The Heresy of Democracy
JOE BOOT

Penal Substitutionary Atonement
JACOB REAUME

Black Liberation Theology
SAMUEL SEY

Gregory of Nazianzus’s Defense of Trinitarian Orthodoxy
DAVID ROBINSON

Review: Christianity and Liberalism
NATE WRIGHT
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Many readers will know by now that the base of operations for the Ezra Institute recently moved from Toronto to the Niagara region. In the providence of God, and to avoid a brutal commuting routine, my family moved too, and as a result, one of the most important and significant decisions that we’ve been facing is the question of finding a new church home. We knew better than to try to find a drop-in replacement for the church family we left behind, where our kids had been born, and where we had been members for nearly ten years. But the move brought home in a very real way the often-theoretical questions about the nature of the church, its mission, its role in society, and which church body was the best fit for our family. Now we had to see how those things were lived.

One of the most worthwhile things I did was to look up several congregations online and read their statements of faith. This important preliminary information told me whether or not these congregations could be expected to rightly handle the Word of truth.

I came away from this exercise with a few observations. In the first place, the theological statements of most places I looked up fall within the bounds of orthodoxy – they correctly address and formulate baseline evangelical distinctives like the doctrines of the Trinity, the inspiration and authority of the Bible, original sin, and the final judgment. Based solely on their statements, we could, in good conscience, have attended a generous handful of local churches.

It’s also worth noting that most of these statements are deliberately broad enough to allow for fellowship with brothers and sisters with whom we disagree – all within the bounds of that orthodox fence. On the other hand, this web-surfing exercise ruled out several places that claimed to be Christian churches, but whose statements were decisively out of the bounds of orthodox Christianity – denying the deity of Jesus Christ or of the Holy Spirit showed up in a couple of places. Incidentally I have also come to believe that a church that is not willing to publish their statement of faith should be viewed with squint-eyed wariness.

Invariably, the churches where we heard the Word of God read and preached, experienced the sacraments administered, and saw the faithful pursuit of discipleship, were those that also emphasized historic Christian teaching in their church statements, either by direct reference to Scripture and to historic creeds and confessions, or with the language and formulas found in those sources. Language matters, and not just for pedantic editors like me. It’s important to use orthodox language so that we have the categories and vocabulary to think in an orthodox way.

Language, like doctrine, doesn’t matter simply for its own sake. Again, doctrine is something that we live; church statements alone are not sufficient to tell us what life is like in that congregation. Our theology tastes and sounds and smells like something. We need the right words to help inform, direct, and shape right actions and attitudes. As the expression goes, the proper end of theology is doxology. Right doctrine leads to right worship, and wrong doctrine leads to wrong worship.

The church is the bride of Christ and the pillar and support of truth (1 Tim. 3:15; Rev. 21:2). It has a responsibility to present herself pure before Him, correcting, suppressing, and removing the stain of heresy from her midst. The ongoing struggle to maintain orthodoxy through the centuries has been compared to a tightrope walk, not only in the sense that it holds to exacting standards, but because of what is at stake if the standards are abandoned. God’s people need to be attentive to our words and to our worship; we can’t allow false teaching to gain an inch, because on a tightrope, an inch means everything.

The persistence of heretical teaching is reason for constant watchfulness on the part of the church, but not for panic. The son of God came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Heresy is dangerous, but orthodoxy is not brittle, truth is not fragile. Truth is a dangerous, powerful
weapon that God has entrusted to His church to destroy demonic strongholds of unbelief and error. Let us learn to wield it well.

IN THIS ISSUE

The articles in this issue of Jubilee represent some of the most pressing and high-profile theological controversies that Western Christians are facing today. As the authors show, the errors found in these doctrines are not new, but are rather updated expressions of old heresies. There are new players with new uniforms, but the game is the same.

Samuel Sey introduces Black Liberation Theology and demonstrates that it is a form of the liberal social gospel that has risen to prominence in recent years hand in hand with prominent race-based movements like Black Lives Matter.

Jacob Reaume explains the biblical doctrine of Penal Substitutionary Atonement, a doctrine that has been subject to high-profile opposition from quarters of liberal Christianity and opponents of the gospel of Jesus. He demonstrates not only its biblical and historical provenance, but the real and serious errors that are entailed in rejecting this teaching.

Joe Boot traces the root and meaning of heresy and illustrates the extent to which heretical ideas influence life outside of the church. As he explains in “The Heresy of Liberal Democracy,” the heretic is one who places his own opinion over the accepted and received authority of God and His Word in any area of life.

David Robinson explores the early Trinitarian teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus, which he preached in Constantinople in the late fourth century to combat the dominant Arianism which denied the divinity of the Son. By basing his defense of Trinitarian orthodoxy on the testimony of Scripture, Gregory grounds himself “within the bounds of reverence,” demonstrating that orthodoxy consists not only of right doctrine, but of right worship, directed toward the Triune God.

It’s also a pleasure to introduce a new section for 2019: based on readers’ feedback we’ve developed a section for book reviews and recommendations. Unlike other book review corners, the primary aim of this section is to introduce readers to the books that have influenced and shaped orthodox Christian thinking, and which have an enduring message for our time. In this issue, Nate Wright reviews J. Gresham Machen’s short classic, Christianity and Liberalism.

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THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

The inescapable question that confronts us in every aspect of life is the question of authority. Whom and what will we believe, how will we live, and by what standard? There are a variety of ways we come to know and believe, and there are various activities by which we arrive at our convictions and acknowledge authority. One human activity giving rise to a certain kind of authority is that of science.

There are numerous sciences – the natural sciences, medical sciences, operational sciences, not to mention what are often referred to today as social sciences, examining things like anthropology, archaeology, economics, history, human geography, jurisprudence, linguistics, psychology, sociology and political science. Theology is an important science where we examine Scripture and the creeds and confessions of the church, to deepen our understanding and insight into them. When certain individuals have spent much time studying a given area, reaching a certain degree of competence, they may establish themselves as an ‘authority’ in their field.

However, when a Christian reads the Bible, prays, or sings the Psalms to meditate on God’s Word and engage in worship, it is not a scientific enterprise. The act of believing the Word of God is different from scientific analysis of biblical languages, for example. Moreover, when we live by the Word of God given in creation and His Word revelation, we do not establish its authority, but acknowledge and trust it. Nonetheless, there is a deep connection between our believing activity and the analytical conclusions we reach in any of these areas we now call the sciences. This connection is critical. Both historically and in terms of the structure of our thought as human beings, all our scientific or theoretical knowledge is preceded by a more original, primary knowledge. This is the everyday knowledge of experience, of practical, factual, full and ordinary life in created reality which deepens and grows with time – it is the experience of being human in God’s world. In this everyday knowledge we encounter norms like good and evil and come upon the laws of God for creation in every aspect of living. One does not need to be a physicist, for example, to discern a law that causes objects to fall to the ground. We ‘know’ this reality regardless of whether we can formulate the law of gravity symbolically on a whiteboard.

The root of this primary knowledge is a kind of basic trust that is necessary for every other kind of knowledge to be established. All other forms of secondary knowledge must presuppose this basic trust – without it there could be no science. This trust rests on a fundamental kind of faith knowledge, or what we might call religious knowledge that is inescapable to human beings as created, religious creatures. This knowledge can be suppressed and distorted, but it cannot be escaped.

In the final analysis all our knowledge is grounded in a created reality which, as a mystery, cannot be fully comprehended by human thought in its totality, because human thinking itself and the scientist himself, are part of the creation he is trying to understand, a cosmos held together and fully dependent upon Christ, the Word of God. By divine revelation, we are given knowledge of the true origin of all things and the problem of sin which introduced the sense of confusion, ambiguity and anxiety that persists in human life and culture. Egbert Shuurman draws the important conclusion that:

This “knowledge” and this “recogni-
The Heresy of Liberal Democracy

The word *heresy* comes from a Greek word (*hairesis*), the essential meaning of which is a taking or *choosing for oneself*. The heretic is one who, in their belief, confession or teaching, has placed their personal, eccentric choice or opinion above that of accepted and received authority — ultimately the authority of God and His Word. That is why a person engaged even in the science of theology (a discipline with as many pitfalls as biology) must take great care not to confuse their novel opinion with authority, or primary knowledge. Which is to say, theological concepts and systems are not identical with Scripture. They must be weighed against Scripture and the testimony of the church down the centuries from the time of the apostles. When theologians have conflated their novel ideas with Scripture itself — with biblical authority — the propagation of heresy is the end result.

The faith knowledge of the heart variously given with creation, manifest in Christ, inscripturated in the Older and Newer Testaments, confirmed by the Holy Spirit and concretized by the confessing orthodox church down the centuries is primary knowledge, while theological systems and conceptual models, though vital and helpful in deepening our understanding, are secondary forms of scientific knowledge, provisional and always in reform. Heresy then, is essentially false teaching which clearly contravenes the biblical Word and orthodox deposit of faith, denying their binding authority. The early church was found almost immediately battling heretical ideas, arising from creative theologies that sought to fuse Christianity with forms of paganism. Several of the most important creeds of the church were the product of that battle for a faithful reception of legitimate authority, rooted in Christ and his Word.

Obviously, without a received authority as the basis of orthodoxy, there can be no heresy — the concept would be meaningless! This means that in a culture which rejects, scorns, or makes light of the authority of Scripture, the orthodox creeds and confessions of the church, as well as church discipline, the Christian concept of heresy will not be tolerated. In fact, such heresy will be...
viewed as unimportant, irrelevant or even impossible to define. At the same time however, a new source of authority that has subtly replaced Scripture and biblical confessions within that culture – for authority never disappears but is simply transferred – will be taken very seriously and a new orthodoxy enforced with the tools of discipline adhering to that new sphere of authority – typically the state. From the Christian standpoint, all true authority begins and resides in the sovereign God and his infallible Word, and this sovereignty (i.e. absolute kingship or rule) of the triune God, as creator of all things, is a foundational article of faith. The Apostles' Creed declares:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord…

And he will come to judge the living and the dead

In a similar fashion the Nicene Creed begins:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of all that is, seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God…through him all things were made…

Notice that these two foundational ecumenical creeds, which summarise the basic teaching of Scripture, affirm that the triune God is almighty and the creator of all things; that Jesus Christ is Lord and God and the judge of all. In short, they affirm the sovereignty and Lordship of Jesus Christ. To deny this Lordship and sovereignty to Christ is therefore heretical.

THE INFLUENCE OF HERESY

Typically, when Christians consider the subject of heresy, we invariably think of church councils, ecclesiastical tribunals and church order – we regard these matters of doctrine as essentially confined to the church institute. After all, what relevance could a person’s rejection of God’s sovereignty, or Christ’s atoning death for sin have on political life for example? Without doubt, these church-oriented considerations are vitally important for understanding and addressing heresy. The church must confront heretical teaching, refute it, and discipline members. But what we rarely consider are the implications of heretical ideas and teaching as they impinge upon life outside the institutional church. This oversight is serious because if we ecclesiastise the concept of heresy and regard it as having relevance only for the life of the church, we will fail to see how heretical thought profoundly affects other vitally important areas of life – including the political. In fact, what we believe about God’s sovereignty actually has far-reaching implications for political life and thought!

It is evident that there are times when heretical thinking is only clearly brought to light outside the ecclesiastical sphere. Because of the tendency among Christians today to acquiesce to secularism’s radical dualism – a way of thinking which divides faith and reason, private and public, religion and politics, into separate storeys of reality as though they were hermetically sealed domains – one foundational truth about reality can supposedly bear authority in the church institute (a supposedly ‘private’ sphere of religion), whilst a contrary commitment can hold, at the same time, for cultural and political life (the ‘public’ sphere of reason). Because of this latent dualism, it is possible for this contradiction to persist without the Christian ever clearly recognising a basic incoherence. This means that a Christian within the confessing church community may believe themselves to be essentially orthodox as far as the fundamental tenets of the faith are concerned (in the ‘religious’ sphere) yet hold, at the same time, to a radical liberal-democratic or even Marxist view of cultural and political life for the public space. They may even suggest to fellow believers that the acceptance of ‘alternative lifestyles’ and the redefinition of marriage is a good thing for ‘society out there.’ In these instances, arising either from ignorance or an arrogant setting aside of Scripture, heretical views of God which deny His total sovereignty in all of life have manifested themselves in areas outside the church institute.
(where they have remained quietly hidden) because inside the church institute God is ‘permitted’ to be sovereign.

This pervasive influence of heresy is inevitable. Because faith-knowledge and religious presuppositions are the point of departure for every area of life and thought, not just in the church or the science of theology, heresy never confines its influence or application within the ecclesiastical sphere. As a result, very often, Christians who are inconsistent in their thinking and lack a comprehensive biblical worldview can unwittingly adopt views and practices in other areas of life that are rooted in heresy. In short, Christians frequently adopt heretical political theologies and even humanistic ideologies as suitable for the life of society, sometimes without ever realising they are in denial of fundamental confessional truths of Scripture and the creeds.

**WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?**

Having considered the meaning and influence of heresy, we are now ready to turn to the concept of democracy and attempt to relate the two. It may seem somewhat shocking to some that the title of this article identifies liberal democracy as an expression of heresy. Do I not believe in the consent of the people to be governed, or their legitimate role in the election of their leaders? Do I wish to replace democratic institutions with an absolute monarchy or some dictatorial form of government? The answer is no. I have no desire to do away with the hard-won cultural freedoms bequeathed by our Christian forebears in the form of parliamentary or congressional institutions that involve responsible citizens in the election of their political leaders, whether in constitutional monarchies or republics.

This being the case, what is really at issue with the question of democracy? Clearly, there are a variety of forms (or structures) of political life even in the Western tradition. Britain has a monarchy, the established church, a House of Lords and Commons. Canada has an upper and lower house (Senate and Commons), with a viceroy for the monarchy called the Governor General. The United States has a President, Congress and Senate. All have an ostensibly independent judiciary. The fundamental issue under consideration in this article is not to quibble over the varied and particular structures of political life, but with basic religious direction. What is the basis and source of final authority that gives direction to any society? Where does ultimate sovereignty (which is another word for kingship or rule) lie? What is the religious root of the idea of democracy and is it consistent with the scriptures and orthodox confessions of the church? As Rousas Rushdoony noted, “Behind all this is the question of authority: is it from God, or from man? If God is the sovereign authority over all things, then His law-word alone can govern all things.”

In a book published in 1955, Lord Percy of Newcastle argued that democracy as ideology is a “philosophy which is nothing less than a new religion.” The book was called, *The Heresy of Democracy: A Study in the History of Government*, and it called attention to these foundational questions. The word *democracy* is derived from the Greek word *demokratia* which brings together *demos*, meaning ‘the people,’ and *kratos*, meaning ‘authority’ — in popular parlance, *people power*. The basic underlying principle is *popular sovereignty*. So, the question naturally arises, is popular sovereignty consistent with biblical truth and an orthodox doctrine of God? In a democratic order without God’s ultimate sovereignty recognized, is it not the case that man’s *theoretical political idea* of popular sovereignty replaces creational and biblical revelation as the basis for social order? Ideological democratic thinkers like John Dewey held that there was a basic contradiction between the popular sovereignty of man and the absolute sovereignty of God. Christianity and the family were for him essentially aristocratic and anti-democratic and therefore incompatible with his vision of democracy.

To properly uncover the whether modern liberal democracy is a heresy expressed in the political sphere, it is necessary to briefly do two things. First, we need to consider the religious assumptions of the liberal democratic tradition and where it stands now. Second, we need to consider **“Christians who are inconsistent in their thinking and lack a comprehensive biblical worldview can unwittingly adopt views and practices in other areas of life that are rooted in heresy.”**
the specific claims of Christ. No orthodox view of political life can negate the claims of Jesus Christ.

**THE ORIGINS OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

It is important to deal first with the qualifier ‘liberal’ in the term ‘liberal democracy.’ Democratic institutions are one thing, the contemporary notion of liberal democracy is quite another. Over many centuries in the English-speaking world, under the influence of Christian faith and customs, an expanding degree of participation of the citizenry in their own government developed. Inherited rights and forms of political life that empowered common people, not just a landed aristocracy, the church, or hereditary monarchy emerged, as a deepening consciousness of the sovereignty of God over all people (king and commoner alike) came to political expression. Here, democracy did not mean the will of the 51% governs (a kind of direct rule by mob), but rather increased separation and differentiation of powers with more and more elected representatives in civil government. In Britain, the Houses of Parliament (Commons and Lords, the mother of all parliaments) balanced one another, with the church acting as the moral compass of the nation, under a monarchy which acknowledged and defended the Lordship of Christ and the Christian faith.

Because of sin, no system of government is perfect but over many centuries the fundamental liberties of representative government emerged in what we now call the Anglo-American tradition. Part of that tradition was the English Common Law, rooted in the scriptures, which, though not the product of popular vote, played a critical role in the development of constitutional life. The English philosopher Roger Scruton once remarked that the English law existed not to control the individual but to free him. Thus, free democratic institutions in themselves are not problematic from a Christian standpoint. However, the development of the notion of liberal democracy, following the Enlightenment and French Revolution, is a much more complicated issue.

In an important recent article, Yoram Hazony, a Jewish philosopher and political theorist, defines liberalism as referring “to an Enlightenment political tradition descended from the principal political texts of rationalist political philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Kant, and reprinted in countless recent works of academic political theory elaborating these views.” He goes on to identify three core religious axioms that undergird liberal-democratic thinking: 1. The availability and sufficiency of reason; 2. The (perfectly) free and (perfectly) equal individual; 3. Obligation arises from choice.

The critical concern that emerges from this for Hazony is that “there is nothing in this liberal system that requires you, or even encourages you, to also adopt a commitment to God, the Bible, family or nation.” In fact, none of the foundational forms of primary knowledge actually undergird the principles of liberal democracy. Despite the oft-heard claim that liberal democracy is meant to protect traditional belief and institutions in a separate sphere of ‘privacy,’ so as to ensure no one is coerced to be a Christian or live life in the confines of the Christian view of the traditional family, “Everywhere it has gone, the liberal system has brought about the dissolution of these fundamental traditional institutions.”

Why is that? Harzony says the answer is not difficult to find. In essence, although liberalism claims to be a form of government that ensures a wide range of individual freedoms: 

...liberalism is not a form of government at all. It is a system of beliefs taken to be axiomatic, from which a form of government can, supposedly, be deduced. In other words, it is a system of dogmas... about the nature of human beings, reason, and the sources of moral obligations that bind us...; there are no grounds for the claim that liberalism is merely a system of ‘neutral’ rules, a ‘procedural system’ that can make traditional political and religious structures work all the better while leaving them intact. Liberalism is a substantive belief system that provides an alternative foundation...[that] has not co-existed...
The Revolution, however, did not spring up from nowhere. The French *philosophes* were picking up the intellectual legacy of one of the fathers of modern liberal democracy, John Locke. Locke's story is an interesting one, growing up as he did during the English Civil War, his father being in Oliver Cromwell's army. He spent time living in France during a period when a politically explosive letter circulated in England which it was thought he had a hand in writing. He was also implicated in a plot to kill Charles II and fled again, returning to England after the glorious Revolution of 1688 with William of Orange.

Locke's thought was rooted in the Enlightenment rationalistic idea of mathematical reasoning — a thought process in which most of the sciences were reduced to a *numerical* aspect of reality. The early political liberals hoped they could demonstrate that political life could likewise be reduced to a kind of mathematical demonstration. Government could surely be developed and grounded in terms of clear rational principles. This they thought could be done in a kind of neutral fashion that would be independent of any religious commitment. The liberals believed their vision was based on 'self-evident' facts, clear to all reasonable people. In pursuing a basic moral axiom that every 'rational' person could agree on, Locke laid the foundations for the idea that all people are perfectly free, autonomous, and endowed with natural rights.

Although Locke himself was not trying to develop a radically secular, de-Christianized democratic society, his thought lay the groundwork for more radical (that is, consistent) views, because he had set aside God's creational and moral order in pursuit of the illusion of religiously neutral 'facts.' Locke was supplanting creational and biblical revelation by making man's reason the basis of justice and civil concord rather than the Word of God. Even the older pre-modern idea of natural law as something external and given was now jettisoned in favor of natural rights that emerged from man's reason. The modern democratic perspective can be detected in Locke's words:

> The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone: and
reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that all being equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.¹⁰

This view of the human person as rational, virtuous, independent and equal (in a pseudo-mathematical sense) is nowhere to be found in Scripture. In biblical faith, man is a fallen sinner. His human understanding, or reason, is distorted by rebellion against God, often leading him radically astray, and he is anything but independent and autonomous. From the Christian standpoint, man is under law in every area of life and not only is he dependent upon God and subject to Him in the totality of his being, but he is set in profound mutual interdependence with other people — including those long dead who shaped the culture and customs of the society in which he lives. For the Bible, a person’s life is embedded in created and covenantal reality in relationship to God and others.² For the Bible, a person’s life is embedded in created and covenantal reality in relationship to God and others, not in a religiously neutral, self-evident, contractual arrangement between abstract individuals in an idealized state of nature. Although all people are made in the image of God having equal intrinsic value and worth, equally subject to God’s law in all things, biblical faith nowhere says all people are perfectly free and equal in the rationalist sense. As Hazony notes:

Whereas Hebrew Scripture depicts human reason as weak, capable only of local knowledge, and generally unreliable, liberalism depicts human reason as exceedingly powerful, offering universal knowledge, and accessible to anyone who will but consult it. Similarly, whereas the Bible depicts moral and political obligation as deriving from God and inherited by way of familial, national and religious tradition, liberalism makes no mention of either God or inherited tradition, much less specific traditional institutions such as the family or nation.¹¹

Locke’s faulty assumptions about the human person inescapably lead to faulty assumptions about political life. Government now becomes a creation of the people, beholden to the people and dissolvable by the people, for it is simply a contract between free, independent and equal individuals. Moreover, in keeping with these philosophical axioms, Locke wanted to neatly keep the concerns of church and state radically separate, because like the social contract in political society, the church is just another kind of voluntary society occupying the private space. The affairs then of religion and the affairs of the magistrate are supposedly entirely unrelated. The state (the public area), is ostensibly free of metaphysical religious claims and so in theory should leave the ‘private’ sphere of religion to organise and go its own way. Samuel Burgess’ analysis of this naïve position is telling:

Locke consistently attempts to avoid the conclusion that in disputed cases the state may need to take its own theological character seriously.... [T]he state is not a neutral arbitrator, but necessarily has its own ethical and indeed theological values so the citizen is at times confronted with a clash of civic and religious duties.... And herein lies one of the fundamental problems faced by modern liberal democracies: they have forgotten that their own beliefs are theological in nature and not simply the product of reason. The idea of human beings as bearers of natural rights is not a theologically neutral position. The state makes judgements as to which expressions of religion are acceptable in the public sphere according to its own theological account of humans as rational, autonomous beings who are equal and bearers of natural rights.... [T]he assertion of subjective rights is incoherent without the theological roots of those rights.¹²

Locke, like modern liberals, also overlooks the fact that his own beliefs did not emerge from an autonomous, independent reason. The idea of basic inherent rights and responsibilities for all people in human society arose in a Christian culture, where human persons are viewed as God’s image-bearers.
The misplaced belief that the ‘truth’ of liberal, egalitarian democracy is evident to all reasonable people of goodwill, because it arises from a supposedly religiously neutral public reason and thus should be the basis of all valid government, eventually led to a remarkable degree of intolerance. With the French Revolution, these assumptions led to a ferocious anger toward Christian people and churches, despite explicit legal provisions for freedom of religion. This leads us to a consideration of liberal democracy as it confronts us today with its claim to promote the rights of citizens over and above the promotion of any particular conception of the good.

**TODAY’S LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

Many modern thinkers took up the liberal mandate of John Locke, pushing it to much greater levels of abstraction, but perhaps none more notable than the American thinker John Rawls. Rawls looked to refine for the twentieth and twenty-first century the contractarian thinking of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Like his predecessors, Rawls begins with an idol – an abstract rational man as free and equal with natural rights from which we can deduce a form of government. He offers no metaphysical validation for his claims about the human person; they are creedal, dogmatic statements of belief. For Rawls, man is a political animal, justice is ‘fairness’ and reasonable, rational citizens will support such a view of society that is based on the overlapping consensus of reasonable individuals, not theological foundations from revealed religion. This view inevitably leads to the situation inherent in modern liberal democracies today – that there can be no public privileging of any one religion. This enforces the interiorization and relativization of religious belief. Christianity can have a voice only insofar as it can make common cause with Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or paganism.

Like Locke, Rawls thus separates religious belief from the sphere of government but does so by arguing for a distinction between privately held religious ‘beliefs’ and common reason. Beliefs that are not obvious and evident to the common public reason of other citizens are ruled out of bounds for political life. But this just begs the question: what is reasonable, fair and just? Moreover, who has the right to decide what are private beliefs and what constitutes common reason? In reality, liberalism is a comprehensive doctrine which asserts itself over the Christian faith and tradition, despite beginning from a supposedly purely political conception.

The result is that the influence of Christianity is severely limited by liberal democracy within its political-doctrinal confession of man as a reasonable, equal being, in possession of natural rights ascertained by the reason of the sovereign common people! A radically denuded, abstract concept of man as rational, atomistic, asocial, equal, free and solitary is an idol that bears no relationship to created reality and which places man, either individually or collectively, in the position of ultimate sovereignty – the creator of rights, authority and government in terms of his idea. Freedom for Christianity exists here only insofar as its confession leaves untouched and unchallenged the basic premises of the liberal contractarian creed. Institutions and organisations which challenge this creed today are under threat because liberalism must isolate and destroy the challenge to political man’s sovereignty. If possible, dissenters must be cured of their religious disease in the public school. As Jonah Goldberg points out:

> “The misplaced belief that the ‘truth’ of liberal, egalitarian democracy is evident to all reasonable people of goodwill...led to a remarkable degree of intolerance.”

**THE HERESY OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

Beneath the individualistic rhetoric lies a mission for democratic social justice, a mission [John] Dewey himself defined as a religion. For other progressives, capturing children in schools was part of the larger effort to break the backbone of the nuclear family, the institution most resistant to political indoctrination.

**TODAY’S PUBLIC SOVEREIGNTY**

Within the liberal democratic view then of popular sovereignty, rooted in autonomous human reason, we see a secularist theory in political science (remember the sciences are a secondary area of knowledge acquisition) taking the place of creational and biblical revelation, being fashioned into new articles of faith to underpin social order – it has become an impersonator of primary knowledge and a new confession of faith. This re-
igious confession of liberal-democracy has as its primary target Christianity. As the Italian political philosopher and politician, Marcello Pera, has pointed out, “Since Christianity is the religion proper to Europe and the West, it is Christianity that liberalism wishes to banish to the private sphere or to oppose as an important religion and public point of reference.”

Today this political faith is everywhere around us, permeating every aspect of people’s lives. The Polish political philosopher, Ryszard Legutko, writes with insight:

“What we have been observing over the last decades is an emergence of a kind of liberal-democratic general will. Whether the meaning of the term itself is identical with that used by Rousseau is of negligible significance. The fact is that we have been more and more exposed to an overwhelming liberal-democratic omnipresence, which seems independent of the will of individuals, to which they humbly submit, and which they perceive as compatible with their inmost feelings. This will permeates public and private lives, emanates from media, advertising, films, theatre and visual arts, expresses itself through common wisdom and persistently brazen stereotypes, through educational curricula from kindergartens to universities and through works of art. This liberal-democratic general will does not recognise geographical or political borders…. [T]he liberal-democratic general will reaches the area that Rousseau never dreamed of – language, gestures and thoughts…; this will ruthlessly imposes liberal-democratic patterns on everything and everyone…”

This reality brings with it the overwhelming temptation for believers to attempt a synthesis of liberal-democracy with Christianity. Just as the second-century Gnostic philosopher and heretic Carpocrates sought a synthesis between Greek thought and the Christ of Scripture, the modern Christian risks accommodating Christ the Lord to the pretensions of liberal-democratic reason. The Carpocratians had statues of Jesus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle together in their shrines. For them Jesus was a man of pure soul, a wonderful philosopher, and anyone had the potential to rise to His level or surpass Him. He was not the sovereign creator, redeemer and Lord, the ‘ruler of the kings of the earth’ (Rev. 1:5). This Greco-Roman Jesus had a shelf-life only as long as that synthesis culture lasted. Once that culture collapsed, the relevance of their imaginary Gnostic Jesus disappeared with it. If we re-shape Christ in terms of the democratic general will, reduce Him to the servant of man’s political reason or relegate Him to an artificial private sphere with every other religious teacher and philosopher, our relevance, and that of the truncated gospel we preach, will disappear with an apostate society, just like the heretics of the past.

THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST

This brings us to our concluding concern, the claims of Jesus Christ. The imperial prerogatives of Christ are clearly set forth in Scripture (Psalm 2; 24; John 1; 1 Cor. 15:24-26; Eph. 1; Phil. 2:9-11; Col. 1; Rev. 1:5;) and are as plain as the doctrine of God. In addition, consider the references to Christ in Scripture as ‘the Lord of glory’ (Jas. 2:1); this was a term reserved for absolute royal power set forth in the Oriental kings and emperors who thought themselves representations of God in time. When Herod, dressed in garments to reflect the sun, which according to Josephus were made of silver, stood in the Temple and sought to claim all the glory for himself, he was struck down by God (Acts 12:21-24). The commission Christians received from the Lord of glory in the Great Commission of Matthew 28, states and presupposes the absolute authority of Christ to possess and rule the nations. Blazing fire (a symbol of glory) appeared over the heads of the disciples at Pentecost as they were equipped by the Holy Spirit for this task. The notion that this commission and empowering was intended for a limited private ‘religious sphere’ as defined by a liberal or pagan state is fatuous:

“The ascendancy of the King of Glory, Jesus Christ, to all pretended kings of glory
The Heresy of Liberal Democracy

The gates of all life, including political life, must be lifted up to let Him in, or they shall be broken down! All spheres of human authority are derived from or conferred by, and are subject, at all times and places, to the sovereign and absolute authority of Christ the Lord, in terms of His Word.

This is a far cry from the popular perspective even in the church of our era. With today’s religious confession asserting a liberal-democratic general will – where man’s reason and his political society is sovereign and morality and justice are created by the state, not revealed by God – we are witness to what Herman Dooyeweerd called “a strong revival of the ancient pagan conception which claimed all of life’s spheres for the state, considered all morality to be state morality and was therefore not aware of the problem of the relation between individual conscience and state law.” There has been a radical departure from our Christian moorings in acknowledgment and confession of the sovereignty of God in Jesus Christ for human society. As Abraham Kuyper observed, “Christian Europe has dethroned the One who was once its King, and the world city has become the queen under whose scepter people willingly bow down.”

In substance and content, these secular dogmas are heretical in their assertion of popular sovereignty, their denial of God’s sovereignty, of human sin and fallenness, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The cry of eighteenth-century liberalism, ‘Vox populi, vox Dei’ (the voice of the people is the voice of God), echoing down to the present and informing the thinking of our era is heresy, and is no less so because, as political doctrine, it is unlikely to get a Christian into trouble with their local presbytery, diocese or elders.

In its essence, the Revolution is a single great historical fact: the invasion of the human mind by the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of man, thus making him the source and centre of all truth, by substituting human reason and human will for divine revelation and divine law. The Revolution is the history of the irreligious philosophy of the past century; it is, in its origin and outworking, the doctrine that – given free reign – destroys church and state, society and family, produces disorder without ever establishing liberty or restoring moral order, and, in religion, inevitably leads its conscientious followers into atheism and despair…. For Christians of whatever church there is now a common cause. They have to maintain Christian faith and law against impiety and anarchy. But if they are to be adequate for this task, nothing less than Christian truth is required…. [T]he Gospel is, and always will be, the ultimate anti-revolutionary principle. It is the sun of justice that after every night of error, appears over the horizon and scatters the darkness. It destroys the revolution in its root by cutting off the source of its deceptive reasoning…. [W]e must take up once more the work of...
the Reformation and continue in it…; the Reformation put the Christian principle – obedience out of love for God and as the servant of God – into practice, and when in every sphere it placed human authority under God's authority, it validated power by putting it back on its true foundation.… [T]he Revolution starts from the sovereignty of man; the Reformation starts from the sovereignty of God. 19

In an era of liberal-democratic heresy, we can take our stand with Carpocrates or Christ. Only one of these has a future.

5 Hazony, “Conservative Democracy.”
6 Hazony, “Conservative Democracy.”
7 Hazony, “Conservative Democracy.”
9 Samuel Burgess, Edmund Burke, 43-44.
10 Cited in Burgess, Edmund Burke, 45.
11 Hazony, “Conservative Democracy.”
12 Burgess, Edmund Burke, 52-53.

Empires of Dirt: Secularism and the Mere Christendom Alternative
Pastors, teachers and Christian leaders are invited to join us on April 25 from 10am-3pm at the EICC Centre for Reformational Culture in Grimsby, Ontario. We look forward to hosting Rev. Douglas Wilson as our special guest speaker as we consider the self-destructing strategy of secularism and the way forward as Christian leaders in calling our nation back to Jesus Christ.

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MOST EVANGELICALS ARE UNFAMILIAR with the origins and foundational beliefs of Black Liberation Theology. That is perhaps why many evangelicals today are becoming sympathetic towards its heretical doctrines.

Black Liberation Theology may be largely unknown to many evangelicals today, but it’s a popular theology inside Black churches in America. Black Liberation Theology developed as a mainstream idea within Black American churches several decades ago. However, most Black Canadians and most Black people around the world are not exposed to it. With the notable exception of South Africa – because of Apartheid history – Black Liberation Theology is a distinctly Black American framework.

Black Liberation Theology has infiltrated all types of Black American churches today, and is perceived as orthodox Christianity within all types of Black churches in America. Millions of Black Americans in Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Episcopal, Presbyterian and other churches today are subjected to sermons from Black Liberation Theology perspectives every Sunday morning. Approximately 40% of Black American churches identify with Black Liberation Theology. This includes thousands of churches from major Black American denominations like the Church of God in Christ and the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

In fact, most of the biggest proponents of Black Liberation Theology and its predecessor theologies were ordained ministers and theologians from the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This includes a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Reverdy C. Ranson, major Reconstruction politician Henry McNeal Turner, and the founder of Black Liberation Theology, James Cone.

Black Liberation Theology exists inside Black churches within multi-ethnic denominations too. For instance, social justice activist Al Sharpton embraced Black Liberation Theology as a young member at a United Church of Christ congregation. And Jeremiah Wright was the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois for almost 40 years. The church is the largest congregation within its denomination. It holds over 8,000 members. And for 20 years, one of its members was Barack Obama.

Black Liberation Theology gained significant attention in the 2008 American presidential election after clips of Jeremiah Wright’s sermons were released by media outlets. The clips featured Barack Obama’s pastor making conspiracy theories about the American government’s role in the September 11 attacks, the Pearl Harbour attack, the HIV crisis, and more. The widely circulated sermons made the world privy to what many adherents of Black Liberation Theology believe about the American government. In one of the clips, Jeremiah Wright said:

“When it came to treating her citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains, the government put them on slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton field, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into positions of hopeless-

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“Black Liberation Theology gained significant attention in the 2008 American presidential election after clips of Jeremiah Wright’s sermons were released by media outlets.”
ness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing “God Bless America”. No, no, no, not God Bless America. God damn America — that’s in the Bible — for killing innocent people. God damn America, for treating our citizens as less than human.”

Americans were shocked by Wright’s sermons. They never imagined that many people within Black churches echoed that level of resentment against America. At the time, they didn’t understand that a significant number of Black Americans didn’t want to sing ‘God Bless America’ or honour the American flag. They didn’t think Black Liberation Theology permeated inside Black churches. They didn’t know the next president of the United States at the time was baptized and discipled under that kind of theology.

Barack Obama and his family removed their membership from Trinity United Church of Christ after the clips were released to the media, and Jeremiah Wright retired from pastoring the church soon afterward. The controversy eventually died down. Barack Obama defeated John McCain in the 2008 election and became the 44th person and the 1st Black American to become President of the United States. He maintained his presidency 4 years later when he won the 2012 election over Mitt Romney. And the American public did not experience that kind of hostile rhetoric from Black church leaders again for years — until the Ferguson riots in 2014.

The riots in Ferguson, Missouri were the aftermath of a fatal police shooting of a Black teenager, Michael Brown, by a White police officer, Darren Wilson. A grand jury and the United States Department of Justice ruled in favour of Darren Wilson. They declared that forensic evidence and eyewitness testimonies supported Darren Wilson’s self-defense claim. But the rulings sparked outrage, riots, and demands for social justice. For many Americans, particularly Black Americans, Michael Brown’s fatal shooting was perceived as yet another instance of a racially-motivated murder of a Black teenager. Two years prior to Michael Brown’s shooting, a Black teenager in Florida, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed after an altercation with a member of a community watch, George Zimmerman. A jury subsequently acquitted Zimmerman of second-degree murder and manslaughter in 2013.

Therefore, tensions from the Trayvon Martin case carried over to the Michael Brown shooting the following year in 2014. Activists, politicians, and media personalities alike suggested that Michael Brown was a victim of America’s systemic racism against Black Americans. Michael Brown’s fatal shooting and the Ferguson riots became arguably the biggest story that year. Time Magazine named the Ferguson protestors runners-up for the magazine’s Person of the Year in 2014. The riots propelled Black Lives Matter into a powerful social justice group. They became the most powerful Black American social justice group since the Black Panthers in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Ferguson riots became the first of many social justice riots across America following fatal shootings of Black Americans by police officers. The riots pushed America’s supposed systemic racism against Black Americans into a major political story. The riots made race relations a major topic in the 2016 American presidential election. And consequently, social justice become the biggest topic in evangelical circles today.

STATEMENT ON SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE GOSPEL

Last September, John MacArthur, Voddie Baucham, and other evangelical leaders released The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel. The statement presented biblical objections to social justice positions on culture, sexuality, gender, ethnicity and race. Concerning ethnicity and racism, the document states:

WE DENY that Christians should segregate themselves into racial groups or regard racial identity above, or even equal to, their identity in Christ. We deny that any divisions between people groups (from an unstated attitude of superiority to an overt
spirit of resentment) have any legitimate place in the fellowship of the redeemed. We reject any teaching that encourages racial groups to view themselves as privileged oppressors or entitled victims of oppression. While we are to weep with those who weep, we deny that a person’s feelings of offense or oppression necessarily prove that someone else is guilty of sinful behaviors, oppression, or prejudice.

And we emphatically deny that lectures on social issues (or activism aimed at reshaping the wider culture) are as vital to the life and health of the church as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of Scripture. Historically, such things tend to become distractions that inevitably lead to departures from the gospel.

The Statement received over 10,000 signatures and became a valuable resource for Christians in the wake of growing support for social justice from prominent evangelicals. In fact, The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel was an answer to the social justice movement within evangelical organizations like The Gospel Coalition and The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Months prior to the release of the statement, the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission and The Gospel Coalition held a social justice conference named the MLK50 conference – in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. That event was followed by the Together for the Gospel conference days afterward, and like the MLK50 conference, it featured an emphasis on social justice.

The conferences suggested that America was systemically racist against Black Americans. Many of the evangelical leaders from the conferences claimed that many White Christians were guilty of ignoring justice for Black Americans. They didn't list evidence to support their claims. They couldn't prove that the current American government is systemically racist. They didn't refer to any racist policies to validate their words. Nevertheless, they charged many White American Christians with apathy or support for racism, and they commanded them to repent.

One of the speakers at the Together for the Gospel conference, David Platt, said: “May it be said of us that we eagerly anticipated future salvation while acknowledging present sin. May it not be said of us that we indulged in worship while ignoring justice, and may it not be said of us that we carried on religion while we refused to repent.”

The conferences elicited strong, polarizing reactions from evangelicals. Some Christians were delighted over the conferences’ support for social justice. Other Christians, however, were deeply disappointed over prominent evangelicals adopting social justice as a gospel issue. This culminated into the Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel months later.

But in between these events, James Cone – the founder of Black Liberation Theology – died. Many Christians who support social justice offered eulogies on social media expressing their admiration for James Cone. The most candid admiration for James Cone's theology, however, came from the president of The Witness: A Black Christian Collective, Jemar Tisby. He dedicated an entire article, without restraint, to commend James Cone's theology. In the article, he said:

A father of black liberation theology, Cone helped pioneer a field that dealt with the racism at the core of much of American Christianity. He shows that black people could understand Christ’s suffering by recalling their own sorrow related to the lynching tree. At the same time, the cross provided comfort because black people could know for certain that in His life and death, Christ identified with the oppressed.

Then in his book, The Color of Compromise, from earlier this year, Jemar Tisby wrote:

James Cone penned The Cross and the Lynching Tree as a theological reflection on racial terrorism. 'Both Jesus and
blacks were strange fruit’, he wrote. ‘Theologically speaking, Jesus was the first lynchee,’ who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil.’ Cone goes on to explain, ‘The cross helped me to deal with the brutal legacy of the lynching tree, and the lynching tree helped me understand the tragic meaning of the cross.’

Jemar Tisby is part of a long line of professing Christians today who have embraced a form of Black Liberation Theology in the wake of Black Lives Matter and the social justice movement. This development actually follows a historical trend. Many social justice leaders within evangelicalism today are much like James Cone and his theological predecessors who abandoned biblical theology to adopt worldly philosophies from liberal theologians and activists from their time as a means to fight injustice.

ABOLITION AND LIBERALISM

The basis for Black Liberation Theology can be traced back to liberal theology within the abolitionist movement. Many abolitionist leaders such as William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Parker abandoned biblical theology because one of biggest obstacles for abolitionism at the time was that many Christians used the Bible to defend slavery. In his book, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis, historian Mark Noll demonstrates that some of the most influential Christian leaders in the nineteenth century, including Richard Fuller, James Henley Thornwell, J.W. Tucker, and probably a majority of Christians throughout America justified their pro-slavery stance with Scripture. 8

This prompted many abolitionists like Garrison to become increasingly antagonistic to the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. Garrison wrote:

There are two dogmas which the priesthood have attempted to enforce, respecting the Bible, from which has resulted great mischief. The first is – its plenary inspiration...the other dogma is – the Bible is the only rule of faith and practise; so that whatever it teaches or allows must be right, and whatever it forbids must be wrong, independent of all other considerations.... Hence, if slavery is or war is allowed in the book, it cannot be wrong. 9

Black abolitionists like Garrison’s close friend, Frederick Douglass, also adopted liberal theology. In his book, By These Hands, Black Liberation theologian Anthony B. Pinn explains that Frederick Douglass’ colleagues like unitarian preacher Theodore Parker, agnostic writer Robert Ingersoll, and his mentor, William Lloyd Garrison, convinced Douglass to reject biblical Christianity. 10

Consequently, liberal theology became prominent within Black abolitionist circles. For instance, the Civil War-era Black abolitionist and women’s rights activist Sojourner Truth, rejected the deity of Christ. In her speech at the Ohio Women’s Convention in 1851, she said: “How came Jesus into the world? Through God who created Him and woman who bore Him.” 11

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Black church leaders – particularly leaders within the African Methodist Episcopal Church, such as Henry Meneal Turner and Reverdy C. Ransom advocated for a social gospel formed by liberal theology and Marxism. 12

Their theology was much like Walter Rauschenbusch’s social gospel. In fact, Rauschenbusch’s book, Christianity and the Social Crisis, laid the foundation for liberation theology. Decades after the book’s release, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “Christianity and the Social Crisis...left an indelible imprint on my thinking by giving me a theological basis for the social concern which had already grown up in me.” 13

Therefore, Martin Luther King Jr. and many of his peers, including Rosa Parks – a life-long member and deacon of the African Methodist Episcopal Church – embraced the social gospel. In a letter to his wife, Coretta Scott King, in 1952, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “Let us continue to hope, work, and pray that in the future we will live to see a warless world, a better distribution of wealth, and a brotherhood that transcends race or color. This is the gospel that I will preach to the world.” 14
Black Liberation Theology was initially a reactionary theology against White, orthodox Christians who were apathetic or sympathetic to anti-Black racism. It’s the ramifications of a long history of many White Christians using the Bible to justify racist, pro-slavery, and segregationist beliefs. Therefore, this reactionary theology is prompted by anger and anti-White racism. Black Liberation Theology leaders admit that their theology is built on hatred for White people, but they do not believe that their hatred for White people is racist. Cone writes:

It is important to make a further distinction here among black hatred, black racism, and black Power. Black hatred is the black man’s strong aversion to white society. No black man living in white America can escape it.... But the charge of black racism cannot be reconciled with the facts. While it is true that blacks do hate whites, black hatred is not racism.”

James Cone’s selective definition for racism can be explained by Black Liberation Theology’s relativist positions on sin. In fact, Black Liberation Theology’s poor concept of sin is why it cannot offer anything more than a social gospel. Black Liberation Theology leaders major on social issues because they minor on sin. Its entire theological system is made up of man-centered or Black-centered thinking that cannot liberate those whom it purports to liberate. It is conformed to the world. Its proponents are not being transformed by renewing their mind on Scripture. Therefore, they cannot discern the good and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2) Cone again:

But there is no perfect guide for discerning God’s movement in the world, Contrary to what many conservatives say, the Bible is not a blueprint on this matter. It is a valuable symbol for point to God’s revelation in Jesus, but it is not self-interpreting. We are thus place in an existential situation of freedom in which the burden is on us to make decisions without a guaranteed ethical guide.
For that reason, Black Liberation Theology doesn’t offer a saviour for sin. It doesn’t offer a sole saviour for a multitude of sins. It exchanges the power of God for Black power. It substitutes the supremacy of Christ for Black supremacy. It is a theology designed to repay evil for evil. Black Liberation Theology is simply a kind of liberal, social gospel.

Thus, in the 1997 edition of *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone wrote:

> As in 1969, I still regard Jesus Christ today as the chief focus of my perspective on God but not to the exclusion of other religious perspectives. God’s reality is not bound by one manifestation of the divine in Jesus but can be found wherever people are being empowered to fight for freedom. Life-giving power for the poor and the oppressed is the primary criterion that we must use to judge the adequacy of our theology, not abstract concepts.”

In other words, Black Liberation Theology is Marxist philosophy with heretical theology. It’s a theological framework strictly designed to accomplish a Marxist revolution for Black people, and evangelical leaders like Jemar Tisby have become sympathetic to it.

But Black Liberation Theology is one of the most destructive heresies in Black American churches today. It’s shaped the way many Black people think about God and government. It’s shaped the way many people in Black American churches perceive themselves and others. But we shouldn’t be shaped by a history of racism, we should be shaped and conformed into the image of Christ. The answer to racism isn’t Black Liberation Theology. No, the answer to racism is biblical theology that doesn’t repay evil for evil.

Black Liberation Theology is destroying many Black Americans. Instead of capitulating to its heresies by adopting a form of their social justice theology to win their approval, we need to challenge Black Liberation Theology with the true gospel of Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and was resurrected for White, Black, and all sinners.

“It is a theology designed to repay evil for evil. Black Liberation Theology is simply a kind of liberal, social gospel.”

And as Cone explains in a 1980 essay, this liberation is a religious revolution with major political implications:

> Why not think of a completely new society and begin to devise ways to realize it on earth? Perhaps what we need today is to return to that “good old-time religion” of our grandparents and combine with it a Marxist critique of society. Together black religion and Marxist philosophy may show us the way to build a completely new society. With that combination, we may be able to realize in the society the freedom of which we sing and pray for in the black church.”

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2 Jeremiah Wright, “Confusing God and Government” (Sermon delivered at Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago, 2003).


6 Jemar Tisby, “James Cone, the cross, and the lynching memorial,” *Religion News Service*, last modified April 30, 2018, https://religion-


14 Martin Luther King Jr., To Coretta Scott (1952).


17 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 14-16.


19 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 12.


21 James Cone, *The Black Church and Marxism* (Institute for Democratic Socialism, 1980).

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GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS’S Defence of Trinitarian Orthodoxy

THE EASTERN ORTHODOX TRADITION has bestowed the title “theologian” upon two people: John, the beloved apostle and evangelist, and Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth-century bishop and preacher.† John’s Gospel, Letters, and Apocalypse provide the clearest revelation of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ in the New Testament. In 451, the council of Chalcedon called Gregory “the Theologian” because of his stalwart and succinct defense of Trinitarian orthodoxy in the late fourth century. In the autumn of 379, Gregory was sent to Constantinople with a singular mission: preach the Trinity. The Arians had maintained a firm grip on the Eastern capital for decades. Gregory planted a church and started preaching. He exclaimed in one of his sermons: “O Trinity, whose worshipper and undisguised herald I have long been privileged to be!” (Or. 23.13)† He exposed the errors of the Arians, who denied the divinity of the Son, and he provided a divided church with a clear and concise confession of Trinitarian orthodoxy.

Gregory of Nazianzus can teach us to be worshippers and heralds of the Trinity. In the following article, I want to situate his teaching in its historical context and then consider three aspects of his teaching. First, he argues that holiness is a necessary prerequisite to right theology. Second, he helps us avoid heresy and error by delineating the doctrine of the Trinity within clear linguistic and conceptual boundaries. Third, he calls on us to worship and adore the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. We want to be orthodox because we want to rightly glorify God: “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is filled with His glory” (Is. 6:3).

CHURCH REVITALIZATION IN THE FOURTH CENTURY

I’m a pastor in Toronto, which used to be called the city of churches. I live and pastor in the city’s West end. Wherever you may be in the West end, you’re usually never more than five minutes from a church building. Some of these buildings have been turned into condos, some are divided up into smaller rental spaces, some are mosques or temples, some have been preserved as gathering places for Christian worship. Toronto is no longer the city of churches, but new churches are being planted here and older churches are being revitalized. Constantinople in the 370s was a city of churches, but for decades, they had been led by Arian bishops and priests. It was an Arian stronghold, supported by the emperor Valens; however, Valens’s death in August of 378 marked the end of the Arian ascendency in the Eastern Empire. When Theodosius was appointed Augustus of the East in January of 379, he immediately began enacting policies to overturn Arianism. Nicene bishops (who affirmed the creed of the Council of Nicaea in 325 and its affirmation of the divinity of the Son) recognized that Theodosius’s religious policies gave them an opportunity to revitalize Nicene churches. A council of bishops was convened in Antioch in the autumn of 379. Church revitalization in Constantinople was on the agenda and Gregory of Nazianzus was appointed to plant a church and lead a preaching campaign to defend and advance the Nicene faith.

Gregory wasn’t the obvious choice for the job. He was widely recognized as a clear thinker and communicator, but he didn’t have the best track record for enduring adversity. He was from the small town of Nazianzus in the province of Cappadocia (central Turkey). In his 20s he studied abroad in Alexandria and Athens, but returned
home at the age of 30 in 359. Shortly thereafter he was called to work alongside his father as a pastor in church of Nazianzus. He kicked against the goads of pastoral work and ran away to Pontus for monastic retreat in 362. He spent several months in Pontus, but the austerity and many discomforts of life in the monastery proved too much. He returned to Nazianzus and took up his post as a priest. In the decade that followed, Gregory moved back and forth between pastoral ministry and monastic retreat. The pastoral ideal was to combine the active and contemplative life, but Gregory vacillated. He could not find the balance between practical pastoral work and the life of prayer and contemplation.

Gregory was living in Seleucia when he received the call to Constantinople in late 379. He'd been away from Nazianzus for four years, leaving a priest named Cleodius to oversee the church in his absence. Gregory must have jumped at the chance to lead a church in Constantinople. He was aware of the emperor's theological sympathies, and how could he resist the prestige of preaching in the imperial capital? He was not warmly received by the Arian churches there, but he wasn't initially viewed as a threat. The Constantinopolitans saw him as another itinerant preacher with a funny accent from the provinces. They didn't give him much attention.

There was a small Nicene remnant in the city. Gregory describes them as “a slight trace and relic of a flock, without order or shepherds or bounds, with neither right to pasture nor the defense of a fold” (Or. 42.2). Now they had a shepherd, but they needed a fold. Gregory had a well-connected cousin in Constantinople, Theodosia. She was married to a senator, who also happened to be Constantine's grandson. She had a villa in the city, where Gregory lived and where he planted a church. He named it “Anastasia.” The church in Constantinople didn't need revitalization. It needed resurrection.

PREACHING THE TRINITY

Gregory began holding services and preaching at the Church of the Resurrection. His tone could be elitist and his style wasn't popular. He wasn't likely to win over the general populace, but that wasn't his mission. He was sent there to convince the powerful and the elite that Nicene orthodoxy had intellectual credibility. From an imperial perspective, he'd been sent there to prepare the way for Theodosius to disestablish the Arian churches. Those established churches soon recognized the political implications of Gregory's presence, which made him the object of personal hostility. Even so, he could not be deterred from attacking the Arian heresy and proclaiming Trinitarian orthodoxy.

Gregory's sermons not only exposed the deficiencies of both the Sabellian (or modalist) and Eunomian (Arian) denial of the Trinity, they also defended and explained the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Gregory's theological discourse is sometimes subtle and sometimes dense; nevertheless, he aimed for concision and clarity. In one of his sermons, he claimed to be offering “a brief synopsis of doctrine not dialectic; given not in imitation of Aristotle, but of the fisherman, not craftily, but spiritually; not as if I was in the market place, but as if I was in Church” (Or 23.12). Speculative theological discourse had divided the church in the fourth century, but a return to the simple discourse of the apostles could restore and revive the church.

Of the 45 sermons (orations) preserved in Gregory's collected works, half were preached during his brief ministry in Constantinople. Five of these sermons stand out: the Five Theological Orations (Orations 27-31), which he delivered in the late summer of 380. The theological orations have a logical unity and structure, which is triadic. Orations 27 and 28 consider the nature and scope of theology and the character and qualifications of the theologian. Orations 29 and 30 consider the relationship of the Father and the Son. Oration 31 considers the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

John McGuckin calls Gregory's theological orations “the quintessence of his theological work, and the most important texts in Christian history for establishing the cardinal doctrine of the Trinity.” They were received by the ancient church as “the ultimate statement of Trinitarian
orthodoxy” and employed as “the chief Trinitarian curriculum” in both the Eastern and Western churches. We would do well to enroll in this curriculum. By way of invitation, I want to highlight three aspects of Gregory’s teaching: (1) his call to holiness; (2) his concise articulation of Trinitarian doctrine; and (3) his call to worship and adore the Trinity.

SANCTIFIED VISION

Gregory’s first theological oration is addressed “to those whose cleverness is in words” (Or 27.1). He is specifically targeting the Arians, who trafficked in theological limericks and one-liners, but he is also speaking to a broader audience. In his view, too many people too quickly engage in theological discussion and debate, which can reduce theology to a contest of catchphrases and clever banter. This kind of thing is displayed online, where amateur theologians spar on Twitter, Facebook, and blogs.

Gregory warns that theological discussion is not for everyone, nor is it for any and every occasion or audience (Or 27.3-6). It requires discretion, restraint, maturity, and above all, sanctity. That is the thesis of his sermon: only holy people can discern and discuss holy things. Our Lord Himself taught us, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8) and “if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). Obedience precedes understanding and purity of heart gives us eyes to contemplate God. Gregory exhorts us “to take a look at ourselves and to smooth the theologian in us, like statue, into beauty” (Or 27.7). His point is not simply that we must strive for a unity and integrity of doctrine and life, but that our perception of God depends upon our progress in sanctification. In another sermon, Gregory exhorts us:

If you trust me, then – and I am no rash theologian! – grasp what you can, and pray to grasp the rest. Love what already abides within you, and let the rest await you in the treasury above. Approach it by the way you live: what is pure can only be acquired through purification. Do you want to become a theologian someday, to be worthy of the divinity? Keep the commandments, make your way forward through observing the precepts: for the practical life (praxis) is the launching-pad for contemplation (theoria). (Or 20.12)

Only by taking the long and narrow path of obedience and prayer do we come to a greater knowledge of God.

Finally, Gregory argues that the task of theology is primarily an exercise of faith, rather than reason:

For when we abandon faith to take the power of reason as our shield, when we use philosophical enquiry to destroy the credibility of the Spirit, then reason gives way in the face of the vastness of the realities. Give way it must, set going, as it is, by the frail organ of human understanding. What happens then? The frailty of our reasoning looks like a frailty in our creed. Thus it is that, as Paul too judges, smartness of argument is revealed as a nullifying of the Cross. Faith, in fact, is what gives fullness to our reasoning. (Or 29.21)

Here Gregory anticipates Augustine’s declaration, “believe that you may understand” (Jo. ev. tr. 29.6) and Anselm’s definition of theology: faith seeking understanding.

TAKING OUR STAND WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF REVERENCE

Having considered the spiritual character and life of the theologian in Oration 27, Gregory turns his attention to nature of theology Oration 28 and the doctrine of God in Oration 31. His primary opponents throughout these orations are the Arians, and more specifically, the Eunomians. The Eunomians were named after Eunomius of Cyzicus, an Arian bishop who represented the extreme wing of the Arian party. Numerous Church Fathers wrote extensive treatises entitled Contra Eunomium. He struck a Nicene nerve.
Arius had argued that divinity, by definition, was unbegotten (agennētōs) and therefore without beginning (anarchos). Since the Son was begotten, he could not be divine and therefore had a beginning. “There once was a time when he was not” was a popular Arian catchphrase. Eunomius clarified and advanced Arius’s teaching. He concludes his short apologetic book with this summary statement: “God is one, both Unbegotten (agennētōs) and without beginning (anarchos), admitting of no being prior to Himself (for nothing can exist prior to the Unbegotten), nor with Himself (for the Unbegotten is one and only He is God), nor in Himself (for He is simple and uncompounded)” (Lib. Apol. 28). God is one and simple and alone. His essence or being is unbegotten and without beginning.

The being of God is unbegotten and singular. For this reason, the Son cannot be of the same substance or being (homoousios) as the Father:

He did not, however, share out anything of His own substance with the one begotten (for God is immortal, undivided, and indivisible, and what is immortal cannot share out its own essence (ousia)), nor did He establish any other like Himself (for only He is unbegotten, and nothing can be begotten which is like the unbegotten essence (ousia)), nor, indeed, did He make use of His own essence in begetting, but of His will only, or beget anything like His own essence, but rather, what He willed, such He begot. (Lib. Apol. 28)

For Eunomius, the terms unbegotten and begotten are definitive of essence or being (ousia). To comprehend the term unbegotten is to comprehend God’s very being. Because these terms are definitive of being, the Father and Son have nothing in common, for the Father is unbegotten and the Son is begotten. Because “unbegotteness” is definitive of divine being, the Son is not divine, because He is “begotten.”

Gregory and the Nicene tradition started from a different premise: biblical revelation. The starting point is Scripture, not certain theological or philosophical terminology. Scripture speaks of the Son and the Spirit in the same way it speaks of God (e.g. John 1:1; 2 Cor. 3:18, etc.). Theological terminology is employed to articulate and explain God’s self-disclosure in Scripture.

For Gregory, the primary theological terminology employed is itself biblical: “we limit ourselves to Christian terms and speak of ‘the unbegotten’ (agennētōs), ‘the begotten’ (gennētōs) and (as God the Word does in one passage) ‘the one who proceeds from the Father’ (ekporeuomenos) (Or. 29.2).” Gregory argues that Scripture sets a limit (horos) on Trinitarian speculation. This does mean we are strictly limited to biblical vocabulary. Gregory gladly uses the term homoousios (same being or consubstantial). In fact, he is the first to say that not only the Son but the Spirit also is homoousios or consubstantial with the Father (Or. 31.8). Gregory warns, however, that we cannot say more about God than Scripture reveals. There is a biblical boundary (horos) for theological discourse.

To go beyond the boundary of biblical revelation is hubris. This is where the Eunomians erred. They claimed to give an account of God’s being that went beyond the boundary of biblical revelation. They claimed their theological terminology described God’s very being. To comprehend their terminology was to comprehend God Himself. Gregory reminds us that no one in Scripture ever makes such a claim. Scripture bears witness to the experience of men like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Paul, and John, who ascended the mountain and even entered heaven itself. What did they see? Did they comprehend God Himself? No, Gregory reminds us, “none saw, none told, of God’s nature (phusis)” (Or. 28.19). Thus, Gregory concludes, “No one has yet discovered or ever shall discover what God is in His nature (phusis) and essence (ousia)” (Or. 28.17).

Gregory is content with the biblical testimony of God’s self-disclosure: “For me it is enough to hear that there is a Son, and that He is from the Father, and that the one is Father and the other is Son. I do not trouble myself beyond this, lest I become just like those voices that go completely hoarse from shouting too loudly, or the eye that

“Only by taking the long and narrow path of obedience and prayer do we come to a greater knowledge of God.”
strains towards the rays of the sun.” (Or. 20.10)\textsuperscript{24}

The names Father, Son, and Spirit are tied to their relationship with one another and the manner in which the Son and the Spirit have their being from the Father:

The very facts of not being begotten, of being begotten and of proceeding, give them whatever names are applied to them – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit respectively. The aim is to safeguard the distinctness of the three hypostases within the single nature and quality of the Godhead. The Son is not the Father; there is one Father, yet He is whatever the Father is. The Spirit is not Son because He from God; there is one Only-begotten. Yet whatever the Son is, He is. The three are one in their Godhead and the one is three in properties (\textit{idiotēs}). (Or. 31.9)\textsuperscript{25}

The Son and Spirit are what the Father is (i.e., \textit{ho-moonouis}), because they are from the Father. The unity and oneness of the Godhead is anchored in the Father's being, which He shares with the Son and the Spirit: “the three are one in their Godhead.” Scripture reveals that the Son is “begotten from the Father” (John 1:14, 18) and the Spirit “proceeds from the Father” (John 15.26). The Son is the Son because He is begotten from the Father. The Father is the Father because He has begotten the Son. The Spirit is the Spirit because He proceeds from the Father. The terms “unbegotten” (\textit{agennētos}), “begotten” (\textit{gennētos}), and “procession” (\textit{ekporeutos}) are not definitive of being (\textit{ousia}); rather, they signify three properties (\textit{idiotēs}), which distinguish the three persons (\textit{hypostases}) of the Father, Son, and Spirit and their relationships with one another: “the one is three in properties.” In Gregory's poetic expression of the tri-unity of God:

\begin{quote}
In threefold lights the one nature is established,
not a numberless unity, since it subsists in three excellencies,
nor a Triad worshipped severally, since the nature is inseparable.
\end{quote}

In the Godhead is the unity, but they whose Godhead it is are three in number. (Poem 1.1.3, 71-74).\textsuperscript{26}

To say that the Son and Spirit have their being from the Father does not mean they have their being after the Father. There is an order, but not a sequence in time. Gregory uses three negative adverbs to qualify the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession: \textit{apathōs} (without suffering or change), \textit{achronōs} (timelessly), \textit{asōmatōs} (incorporeally) (Or. 29.2).\textsuperscript{27} In other words, there is no comparison or analogy between human begetting and the Father's begetting. Gregory warns against analogies for the Trinity in general: “There is one God, one supreme nature, where can I find analogy to show you? Are you looking for one from your environment here in this world?” (Or. 31.10)\textsuperscript{28} Analogies for the Trinity will only reduce and obscure our understanding. We cannot look to the world around us to understand the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession. The private adverbs (\textit{apathōs}, \textit{achronōs}, \textit{asōmatōs}) serve as a linguistic and conceptual boundary.

How then should we understand the Son’s generation and the Spirit's procession? First, Gregory asks, “How, then, was [the Son] begotten?” His answer:

God's begetting ought to have the tribute of our silence. The important point is for you to learn that He has been begotten. As to the way it happens, we shall not concede that even the angels, much less you, know that. Shall I tell you the way? It is a way known only to the begetting Father and the begotten Son. (Or. 29.8)\textsuperscript{29}

Second, he asks, “What, then, is ‘proceeding’?” His answer: “You explain the unbegottenness of the Father and I will give you a physiological account of the Son's begetting and the Spirit's proceeding – and let us go mad the pair of us for prying into God's secrets (\textit{mystēria})” (Or. 31.8).\textsuperscript{30} Scripture reveals that the Son is begotten from the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. Scripture does not explain how the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds. Such knowledge belongs to God and we dare not pry into such a divine mystery.
"Gregory decisively exposed the error of Apollinarianism with his simple dictum, “what He has not assumed He has not healed.”... his response laid the theological groundwork for the construction of orthodox Christology...

Gregory here positions orthodoxy between the opposite errors of Sabellianism and Arianism. Sabellius was concerned that speaking of three persons implied polytheism and so denied that there are three persons in the Godhead. This meant blending or confusing the Father, Son, and Spirit. Arianism denied the divinity of Son and the Spirit, making the Father, Son, and Spirit three alien and unrelated things. Orthodoxy is a straight plant, neither bent to one side or the other: "we adore the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, dividing their individualities but uniting their Godhead...and so we take our position within the bounds of reverence."

Gregory also kept the church within the bounds of reverence by guiding it between two Christological errors. The boundaries of Christological orthodoxy would be clearly marked out in 451 by the Definition (horos) of Chalcedon, which confessed the union of two natures (phusis), human and divine, in the one person of Christ, who is God the Son. Gregory anticipated this Christological definition by charting a straight and narrow way between the errors of Apollinarius of Laodicea (a representative of the Alexandrian tradition) and Diodore of Tarsus (a representative of the Antiochene tradition). According to Apollinarius, in the Incarnation, the Son occupies the rational soul of Jesus of Nazareth. The Word assumed human flesh, but not a human mind. According to Diodore, God the Son joined Himself to Jesus of Nazareth. The Incarnation is a union of two persons, the Son of God and the Son of Man.

Anyone who has put his trust in Him as a man without a human mind, must be mindless himself, and quite unworthy of salvation. For what He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half an Adam had fallen then that which Christ assumes and heals might only be half as well; but if the whole of Adam’s nature fell then it must be united to the whole nature of the Begotten One, and so be saved as a whole. (Letter 101.5)"
yet no stranger, since from my own kind came this immortal, being made man by a virgin mother, so that the whole of Him might save the whole of me.

For it was, again, the total Adam who fell, through that illicit taste.

Therefore, humanly, and not after human custom,
in the hallowed womb of a maid inviolate

He took flesh (amazing! to washed-out minds incredible!)

and came, both God and man, two natures gathered into one:

one hidden, the other open to mankind;

of these, the one is God, the latter was created later with us. (Poem 1.1.9, 41-50)³⁴

"THE SUM OF IT IS THIS:
WORSHIP THE TRINITY"

Gregory was concerned that we “believe aright” (orthos) (Letter 101.5). To believe aright is to be orthodox, but orthodoxy cannot be reduced to right doctrine. Orthodoxy is right worship. Gregory puts it succinctly: “The sum of the matter is this: worship the Trinity” (Poem 1.1.10, 74).³⁵ Right theology rightly orients and defines our worship. It places us “within the bounds of reverence” (en horois tes theosebeias) (Or. 20.5).

While Gregory’s Five Theological Orations are celebrated for their doctrinal exposition, the conclusion of the fifth oration sets his theological discourse in its proper liturgical context:

So, in the end…I resolved to keep close to the more truly religious view and rest content with some few words, taking the Spirit as my guide and, in His company and in partnership with Him, safeguarding to the end the genuine illumination I had received from Him, as I strike out a path through this world. To the best of my powers I will persuade all men to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the single Godhead and power, because to Him belong all glory, honor, and might for ever and ever. Amen. (Or. 31.33)³⁶

Gregory did not go to Constantinople as theological orator, charged with imposing Nicene orthodoxy. He went as a pastor, to serve a flock that was “without order or shepherds or bounds, with neither right to pasture nor the defense of a fold” (Or. 42.2).³⁷ He led that flock into the pastures of orthodoxy and the bounds of reverence. The Church of the Resurrection was a church that worshipped the Trinity. May we say with Gregory, “To the best of my powers I will persuade all men to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the single Godhead.” I conclude this article with a final word of encouragement and exhortation from Gregory the Theologian:

But when we “guard our soul with all vigilance” (Prov. 4:23) and “build upward paths in the heart” (Ps. 83:6), “breaking up our fallow ground anew” (Jer. 4:3) and “sowing the seeds of righteousness” (Hos. 10:12) as Solomon and David and Jeremiah advise us to do, and so enkindle within ourselves the light of knowledge – at that point, let us begin to utter God’s wisdom, which is hidden in Mystery, and let us shine forth this light on others. Until then, however, let us first purify ourselves, and be initiated into the Word…receiving the Word when He comes – not only receiving Him, in fact, but holding on to Him and revealing Him to others. (Or 39.10)³⁸

¹ It’s a triumvirate if we include Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022).
³ The following historical narrative is drawn from John McGuckin, St Gregory of Nazianzus: An
4 McGuckin, St Gregory of Nazianzus, 240-41.
6 McGuckin, St Gregory of Nazianzus, 241.
7 Trans. McGuckin, St Gregory of Nazianzus, 263.
9 McGuckin, St Gregory of Nazianzus, 264.
10 McGuckin, St Gregory of Nazianzus, 277.
12 On the theme of purification in Gregory’s writings, see Christopher A. Beeley, Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 65-90 and Brian J. Matz, Gregory of Nazianzus (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 37-52.
13 Trans. Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus, 104; Greek text: SC 270, 80, 82.
14 Trans. Wickham, God and Christ, 88-89.
15 crede ut intellegas (PL 35, 1630).
16 fides quaerens intellectum
17 Basil the Great, Diodore of Tarsus, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Theodoret of Cyrus all wrote Contra Eunomium.
19 Greek text and trans. Vaggione, Eunomius: The Extant Works, 74, 75.
20 Greek text and trans. Vaggione, Eunomius: The Extant Works, 74, 75.
22 Trans. Wickham, On God and Christ, 52; Greek text: SC 250, 140.
23 Trans. Wickham, On God and Christ, 49; Greek text: SC 250, 134.
24 Trans. Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus, 103-104.
25 Trans. Wickham, On God and Christ, 123 (slightly modified); Greek text: SC 250, 292.
27 SC 250, 180.
29 Trans. Wickham, On God and Christ, 74.
30 Trans. Wickham, On God and Christ, 122 (slightly modified); Greek text: SC 250, 290.
31 Trans. Daley, Gregory of Nazianzus, 100-101; Greek text: SC 270, 68.
33 Trans. John McGuckin, Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy (Crestwood NY: SVS Press, 2004), 393. Cf. Poem 1.1.10, lines 23-24, 35-36: “He is wholly God and man, saving me wholly / the Son both known by mind and seen by sight…. But you have the nerve to speak of a semi-human / for what has not been assumed does not get saved” (trans. Gilbert, On God and Man, 82).
34 Trans. Gilbert, On God and Man, 72-73.
36 Trans. Wickham, On God and Christ, 143.
The Message of Jesus Christ is the announcement of hope for an otherwise hopeless world. Corrupted by the sin of our first father Adam, we are born in cosmic treason against our Creator and stand under His just condemnation. Not only does every man languish in sin, but he staggers toward an everlasting inferno because of his sin. The earth that God gave us groans under our corruption. God, in Jesus Christ, announces a promise of hope for our damned race and groaning world. At the heart of the promise is the good news of the forgiveness of sins. At the heart of the good news of the forgiveness of sins is the cross. And at the heart of the cross is Christ's penal substitutionary atonement. So, at the heart of the heart of the heart of our only hope in an otherwise damned existence is the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ.

Each element of this doctrine is critical: Christ's death was penal in that His death was the penalty for sinners. His death was substitutionary in that He died in the place sinners. J. I. Packer offers a definition:

The notion which the phrase 'penal substitution' expresses is that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption, and glory.¹

John Bunyan (1628–1688) states, “Man should have been pierced with the spear of God’s wrath; but, to prevent that, Jesus was pierced both by God and men. Man should have been rejected of God and angels; but, to prevent that, Jesus was forsaken of God, and denied, hated, and rejected of men.”² Insisting on penal substitution is insisting that Christ died for sinners. To deny it is to deny Christianity. It is to bereave the world of love and plunder Christ of His glory. In what follows I formulate penal substitution from the Scriptures, and then I explain it within the context of Christian history.

The Biblical Roots

After the Fall, God cast man from the paradise of Eden, but moved quickly to promise salvation. He assured the serpent that he would be destroyed (Gen. 3:15), and as the story of Scripture progresses that promise is fulfilled in the penal substitution of Eve's offspring, the Lord Jesus.

The details of that promise become clearer as Scripture progresses, and Scripture offers a major clarification to Abram in Genesis 15. God first promised descendants and land to Abram in Genesis 12:1–3. By Genesis 15, years had gone by, and at about 75 years of age Abram had neither. To validate the strength of the original promise, God led Abram through a covenant ceremony. God commanded Abram to fetch "a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon" (Gen. 15:9). Then Abram cut the animals in half so that there was a row between each half (Gen. 15:10). That cutting followed the format of an Ancient Near Eastern covenant ceremony. When a powerful king cut a covenant with a weaker king, they would each pass through the cut animal halves (Jer. 34:18-19). The stronger king covenanted to protect and provide for the weaker king. The weaker king promised faithfulness to the stronger king. By passing through the animals each king indicated that the king who fails to uphold covenant will be butchered like the animals. The penalty for covenant violation was a bloody death.³
In this case, God put Abram into a deep sleep so that only God could pass through. God restated His promise to Abram, and then “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces” (Gen. 15:17). The smoking fire pot and the flaming torch represented the presence of God (cf. Ex. 13:21; 19:18; 20:18). In other words, God passed through the butchered carcasses on His own behalf and on Abram's behalf. In the ceremony, God symbolically promised that if God failed to keep covenant God would be butchered. And, God also promised that if Abram failed to keep covenant God would suffer as the penal substitute for Abram's failure. God walked through the carcasses on His own behalf, and God walked through the carcasses as Abram's substitute. The New Testament teaches that Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, are heirs to God's promise to Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:23–29). Abram looked forward to that penal substitute by way of the covenant ceremony; we look back to the penal substitute in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God became flesh and shed His blood for our sins. We are covenant breakers, and Immanuel died like an animal to uphold the covenant. He is our penal substitute, and consequently the covenant is upheld.

Proclaiming the promise of penal substitution in the cutting of the covenant, God then detailed its necessity at Sinai. The law reveals the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of man. In Exodus 32, Moses returned from Sinai where he received the law to find that the people had “broken loose” (Ex. 32:25) in idolatrous reveling. In response Moses had the Levites execute 3,000 men in one day. God himself, then sent a plague to ravage the camp in an act of divine wrath. Israel sinned and received God’s wrath. The law reveals that God’s wrath is God’s predictable response to sin. On another occasion, the sons of Aaron “offered unauthorized fire” (Lev. 10:1) in a worship ceremony. That ended when the fire of Jehovah killed them for their transgression. Immediately, Moses warned Aaron and Eleazar to act properly in their response, lest God’s anger also break out against them. The law is so good that lawbreakers must die. A man who violated the Sabbath laws by picking up sticks serves as one more example of the goodness of the law and the sinfulness of sin. In Numbers 15, he was taken into custody, and God had the congregation stone him to death (Num. 15:36). With those three instances (among many others)—the reveling idolaters, the sons of Aaron who offered strange fire, and the Sabbath breaker—we learn quickly that God is good and men must die for being sinful. For sinful men to enjoy fellowship with a holy God, the relationship must be reconciled. In the providence of God’s good law, reconciliation between God and man can occur only by penal substitutionary atonement.

The law points to God’s righteousness and man’s sinfulness, and the sacrificial system explains that the two are reconciled by atonement. The word, “atonement,” is “extensively used in Leviticus” to outline the means by which the righteous Jehovah can dwell with His sinful people. In Leviticus atonement is penal and substitutionary. Chapter 16, at the heart of Leviticus, describes the Day of Atonement: The priest “shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly” (Lev. 16:33). The day was necessary so “atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins” (Lev. 16:34). Animal sacrifices served as a temporary substitute for the penalty of the people. God had the priest sacrifice a bull to make “atonement for himself and his house” (Lev. 16:11). The priest was to kill a goat and sprinkle its blood inside the veil of the tabernacle to “make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleanness of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins” (Lev. 16:16). With the blood of the bull and the goat he was to make atonement for the altar (Lev. 16:18). He was to “lay both his hand on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins” (Lev. 16:21). He placed their sins upon its head, and then he sent the live goat into the wilderness “to bear all their iniquities on itself” (Lev. 16:21, 22). After a ceremonial washing, he was to offer a burnt offering “to make atonement for himself and for the people” (Lev. 16:24). Then, “the bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the
Holy Place, shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned up with fire” (Lev. 16:27). Thus, with the deadly consequence of sin in the background, the animal sacrifices are penal substitutes that atone for the sins of Israel, reconciling God and sinners. Of the sacrifices, God says, “I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls” (Lev. 17:11). The penal substitutionary sacrifices in Leviticus point forward to “Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice as the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement rituals.”

While Leviticus describes the provision of penal substitution, Isaiah 53 portrays an innocent servant afflicted by God as a penal substitute for the salvation of His people. The servant “had done no violence, and there was not deceit in His mouth” (Isa. 53:9). He was passively “wounded” and “crushed” by “chastisement” and “stripes,” and the suffering was orchestrated by “the LORD” who “laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5, 6). The purpose of Jehovah’s plan is penal substitution which, as Matthew Henry (1662–1714) explains, “is asserted here plainly and fully, and in a very great variety of emphatical expressions.” He “has borne our griefs,” “carried our sorrows,” “was wounded for our transgression,” and “crushed for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:4, 5). His “soul makes an offering for guilt” (Isa. 53:10). He will “make many to be counted righteous” (Isa. 53:11). “He shall bear their iniquities,” and “He bore the sins of many” (Isa. 53:11, 12). The servant is ultimately revealed to be Jesus Christ who suffered for our sins as a penal substitute (Acts 8:29–35).

Moving on to an important New Testament passage on penal substitution, Paul declares that Jesus Christ was “put forward” by God “as a propitiation” (Rom. 3:25). Propitiation means to satisfy God’s wrath and turn it away. It translates the Greek word Ἰλαστήριον (hilasterion), and as such serves as a clear statement of penal substitution. Those who deny penal substitution are quick to propose alternative translations of Ἰλαστήριον. Redefine it as they may, the first century use of the term demonstrates that propitiation is the concept that Ἰλαστήριον captures. In non-biblical Greek, “There is considerable agreement that this word-group denotes ‘propitiation,’ ‘appeasement,’ etc., in pagan usage,” and, “when a first-century Greek heard the words of this group, there would be aroused in his mind thoughts of propitiation.”

The word in question meant “propitiation” at the time of Paul’s writing, and the context of Romans 3:25 makes that meaning obvious. All that precedes verse 25 proclaims that all men, Jew and Gentile, stand condemned under God’s just wrath. Verse 25 explains that Christ, the propitiation, satisfied that wrath. If God is rightly angry with all men, what will turn His anger away? The answer is propitiation. “By the blood of Christ a propitiation is effected so that those who are of faith no longer need fear the wrath.”

The context leading up to verse 25 points to propitiation, and so does what follows. The propitiation was “to show God’s righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins” (Rom. 3:25). How can God be righteous in not punishing former sins? He was waiting to punish them in Jesus Christ, the propitiation. Further, “It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). How can God be just in justifying sinners right now? Because He punished sin in Jesus Christ. The context before and after verse 25, along with the extra-biblical data, indicates that “propitiation” is the correct translation of Ἰλαστήριον. At the cross, God offers grace to sinners by pouring His anger upon their penal substitute, who is Jesus Christ, the propitiation for our sins. So pivotal is this understanding that J. I. Packer observes, “a gospel without propitiation as its heart is another gospel than that which Paul preached.”

**THE HISTORICAL RECORD**

Having established the teaching of penal substitution from Scripture, it is also important to note that Christian theologians have articulated this doctrine since earliest times. It was assumed. Clement of Rome (35–99 AD), for example,
wrote, “In love the Master received us; because of the love He had towards us, our Lord Jesus Christ gave His blood for us in accord with the will of God: His flesh for the sake of our flesh, His life for our lives.”

Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) opened “a new era in the history of this doctrine.” He explained that atonement could not occur unless God’s honour was upheld. Anselm believed God could not forgive sins unless the satisfaction for sin was offered, thus rendering satisfaction for sin prerequisite to forgiveness of sin. Man, sinful as he is, is incapable of providing this satisfaction, and so it “cannot come about unless there should be someone who would make payment to God greater than everything that exists apart from God.” It “is necessary that a God-man should pay it.” Anselm grounds the necessity of the atonement in the character of God. Without the sacrifice of Christ, God’s honour could not be satisfied.

The Protestant Reformers improved upon Anselm’s teaching. They emphasized the guilt of sin more than its dishonour and the penal sacrifice of Christ more than its payment of honour. Calvin (1509–1564) even asserts that the reference to Christ’s descent to hell in the Apostle’s Creed is a reference to His penal substitution. He does not mean that Christ went to hell, but rather that Christ suffered the equivalent of hell in His death:

Hence there is nothing strange in its being said that He descended to hell, seeing He endured the death which is inflicted on the wicked by an angry God…. But after explaining what Christ endured in the sight of man, the creed appropriately adds the invisible and incomprehensible judgment which He endured before God, to teach us…that He bore in His soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man.

OPPOSITION TO ORTHODOXY

While the church has known defenders of penal substitution, there have also been those throughout history who oppose this core doctrine, typically offering alternative explanations of the atonement which they call “atonement...
“Atonement theories’ often wrongfully substitute the benefits of the atonement for actual definitions of atonement.”

The penal substitutionary theory teaches that God paid a ransom to Satan so that people could be set free from Satan’s enslavement. Origen (184–253) developed it. Advocates rely largely on 1 Corinthians 6:20 which states that we are bought with a price. They assume that the payment went to Satan. The ransom theory is found nowhere in Scripture. Yes, the world has been deceived by Satan. Yes, Christ offered Himself as a ransom for sinners. But to say that Christ was paid to Satan or to say that Christ did not propitiate God is to contradict Scripture. It neglects the just demands of God’s holiness, and it presents Satan as too powerful. Instead of being offered as a ransom to Satan, Jesus was offered by God to God. “God in saving us saves us from Himself.”

The example theory of the atonement was popularized by the Socinians, a heretical movement of the sixteenth century. Denying that Christ died to pay for our sins, proponents of this theory argue that Jesus died to provide an example for humans to follow. Christ trusted God wholly even unto death, and we should follow His example. Jesus’ death teaches us to follow God when it is very difficult. Proponents rely on 1 Peter 2:21 and 1 John 2:6 to make their case. Now of course, Christ is an example. His obedience unto death motivates us towards obedience. Nonetheless, this theory negates the guilt of our sin, and it also negates the justice of God. Christ obeyed God to the point of death because God loves His people and offered His Son in their place. To misunderstand this offering is to miss the full force of Christ’s example.

The moral-influence theory of the atonement teaches that Christ died to display God’s love. Christ’s loving death should create within our hearts an openness to God. It helps people become comfortable with God. Peter Abelard (1079–1142) first developed it, but it was not widely known until Horace Bushnell (1802–1876) and Hastings Rashdall (1858–1924) propagated it. This theory puts a strong emphasis on God’s love at the expense of God’s holiness and righteousness. In emphasizing man’s discomfort with God, they neglect to mention that God’s righteous hostility towards mankind must be quelled. Man is uncomfortable with God because man is a rebel against God. So yes, the cross does demonstrate God’s love and does woo us Godward. But to miss that Christ died in the stead of lawless rebels is to miss the essence of God’s love.

The governmental theory of the atonement presents Christ’s death as a deterrent from sin. Advocates argue that God has a right to punish sin, but He is not required to do so. In the best interest of humanity Christ died to demonstrate the wickedness of sin. Theoretically, when people understand the terror of Christ’s death they should be moved away from their sins to God. God forgives those who turn from sin, but Christ’s death is not the basis of that forgiveness. God forgives simply because He can. Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) developed this theory. Christ does serve as an example of God’s judgment towards sinners because He received God’s judgment towards sinners, although He Himself had no sin. That is not primarily because God can punish people, which He certainly can and will, but because God must punish people. The governmental theory presents God’s justice as arbitrary, not fixed. To miss Christ’s payment for sin is to miss the full terror of His death and the love of His offering.

The Christus victor theory of the atonement presents Christ’s death and resurrection as a triumph over evil powers. Gustave Aulén (1879–1977) popularized it. He claims there is almost a break between the Old and New testaments. While the concept of justice might be central to the Old Testament, God breaks through that concept in the New by divine love. This love conquers evil, but it is not grounded in the justice of God. It relies heavily on New Testament passages about Christ’s conquest (Eph. 3:8-10; Col. 2:15). Certainly, Christ does conquer evil. The devil is the accuser (Rev. 12:10), and his leverage over sinners includes an appeal to God’s justice. Christ’s penal substitutionary atonement satisfies God’s justice and removes guilt; it makes Satan’s accusations impotent because justice was satisfied on the cross. Even the
final victory of Jesus Christ is grounded in His just judgments (Rev. 12:1-2). So, yes, Christ's cross and resurrection guarantee Christ's victory, but that's only because that victory is grounded in His penal substitutionary atonement.30

These alternative theories mistake misconstrued benefits of the atonement for a definition of the atonement. Declaring one aspect of the atonement to be the one theory of the atonement is like saying a rainbow is purple, but not blue, not orange, not green. When we understand that penal substitution is the center of the atonement, the prism from which all colours flow, we see the full spectrum of beauty in God’s plan. It’s like seeing the whole rainbow of colour and how each colour relates to the others. Penal substitutionary atonement captures the entirety of God’s character in one event. Denying it is deadly.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, penal substitution divided theological liberals from evangelicals, with liberals attacking it and evangelicals defending it.31 The list of academics who still deny Christ’s penal substitution is lengthy, but I offer the names of some pastors who have popularized those denials more recently. Brian Zahnd, an American pastor, has characterized the concept of penal substitution as the “appeasement of a monster god through barbaric child sacrifice.”32 American pastor Gregory Boyd, has also made arguments against it.33 Bruxy Cavey, popular Canadian pastor of multi-site church The Meeting House based out of Oakville, Ontario, has called penal substitutionary atonement “scripturally nebulous,” a “novel way of thinking,” “the wrong theory” of the atonement, and he’s said he’d “love to convert everyone away from penal substitutionary atonement.”34

These opponents do not merely attack a point of doctrine. They rip the soul out of the gospel and mercilessly conceal God’s love from a world that needs it. J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937), who sounded an early alarm against liberal assaults on the atonement, understands how personal this is: “It never seems to occur to modern liberals that in deriding the Christian doctrine of the Cross, they are trampling on human hearts.”35 Christ died in our place, and therefore we sleep well at night with clean consciences. He died for us, and accordingly we endure suffering with hope in a heavenly city. We offer the love of God, in Christ’s penal substitutionary death, to a world of hate. Ultimately, it moves our hearts to the joyful worship of our Triune God. Charles Wesley (1708–1788), in his hymn “And Can it Be?” captured the wonder and praise that Christians have always had over Christ’s substitution:

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain-
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Christ died for us. We are saved. Praise Him.


12 Athanasius, as cited in Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach, 170.


14 Ambrose of Milan, as cited in Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced*, 175.


18 Anselm, as cited in Allison, *Historical Theology*, 396.


24 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923), 117.


27 Grudem, Systematic, 581–582.

28 Grudem, Systematic, 581.

29 Grudem, Systematic, 582.

30 Jeffrey, Ovey, and Sach, *Pierced*, 139-142.

31 Machen, 117–156.


35 Machen, *Christianity*, 120–121.
THERE ARE BOOKS THAT will inspire and motivate us, there are others that will convict us, and many that will entertain, but there are some books that help to shape our thinking. These are books that we come back to several times and put in other people’s hands because they help solidify our understanding about something important. John Gresham Machen’s book Christianity & Liberalism is one such book for me.

Theological differences are an unavoidable part of the Christian life. God has revealed himself to us in his Word, but how we understand that Word, interpret it, and apply it to a changing cultural landscape is what creates academic debates, denominational segregation, church splits and even close relational conflict.

What Machen helped me to understand is that there comes a point where a different interpretation of historic Christianity falls right out of orthodoxy, and two sides are no longer debating the finer points of the same system, but are arguing for different religions altogether.

The setting for J. Gresham Machen’s classic book Christianity & Liberalism is 1923 America. After World War I, liberalism was on the rise in many American seminaries, including Princeton Theological Seminary where Machen was a New Testament scholar. Machen rightly identified the rise of modernist, or liberal theology, as the greatest threat to orthodox protestant Christianity. Many of Machen’s post-war works were academic critiques of liberal theology, and his theological engagement eventually led him to found Westminster Theological Seminary.

Machen would later describe the central thesis of Christianity & Liberalism in a letter to British Weekly as “to show that the liberal attempt at reconciling Christianity with modern science has really relinquished everything distinctive of Christianity, so that what remains is in essentials only that same indefinite type of religious aspiration which was in the world before Christianity came upon the scene.”

In other words, the liberalism of Machen’s day – in an attempt to make Christianity palatable to a society increasingly influenced by materialism and scientism – surrendered all the fundamental tenets of the faith. Liberal Christianity, Machen argues, is not a form of Christianity, but a different religion altogether.

This is a serious charge, but I think Machen is right. He sees liberalism as an enemy so evil and threatening that he states, “If a condition could be conceived in which all the preaching of the Church should be controlled by the liberalism which in many quarters has already become preponderant, then, we believe, Christianity would at last have perished from the earth and the gospel would have sounded forth for the last time.”

The book is relatively short and a pretty quick read, but as you read you will find so much of it quotable, re-readable, and worth chewing on. Machen divides the book up into seven chapters, the last five of which are titled: God and Man; The Bible; Christ; Salvation; and The Church. In each of these chapters Machen meticulously proves that the liberal understanding of each subject is so far removed from traditional Christianity that the two cannot be reconciled.

In his chapter on God and Man, for example, he states:

The liberal conception of God differs even
more fundamentally from the Christian view than in the different circle of ideas connected with the terminology of fatherhood. The truth is that liberalism has lost sight of the very center and core of the Christian teaching. In the Christian view of God as set forth in the Bible, there are many elements. But one attribute of God is absolutely fundamental in the Bible; one attribute is absolutely necessary in order to render intelligible all the rest. That attribute is the awful transcendence of God. From beginning to end the Bible is concerned to set forth the awful gulf that separates the creature from the Creator… In modern liberalism, on the other hand, this sharp distinction between God and the world is broken down… the gospel story of the Incarnation, according to modern liberalism, is sometimes thought of as a symbol of the great truth that man at his best is one with God.

I am quite sure that as you read the book, especially chapter four on the Bible and chapter six on Salvation, you will see Machen deconstruct and reject many arguments and beliefs still held in liberal denominations, and some which have begun to creep into historically conservative denominations as well. What I believe you will see as you read is that Machen rightly points out not only the underlying biblical principle land plain teaching being rejected by these liberal interpretations, but also, almost prophetically, he warns of the consequences should these lies take root.

Unfortunately, it seems that Machen’s warnings fell on mostly deaf ears. Liberalism has swallowed many Canadian Christian denominations and threatens many more. But not all is lost, as Machen himself states:

If the Word of God be heeded, the Christian battle will be fought both with love and with faithfulness. Party passions and personal animosities will be put away, but on the other hand, even angels from heaven will be rejected if they preach a gospel different from the blessed gospel of the Cross. Every man must decide upon which side he will stand. God grant that we may decide aright!

It has been nearly a century since this book was first published, and those paying attention have seen the same cycle repeating itself. Whenever the culture goes through a major shift on a particular issue, another key doctrine of orthodox Christianity is swallowed up by liberalism. When Darwinism swept through western universities, to make Christianity palatable, Christians began to reimagine the creation narrative. When feminism ramped up into its second wave most denominations abandoned a complementarian view of church leadership. As LGBT activists push their cultural agenda, we now have many churches reinterpreting God’s law and explaining away plain commands.

Perhaps as God providentially revives interest in and fervor for classic reformed works such as Christianity & Liberalism, the Christian church can recover ground that we’ve lost in recent decades, and stop shrinking from declaring the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

2 Machen, Christianity & Liberalism, 8.
3 Machen, Christianity & Liberalism, 62.
4 Machen, Christianity & Liberalism, 178.
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