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The Philonoman Temptation

Ever since the sixteenth century Protestants have had to bear the accusation of being antinomian. The logic was, and still is, simple. If you believe that salvation is based strictly on faith, not on works, you send the message that the way a believer lives does not really affect his or her standing before God. Despite (or perhaps) owing to this complaint, Protestants since the Reformation have done their darnedest to prove the accusation wrong. So successful have the descendants of Luther and Calvin been in correcting the impression that good works don't matter in obtaining God's favor, that Roman Catholics and Protestants have swapped roles, with the former being the church for an antinomian piety, and the latter's denominations insisting upon good behavior for continued fellowship.

This is not a cheap shot at Roman Catholics (at least it is not the intent). The difference between Rome and Protestantism these days on good works actually works toward Roman Catholicism's favor. The church that once accused Luther's teaching of

antinomianism has consistently made room for repeat offenders, the kind of sinners whom Protestants are quick to remove from church rolls. Roman Catholic history is filled with examples of believers who fall off the wagon, repent, confess their sin and find forgiveness in the church's ministry. From whiskey priests to mafia dons, the Roman Catholic church has been a communion, despite its teaching on the relationship of faith and works, where the believer's ongoing battle with sin is frankly acknowledged and accommodated. This makes it one of the great ironies in Western Christianity that the ones who originally accused Luther of sanctioning immorality have been the communion to provide what appears a roomier basis for fellowship than Protestants can muster.

THE RECENT SCANDAL surrounding Roman Catholic priests and pedophilia suggests that this may be changing, that, in fact, becoming an American church has involved becoming infected with Protestant philonomanism. This is certainly the impression that Richard John Neuhaus gives in his comments on the meeting of the United States bishops in Dallas to address the sexual misconduct of priests. The editor of *First Things* quoted one reporter who claimed that the American bishops "behaved more like Senators or CEO's engaged in damage control than as moral teachers engaged in the gospel." Neuhaus fears that the adopted policy of "one strike" and "zero tolerance" will prevent repentant priests from coming forward and seeking help and forgiveness. Even worse, he writes, is what the policy of retribution does to the church's witness. "The bishops have succeeded in scandalizing the faithful anew by adopting a thoroughly unbiblical, untraditional, and un-Catholic approach to sin and grace."

They wound up with "a policy that is sans repentance, sans conversion, sans forbearance, sans prudential judgment, sans forgiveness, sans almost everything one might have hoped for from bishops of the Church of Jesus Christ." Of course, Reformed Christians have a different understanding of the basis for a sinner's forgiveness. But Neuhaus' complaint, the bishops' policies notwithstanding, implies that the language of mercy may be more the possession of Catholics than Protestants.

IN PROTESTANTISM'S CASE, THE adoption of an ecclesial posture free from charges of antinomianism is not only ironic but ridiculous. Yet evidence accumulates that demonstrates just how uncomfortable Protestants are with receiving and resting on Christ alone for all the benefits of salvation.

One such example comes again from Neuhaus' journal, *First Things*. In the April 2002 issue Jerry L. Walls, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary wrote in defense of purgatory, thus proving to some in the *NTJ*'s offices that the line separating Wesleyans and Roman Catholics on sanctification is a thin one thanks to John Wesley's curious doctrine of perfection. Walls begins on a weak note, one sure to get him and us in trouble. He asserts that Wesleyans "reject the notion that salvation is only, or even primarily, a forensic matter of having the righteousness of Christ imputed or attributed to believers." God not only forgives, Walls adds, but "also changes us and actually makes us righteous." The problem is that life is not long enough for the sanctification of believers. So much sin, so little time. In addition, Walls finds the Protestant notion of perfection in death to be unconvincing. Purgatory is the solution. For it is a teaching that

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The *Nicotine Theological Journal* will likely be published four times a year. It is sponsored by the Old Life Theological Society, an association dedicated to recovering the riches of confessional Presbyterianism.

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emphasizes "the notion that no one can be exempted from the requirement of achieving perfect sanctity in cooperation with God's grace and initiative."

Walls admits that the idea of a time after death where the road to sanctity is allowed to wind on in proportion to a sinner's wickedness appears to deny justification by faith alone. That is so if salvation is conceived in solely forensic terms. But Protestants were novel to separate justification and sanctification. And since "justification so understood does not make us actually righteous, it is simply irrelevant as an objection to purgatory." What is especially interesting to note here is Walls' conclusion since it bears on this matter of forgiveness and how sinners become righteous. "Appealing to God's forgiveness does nothing to address the fact that many Christians are imperfect lovers of God . . . at the time of their death." As such forgiveness "alone"

cannot eliminate the unpleasant aspects of sin. "Other remedies are necessary, and . . . they may involve pain." One wonders if Walls may have been present behind the scenes when the Roman Catholic bishops gathered in Dallas. His understanding of pain-added forgiveness would certainly square better with the policy of "zero tolerance" than Neuhaus' idea of divine mercy's recuperative powers.

OF COURSE, WALLS MAY BE dismissed as a Wesleyan who, following the lead of the urWesleyan, collapsed justification and sanctification in such a disquieting way. Yet, Reformed Christians have of late been giving Methodists and Roman Catholics a run for obscuring the sufficiency of Christ's righteousness. In fact, many within the ranks of conservative American Presbyterianism show how willing they are to blink when the charge of antinomianism comes their way. In which case, Reformed Christians, like Walls, blur justification and sanctification in the hopes of making their theological tradition as good as they want Reformed Christians to be moral.

One indication of the confusion comes from an earnest Presbyterian elder who has written an unfortunate explanation of his views in response to some who suspect him of denying the Protestant doctrine of justification. A read through this paper suggests that his accusers have a point. (He will remain anonymous because of presbytery proceedings that have taken up this matter.) At one point, under the heading of "God's Purpose and Plan," he writes: "Neither the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, which all Christians receive at justification, nor the infusion of the righteousness of Christ (a false and non-existent concept taught by the Roman Catholic Church) can suffice for that purpose [i.e. being conformed to the image of Christ in true and personal righteousness and holiness]. Christ does not have an imputed righteousness; His

righteousness is real and personal. If we are to be conformed to his image, we too must have a real and personal righteousness." What is interesting about this quotation is that it is as hard on Protestantism as it is on Roman Catholicism. But because he denies Rome's error the implication is that he is error free. What remains, in fact, is an error of Pelagian proportions.

Of course, this example could simply be an aberration. But the trouble is that theologians and pastors in Presbyterian circles have encouraged these ideas by what one might call a hyper-covenantalism. Because they believe that the Bible makes the covenant central to God's relationship with man, all doctrines have the potential to be covenantalized. So, for instance, Peter Leithart on his website offers a paper in which he articulates a "biblical" perspective on justification. There he comments: "while Protestant theology rightly understands 'justification' as 'courtroom' or 'forensic' language, it does not take sufficient account of the full biblical scope of the 'forensic.' Following a number of recent studies, I take 'righteous' to be essentially a covenantal and relational term." As such the main idea behind biblical righteousness is not "conformity to a code of laws," but instead refers to "fulfilling obligations in a relationship." On it goes.

IT NEEDS TO BE STATED THAT Leithart does not go where the unnamed elder dared to go – Leithart does not deny the doctrine of imputed righteousness. But he does reflect where the equivocation of justification along covenantal lines, begun by Norman Shepherd twenty-five years ago and published recently as *The Call of Grace* (2000), has led. The impression persists that the traditional formulation of justification is passe and doesn't reflect the recent scholarship. Just as bad, it's not biblical but a theological imposition upon the text. Even worse, it's responsible for keeping Roman Catholics and

Protestants apart. As Shepherd stated in a Reformation Day sermon five years ago, "If we could get our Roman Catholic neighbors to see that the Bible talks about covenantal love and loyalty, and not about the merit of good works, and if we could get our evangelical Protestant neighbors to see that the Bible talks about covenantal love and loyalty, and not about cheap grace, then at least one major obstacle would be removed preventing us from seeing that the true church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. We would have a catholic church that is reformed according to the word of God. This is the church that Jesus is building today."

IN THIS SERMON SHEPHERD interestingly uses the word "comfort." A covenantal understanding of justification does not offer comfort to the antinomians because the gospel's promises are not "unconditional." Nor does it provide succor to the legalists because the good works it requires are not meritorious. The problem is that the covenantal understanding of justification does not offer much comfort – period. For it still saddles sinful men and women with obligations that they cannot keep perfectly. Which leaves them in a bit of a pickle.

Here it might be worth considering why people are not comforted by the Protestant doctrine of justification. Even if we were to concede that the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone, which looks to Christ's righteousness alone for justification today and on judgment day, even if this doctrine were not true, why wouldn't Protestants want it to be? The psychological problems are easier to spot for Roman Catholics who anathematized Protestants in the sixteenth century and so are on record against justification by faith alone. A defense of truth (as Catholics understand it) along with a defense of the tradition drives Roman Catholics to deny the Protestant doctrine. The only possible explanation for Protestants abandoning the doctrine is that the truth

of the Bible is at stake. But even here, if the Bible taught that our salvation depended in some small way upon our own righteousness or our ability to cooperate with Christ's, why would any Protestant believe it? "Thus saith the Lord" has a certain force to it. But if the Lord says "you must be good in order to be saved" then the consequences of disobedience are just as great as those involved in obedience. For if men and women are honest with themselves, the thought of producing works good enough for God's favor is downright scary.

But if Protestants who cozy up to the notion of obedience fail to notice the relief that Christ's righteousness provides, these reformers of justification don't seem to fathom how incomplete human righteousness is. As such, if classic Protestantism is susceptible to the charge of "cheap grace," neo-Protestants are in danger of promoting "cheap works." The point here is one well made by the Westminster Divines in chapter sixteen of their Confession of Faith. This is a section of the Westminster Standards that few of Luther's Reformed critics ponder.

IT IS, OF COURSE, ONE THING TO say that nothing the unregenerate man may do will please God, thus at least requiring Christ's work to wipe the slate clean. But once regenerate, some are teaching, Christians may actually perform deeds that are acceptable. Not so, according to the Westminster Confession. "We cannot, by our best works, merit pardon for sin, or eternal life, at the hand of God, because of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God. . . ." So much for the possibility of being re-justified on Judgement Day on the basis of our good works. And the reason is that our good works proceed both from the Spirit who makes them "good" and from us who make them "defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection that

they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment" (16.v). In other words, our good works, the allegedly conditional part of the covenantal arrangement, are not very good. In fact, they come up short of God's holy standard, thus making Christ's righteousness the only sufficient basis for our standing before God. Sin goes so deep that perfection for the Christian awaits death or the consummation.

YET THE JUSTIFICATION-revision school continues to be worried about antinomianism. They appear to fear that grace and mercy will lead to moral laxity. And so they contrive various biblical themes to water forgiveness down with obedience. In the process, they lose sight of how helpless sinful men and women are, both before and after regeneration. They make it seem as if believers may really keep the law because the promises are conditional, though not meritorious. The net effect is to ignore the depths of human depravity, as well as the burden that comes with always asking whether you are really good.

The Reformers were aware of this problem. The Belgic Confession in Article 24 (Man's Sanctification and Good Works) concludes on this somber note: if we do not keep in mind that our good works in no way merit God's favor, "then, we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed . . ."

Does this mean that we should keep on sinning so that forgiveness may abound? The apostle Paul stated that one in the face and said, of course not. Smoking two packs a day because you know you're going to die anyway is not the best response to the blessings of this life (one pack should be sufficient). Neither is abandoning your wife a legitimate response to the idea that marriage is provisional and not part of the glorified state. The Reformed response, along with the Lutheran one, has been the third use of the law, even

though the latter tradition has not spoken in these terms. The basis for good works is gratitude, not fear. In fact, the release that comes from knowing that God's demands have been satisfied by Christ frees the Christian to perform good works, though still polluted, from the correct motive – to glorify God, not to save one's hide. The Augsburg Confession, Article 20 could not state it any better than when it declares: "It is also taught among us that good works should and must be done, not that we are to rely on them to earn grace but that we may do God's will and glorify him. It is always faith alone that apprehends grace and forgiveness of sin. When through faith the Holy Spirit is given, the heart is moved to do good works."

Forgetting forgiveness and loving the law has had many unfortunate consequences. But the greatest may be that Reformed Christianity no longer can be accused of being antinomian. Of course, antinomianism is bad, and that's why the Reformed creeds assert the importance of good works. But at the same time, proclaiming the gospel in such a way that it sounds antinomian is very good, even biblical. Martin Lloyd-Jones had it right, when he wrote, following the lead of the apostle Paul:

The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace. . . . I would say to all preachers: If your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you really are preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, to the sinner, to those who are dead in trespasses and sins,

to those who are enemies of God.

After almost five hundred years of hearing the charge of antinomian, one would think Reformed Christians could resist the philononian temptation to turn Christ's sufficiency into a blueprint for ethical enrichment.

Townsend P. Levitt

SC88

Herman Hoeksema Meets Clark Pinnock

What do you get when you cross a supralapsarian with an open theist? The answer is found below, but first, permit me to indulge in more reflections on common grace. Readers are aware that the *NTJ* is not terribly fond of Kuyperianism, and it often finds itself exceedingly impatient with Kuyperian formulations of the Reformed doctrine of common grace. As Edward E. Ericson once observed, "common grace can be used to baptize almost any new idea, however pagan or secular or overtly antitheistic. Mutter the magical words *common grace* and, presto, any ungainly creature whatever is let in under the tent."

My problem is not quite that of Allen Rich, who is willing to jettison the doctrine altogether ("What's Grace Got to Do With It?" *NTJ* July 2001). Where his beef is with the noun, mine is with the adjective: common grace advocates fail to reckon seriously enough with the *commonness* of common grace. The challenge, in other words, is to rescue common grace from its defenders.

A case in point is Richard Mouw's recently published *Stob Lectures on common grace*, *He Shines in All That's*

Fair (2001). This little book, I hasten to note, contains a lot of wisdom, and in some respects it is a good place to start on the topic. For example, Mouw offers an insightful analysis of the differences between supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism (which battle lurked behind the debates on common grace in the Christian Reformed Church in the early twentieth century). According to Mouw, the key difference between supras and infras was the former's unwillingness to draw any distinctions in the purposes of God. Herman Hoeksema argued that God's creative purpose was singular: his greater glory, and there were no temporal purposes that he was willing to acknowledge. So Hoeksema and his fellow travelers left the CRC and formed a common grace free zone, the Protestant Reformed Church. In contrast to Hoeksema, Mouw cites Bavinck, who insisted that creation has value in itself. Not every good and noble thing under heaven had to relate somehow to the consummated state.

MOUW GETS IT EXACTLY RIGHT here. The nobility of creation – even under the curse – provides an interpretive mechanism for the so-called virtuous pagan. Common grace permits the "Calvinistic messiness" of identifying genuine (though temporal) good in those who are genuinely (and ultimately) wicked.

Ironically, however, Mouw doesn't finish this little tome before he abandons Bavinck's doctrine of creation in favor of Hoeksema's supralapsarian reductionism. His troubles begin with discontent over a merely outward and restraining view of common grace. (Although he goes unmentioned, John Murray articulated this view in a study that is still unsurpassed: "Common Grace," 93-119 in his *Collected Writings*, vol. 2.) Beyond the external, Mouw writes that there is an interior work of character formation by the Spirit in common grace. But if the Spirit is graciously

reorienting the heart of the pagan, how does that differ from regeneration? And if regenerated, how is he or she any longer a pagan?

In the end, Mouw seems unwilling to abide the Calvinistic ambiguity of the virtuous pagan. He shares Hoeksema's denial that God can have legitimate though penultimate purposes in creation. In an only slightly more nuanced form, he has reduced "all that's fair" in creation to "kingdom work." Just as supras "subsume all . . . under predestination," so Mouw squeezes every vocation under the umbrella of the kingdom. Gone is the "multiplicity in the divine purposes." What keeps him out of the Protestant Reformed Church is a magic wand of denial that reads "transformationism," not "predestination."

Not surprisingly, Mouw's sleight of hand entails a whiff of theonomy. This is to be expected, as theonomy, supralapsarianism, and a denial of common grace tend to cohabitate. He poses the curious question on page 66: "What kind of reconstructive project should Reformed thinkers pursue amidst the spiritual and moral devastation of our 'postmodern' landscape?" Notice the assumption embedded in the question: Reformed work in culture is "reconstructive" – about that there is no debate. Mouw's only question is: of what sort?

IF COMMON GRACE IS INWARD and renewing, and if it is building the eschatological kingdom of God, what's common about it after all? Maybe nothing. By the end of the book, Mouw is prepared to cash in the adjective: "much of what we now think of as common grace may in the end time be revealed as special grace." Moreover, if the virtuous pagan is ultimately the object of electing grace, then we need to rethink our Reformed particularism. "While I am no universalist," Mouw writes, "my own inclination is to emphasize the

'wideness in God's mercy' rather than the 'small number of the elect' motif that has often dominated the Calvinist outlook." He may fancy this is justice and peace embracing, but it reads more like a Protestant Reformed – Reconstructionist – Open Theist group hug.

Protestant Reformed theologian David Englesma has written that the "worldview of common grace has proven to be a colossal failure." If this is so, it may be because it has not been tried. Common grace will work as an interpreting device only if we keep it common. And Mouw is one more advocate from whom the doctrine must be rescued.

Bryan A. Pieters

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California Diarist: 9/11, 9:11 – Whatever

Major League Baseball (MLB) took flack last year after the destruction of the World Trade Center for going back to the pennant race sooner than a proper period of grief should have dictated. In part to make up for that apparent insensitivity (apparent because the week long stoppage conflicted with the commander-in-chief's order to resume normalcy), they staged a time of commemoration at each of its ball parks this year on September 11th. Because MLB is a national enterprise, its claims to a World Series notwithstanding, baseball fans, players, coaches and managers, and souvenir and concession vendors paused at three different times to honor those who died in last year's attack and the rescue workers who labored to save whatever possible. In each time zone, baseball stopped at 9:11 p.m. for ceremonies which consisted first in a moment of silence and then a short video shown on

the scoreboard's huge monitor, with clips of last year's playoffs.

IT WAS A CLASSIC PR MOVE BY the Major League's owners and handlers, complete with t-shirts handed out to all fans, which featured the now ubiquitous loop of ribbon employed in times of national calamity, this one in red, white and blue, with the insignia of MLB in the middle, and a circular border with the words, "We Shall Never Forget September 11, 2001." Never mind that the sequence of baseball highlights, which leaned heavily in the direction of the New York Yankees (and understandably so) may have nurtured both forgetfulness about 9/11 and memories of last year's pennant race.

Among the oddities of this evening in baseball was MLB's strained effort to participate in the national festivities without losing profits or at least mucking up the schedule. First, why a moment of silence at 9:11 p.m.? The moment of silence in New York City's official ceremonies was at 8:46 a.m., the time when the first jet struck the one tower. Why not then at least synchronize MLB's commemoration time with that event, rather than using the date as a point on the watch? The answer is obvious. MLB does not play in the morning. Or why not simply observe a moment of silence before the game, and leave it at that? The cynic couldn't help but think that some executives and business people saw that they couldn't be part of the morning's activities, but liked the idea of ceasing work to observe the attack, and so voted for 9:11.

Then there was the incongruity of the seventh-inning stretch. Yes, we were still able to sing "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," but not before we had to sing "God Bless America," which was also sung before the National Anthem at the beginning of the evening. Why couldn't the folks who staged this event simply have left the commemoration time to the moment at 9:11, which in

the game between Oakland and Anaheim that night occurred in the bottom half of the fifth inning? But in our therapeutic times, we need to keep *feeling* this tragedy, and so when collective singing was called for, a time for feeling since song conveys it well, it also required a nod to the angst of the day. One fan (okay, the author) was heard trying to combine "God Bless America" with "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" by singing "God Take Me Out to the Ball Game." But the meter wasn't quite right.

By the end of the day, it looked like 9:11 in MLB was symptomatic of the national hype of 9/11. This is not to say that an anniversary is an unworthy time for reflection upon the significance of a day and its aftermath. We are supposed to do this with July 4th, and 11/11, and even though the former has yielded a day with little more than picnics and car sales, while the latter is fading quickly from memory, it is still a valuable effort. But why does it have to be orchestrated? Why can't we let people honor it the way they see fit, with New York City conducting its own ceremonies, the folks at the Pentagon observing the loss of colleagues, the president touring the cite in Schwencksville and making speeches in New York, and families and individuals grieving in ways they deem appropriate? (This is actually sort of like contemporary worship where the so-called worship planners try to orchestrate the people of God's encounter with their God.)

IN WHICH CASE, THE FITTING thing for MLB may have been to cancel its games. Smart executives who made up the schedule last winter should have been able to foresee the significance of 9/11. Instead, they sent the mixed signal that the numbers 9 and 11 are interchangeable as dates and times, thus making plausible the forgetfulness that MLB's t-shirts promised to prevent.

H. Valeria Ido

SC88

39 Alexander Hall

The Flower Fadeth, Boy Doth It!

The publication of a new biography of Robert E. Speer, the secretary of the PCUSA's Board of Foreign Missions during the turbulent decades of the 1920s and 1930s, provoked thoughts about heros in the oldest Presbyterian denomination in North America. When it comes to conservative Presbyterianism the identification of Reformed worthies is fairly easy. Aside from the Gilbert Tennents and John Witherspoons of the eighteenth century, the Hodges and Warfields of the nineteenth, Orthodox Presbyterians, for instance, count such twentieth-century figures as J. Gresham Machen, Bruce Hunt, Cornelius Van Til, Geerhardus Vos, and John Murray, for starters, as inductees in the American Presbyterian Hall of Fame. One easy way to define such luminaries is the degree to which they continue to be read and subjects of further study.

WHEN IT COMES TO THE PCUSA, it is a much more difficult problem in selecting heros. Speer is one who comes to mind, but of his more than fifty published titles, only one, a daily devotional study, remains in print. John Foster Dulles or Eugene Carson Blake might also qualify, but you would never know by the availability of their writings. A few years ago Barbara Wheeler commended to an audience at Princeton Seminary the collective piety of the modernist Henry Sloan Coffin and the premillennialist Charles Erdman but aside from the current Auburn Seminary president's search for a usable past (one that in Wheeler's case might bless homosexual unions), not many Presbyterians appear to be reading these formerly Presbyterian heavy weights.

Another reason for thinking about mainline Presbyterian heros, by the way, is the thought of the Confessing Movement in the PCUSA. To whom do these evangelicals look for inspiration and location of real Presbyterianism? It's a short list. Most of the leaders who were not liberal in the PCUSA were so moderate that even though they were successful in keeping the church mainly together, they were also sufficiently tolerant of erroneous views as to give the Confessing folks little leverage. But if these conservatives try to go back to the Hodges, Warfields and Machens of Presbyterian history, they run the risk of marching underneath the banners of fundamentalism or worse (i.e., misogyny and racism). After all, one of the ways that moderates and liberals secured an "ecumenical" Presbyterian Church was by branding conservatives as sectarian extremists.

SO WHERE DOES A MAINLINE Presbyterian today turn for guidance from previous generations of saints? The problem isn't simply one for conservatives. Gay-rights Presbyterians have a similarly short list of "prophetic" Calvinists who were ahead of the curve in recognizing the justice of homosexual love. Instead, the problem is one of a church that hitched its car to the engine of progress and now finds that the shelf-life of any of the great Presbyterians from the past is about as long as it takes for egalitarianism to find another oppressed group in need of affirmation. This makes the evangelicals like Erdman, the moderates like Speer, the liberals like Coffin or even the politicians like Dulles always a step or two behind the beat of, as Flip Wilson called it, "the church of what's happening now."

This is not an excuse for smugness among conservatives outside the PCUSA for conservative Presbyterianism in the United States has carried its own baggage of

relevance. But the plight of the PCUSA is a reminder about what endures. And when it comes to matters eternal and spiritual, the most enduring things are those like significance of the cross and empty tomb that look foolish in the eyes of those who desire a church to be on the cutting edge of societal evolution.

Dated

"The popularity of gospel rock groups that appeal to the sensual side of man is yet another indication of accommodation to worldly standards."

If asked to guess the year these words were written, the phrase "gospel rock groups" would clearly give this quotation away as something less than recent. "The sensual side of man" is another indication of an older idiom, both in its gender insensitivity (though it does free women from sensuality) and its assumption that the sensual is something believing men should avoid. In some ways the sentence has the ring of the 1950s when reason still could be counted on to be a better guide than passion or enthusiasm, though the lack of rock and roll Christian bands indicates a later time.

DRUM ROLL, PLEASE. THE author of this sentence is Donald Bloesch and it comes from his 1973 book, *The Evangelical Renaissance*, an unfortunate title for a movement known less for its arts and letters than its kitsch and schmaltz. In fact, this quotation comes from a longer section in which Bloesch decries "the carnality and frivolity in much modern-day evangelical religion." These vices are evident, he wrote, "in the fascination of many evangelicals with public relations and showmanship," in "technique and method" being valued in churches and schools "more highly than right doctrine," and "group dynamics" the

receiving more attention than "prayer and other spiritual disciplines."

WHAT IS AMAZING ABOUT THIS dated verdict on evangelicalism is how tame the early 1970s now appear compared to today's carnality and frivolity. If Bloesch were to describe the scene of 2001, what words could he use that would not sound completely out of synch? In fact, Bloesch not only sounds curmudgeonly but like he's arrived from another planet. So thorough has the victory of affect over form been that what Bloesch once considered "worldly" is now *de rigueur* in the churches. The proof comes from "gospel rock groups" which have become as standard in Protestant churches as seating ("pews" used to be the word for church seating until they became uncomfortable.)

All of this brings to mind Robert Bork's notion, "Defining Deviancy Down." Why is it that evangelicals are regarded as the traditionalists when they have been doing in the religious world precisely what the po-mo crowd has done in the academy, namely, abandoning a sense of propriety and good taste as forms of oppression and elitism? Why are evangelicals *the* conservative party in American Protestantism? Or is it more likely that, like their favorite president, they are the Teflon religious adherents whose misdeeds never stick?

Paleo-Cons on Paleo-Protestants

If it does not appear on the Internet, some in the editors' conservative Presbyterian circles will not see journalistic pieces of limited interest, unless, of course, such an item appears in *World* magazine, sectarian Presbyterianism's publication of record. So it may not be an instance of self-flattery to mention for the sake of those who don't get around much in the

periodical world that *Chronicles of Culture*, a monthly magazine produced by the Rockford Institute and known for its older variety of conservatism, ran a short item on the *NTJ*.

Although the author, Jeremy Lott, made a few mistakes, his take on the *NTJ* was good-natured and fairly accurate. Lott, who must have heard about our efforts through the much appreciated attention of Richard John Neuhaus, describes the *NTJ* as a "theological journal in a very usual sense." With regard to our mandate of promoting reflection on the connection between Reformed conviction and practice he judges us to be "only a partial success." Our discussions of exclusive psalmody, the observance of the Second and Fourth Commandments (by Reformed counting), and contraception appear to Lott to be interesting but not very appealing to the non-Reformed.

HE ADDS THAT THE "REAL FUN comes when these Reformed, being Reformed, depart from their mandate and begin to pick at the broader Christian world." In fact, our picking at that world has always been part of our mandate because so many Reformed Christians have lost the ability to see any difference between Reformed and evangelical Christianity.

Still, we are grateful for Lott's subdued praise: "Most of this dissension is carried off with an admirable touch of pith and vinegar, so that even those who regularly disagree with the authors' assessments – and, as an ecumenical Baptist contributor to *Books & Culture* and *Touchstone*, I would usually include myself in that category – can appreciate their contrarian cussedness, even if it occasionally leaves us hot under the collar." "Contrarian cussedness" – that may not be something to write home about. But it is another way of saying the *NTJ* is provocative, which has also always been part of our aim.

What is curious about the *Chronicles* article is not that the author would be irritated by things published in the *NTJ*, but that a journal known for defending paleo-conservatism relies upon an ecumenical Baptist who writes for Christianity Today, Inc. What does it say about the world of the isolationist, anti-immigration right that they employ folks who write and edit for the casparmilque toast evangelical middle? Could it be that the world of paleo-conservatism is almost as lonely as that of paleo-Protestantism? Which is another way of saying that if Mr. Lott has any contrarian cussedness left after the niceness that typifies Baptist ecumenism, he's welcome to write for the *NTJ*.

John Haddon Leith (1919-2002)

It may be petty to point out, but it was still curious to see that the *Christian Century* has yet to run a notice of John H. Leith's death on August 12, 2002. It was even more curious to see that in their notes on people for the September 25-October 8 number, they reported on Walter Wangerin, Jr.'s broken hip and the death of Marvin C. Wilbur, "a Presbyterian communicator and public relations specialist" who died only two days after Leith. But still no mention of the latter's passing.

The reason for this slight could well be that Professor Leith, who started his career as the enemy of southern Presbyterians who eventually formed the Presbyterian Church in America, turned out by the 1980s to be one of mainline Protestantism's fiercest critics, especially his own communion, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. for, in ways reminiscent of the *Century*, putting public relations ahead of theology.

Dr. Leith was the son of the late William H. and Lucy Haddon Leith. He received a B.A. from Erskine College

in 1940 followed by a B.D. from Columbia Theological Seminary in 1943, an M.A. from Vanderbilt University in 1946, and in 1949 a Ph.D. from Yale University. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., Leith served churches in Mobile, Alabama, Nashville, Tennessee and Auburn, Alabama before teaching from 1959 to 1990 at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia.

THOUGH BARTHLIAN INFLUENCES on his theology compromised his gaining a hearing among conservative Presbyterians, Leith's fifteen books and numerous articles revealed how much better for Presbyterian reflection it was to have Barth as theological interlocutor rather than either neo-evangelicalism's Harold John Ockenga or mainline Protestantism's Henry Pit Van Dusen. We will miss having Professor Leith as such a theological conversationalist even more than we will miss watching him bedevil mainline Presbyterians.

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Second Hand Smoke

For readers yet unpersuaded of our concerns about the excesses of Kuyperianism, we offer this from Henry R. Van Til (Kees' nephew), in his Calvinistic Concept of Culture, where he warns us not to ask strangers for a light until we determine their weltanschauung.

However, there are those who have a different conception of commonality. By it they mean that all men share alike under the common grace of God in the natural blessings of sunshine and rain; they have everything in common up to a certain point. The ordinary thinks of life together with human nature with its gifts of reason, appreciation for beauty, etc., are universally received and given without discrimination. For God loves

men promiscuously, and we must follow his example by not drawing a line between saints and sinners in the common things of life. We must learn to enjoy and appreciate the common culture, without dragging the antithesis into the picture. . . . Some such concept seems to be prevalent in many circles. As a result, there is a certain level of existence at which the army of the Lord is immobilized, where it does not function as an army, but suddenly takes on the appearance of crowds of vacationers, or the motley multitude at a fair and pushing one another for a better position to see. Thus there is established between the church and world a grey, colorless area, a kind of no man's land, where an armistice obtains and one can hobnob with the enemy with impunity in a relaxed Christmas spirit, smoking the common weed. [Author's note of explanation: The reference is to the hobnobbing of Allied and Axis forces during the first world war, when men relaxed during Christmas holiday and smoked cigarettes with their enemies. And the problem is?]

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Book Offer: *With Reverence and Awe*

The incentive mentioned in the last issue is still in effect. Anyone who renews or begins their own subscription and gives two gift subscriptions to new readers (we're talking \$21 except for Canadians) will receive for a limited time (until July 2003) a copy of the editors' new book, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (P&R, 2002), a \$12.99 value.

Some readers, other than the authors' family members, have actually praised the book as a valuable introduction to the nature of Reformed worship.