it also speaks of sinners hardening their own hearts. . . . *Human beings alone are responsible for their hardness of heart. . . . God only has to leave us to our own devices in the case of reprobation*” (176, emphasis added).

So, when Naselli asks how can God ordain “both (1) what we choose and (2) that we freely and responsibly choose what we most want?” I am somewhat mystified by his answer: “I don’t know how. It’s a mystery” (177). Is it? Isn’t it depravity, in conjunction with preterition and withheld grace? Naselli and those he quotes have explained it admirably. Hardening is allowing sinners to choose what we most want in keeping with our fallen nature, without the intervention of persuasive grace to change what we want. Where is the mystery in that? As to “how God can ordain sin but not be guilty of it,” John Piper explains it in essentially the same way: not divine instigation, but divine permission.⁹ The objection may be raised, “But that’s not how Paul answers in Romans 9; he seems to think it’s a mystery (9:19) answerable solely by a silencing appeal to God’s absolute sovereignty (9:20)” (cf. 61). But as I have argued elsewhere, 9:20 is not all Paul had to say on the subject.¹⁰ To be sure, there is a

⁷ This is my conclusion, not Naselli’s. The author admits, on the one hand, that hardening is just and deserved by virtue of our depravity; but he also seems to want to maintain that such hardening is an utterly independent and unconditional act of divine sovereignty (171). But if hardening is God’s just dealing with those already guilty by virtue of the depraved human condition, then it’s not really “*unconditional*.”

⁸ I found the second category particularly confusing. Under “God Hardens through Sinful People” Naselli shows how “God uses wicked people to accomplish his purposes”—such as Joseph’s brothers, the Sabeans who attacked Job’s flocks and servants, the Babylonians, and Judas (173–74). But these are not equivalent or synonymous propositions. *Whom* is God hardening “through” these wicked people? The examples do not seem to make sense of the category. The meaning and explanation of the third category (“God Hardens with the Truth,” 174) could also use more clarification.

⁹ *Providence*, 175–79 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020). See my review of this work in *JBTW* 4, no. 1 (Fall 2023) and my article in the same issue, “An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh’s Heart,” especially 70–72.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 67–70.

mystery attached to election and reprobation. Naselli hits on it earlier: “Why did he love us *and not others* in this way? We don’t know because God doesn’t tell us” (56). Aye, there is the mystery.

Naselli does a masterful job summarizing the goal of reprobation. God’s mercy and grace are seen and appreciated most vividly against the backdrop of his wrath and power—attributes that are just as inherent to God’s nature and character as his mercy and grace. He rehearses the seven doxologies in Revelation that glorify God specifically for his righteous judgments on the earth (187–89). “If reprobation did not exist then there would be aspects of God’s glory that we could not see and praise God for” (191).

Who, then, deserves blame for reprobation (chapter 15)? Naselli marshals a series of passages that lay the blame squarely upon humanity. It is because of “*your hard and impenitent heart*” (Rom 2:5 ESV). Paul does not explain Israel’s unbelief in terms of election; that may be “a theologically correct answer, but it is only part of the answer. And . . . it is not what Paul emphasizes in [Rom] 9:30–10:21. Paul emphasizes the *human* reason: . . . *They* have not pursued . . . *They* have stumbled . . . *They* have sought . . . *They* have not confessed . . . [*they*] have not called . . .” (200–1, emphasis added). In short, “an individual non-elect sinner is responsible for his or her own reprobation because sinners are responsible for their sins” (199)—which roots the justice of reprobation in depravity, in native human hardness not just divine hardening. That is why I am again mystified when Naselli raises the question, “How can God be the ultimate cause of reprobation and humans still be responsible for their condemnation?” only to answer, “That’s a mystery” (203). In my opinion, Naselli does a pretty good job of explaining the mystery.

If you want a concise, accessible, well-organized, Reformed-oriented primer to the vexed and complex topics of election and reprobation, you could hardly do better. Despite some disagreements and differences in emphasis (which the author and I have shared, in friendship, for a long time), I warmly commend Naselli’s thorough, thoughtful, and reverent work on predestination.

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