Health and Wellbeing

THE BIG PICTURE

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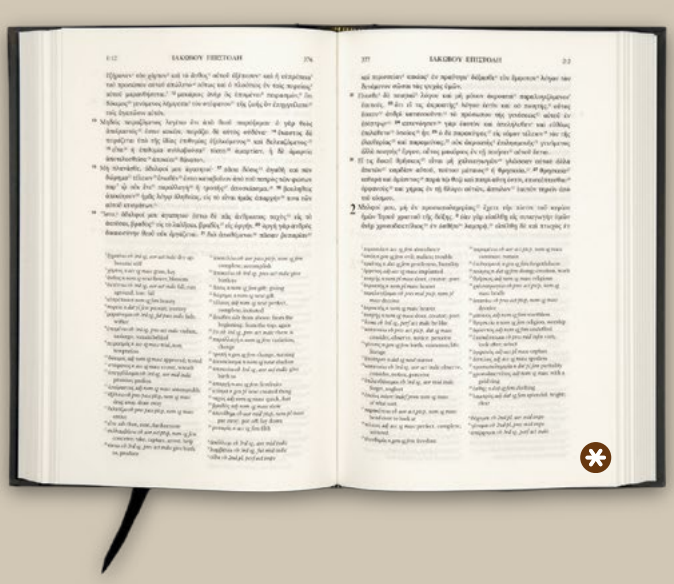

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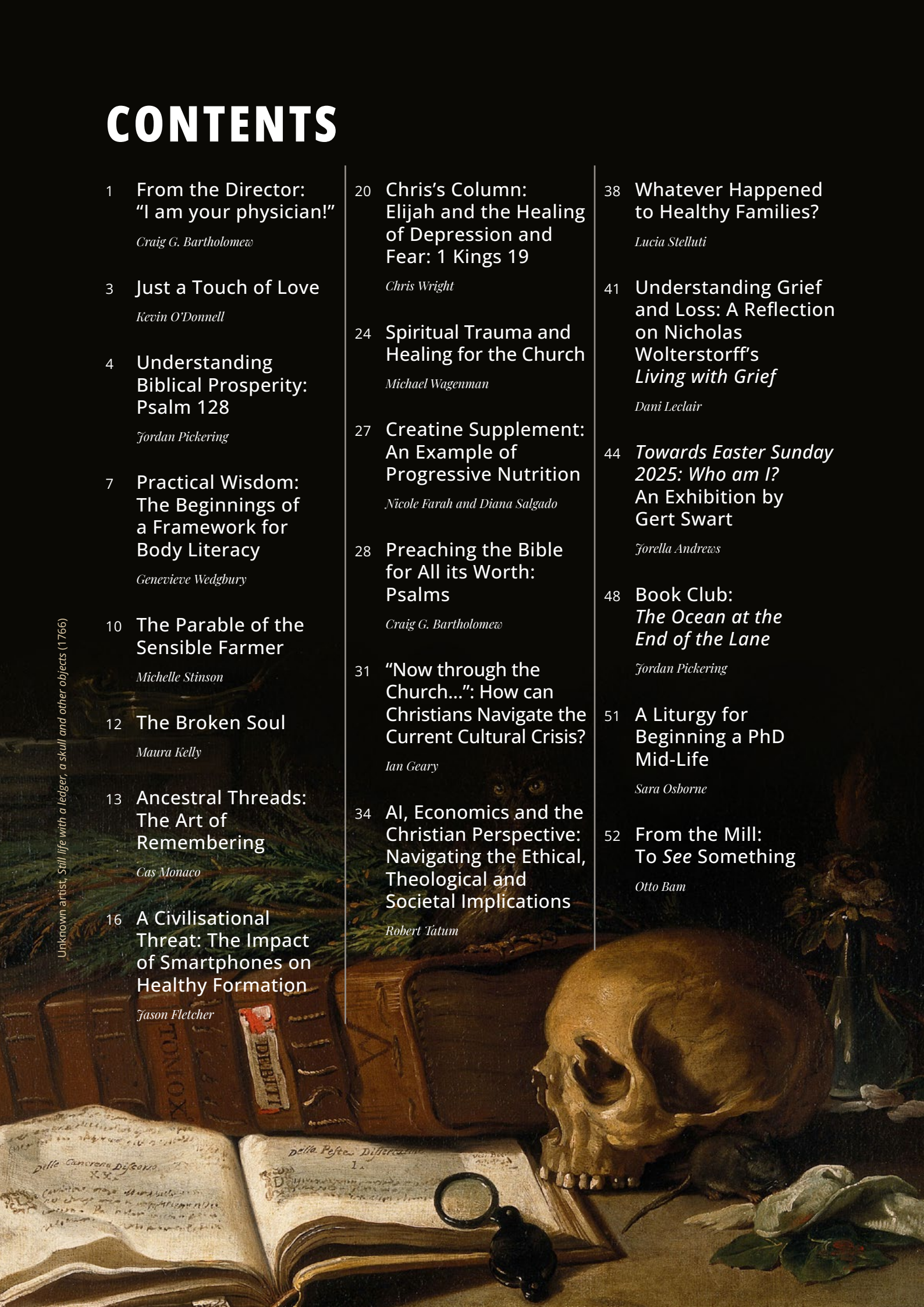

Unknown artist, *Still life with a ledger, a skull and other objects* (1766)

The Big Picture is produced by the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge, a non-profit academic research centre whose vision is to foster Christian scholarship and public theology, rooted in spirituality and practised in community, for the glory of God and the flourishing of the church and world. Our resources and events are all aimed at exploring answers to the question: How then should we live?

The Big Picture seeks to: (1) Educate, inform and inspire readers about public theology, (2) Ground our work in Scripture, (3) Embody the big-picture vision of the gospel with creativity, (4) Connect with good practice wherever it is found, and (5) Build community locally and globally with our friends and partners.

Please be aware that the articles that we choose to publish have not been selected because they reflect an official KLC position or the views of the editors. Our aims above encourage deep discussion of a plurality of views, across traditions, within the broad boundaries of the gospel. We celebrate difference without division.

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COVER ARTWORK

Gert Swart, *If Not For You* (2022, used with permission). Named after the Bob Dylan song, which speaks of life not making sense or ringing true, if not for you, Swart's sculpture speaks of the role of others, especially one's significant other, in forming and nurturing one's identity. The egg at its centre represents the sum of one's life experiences that shape one's future, residing under an altar-like seat that acknowledges life's spiritual dimension and a place from which to rest and contemplate the gift of life.

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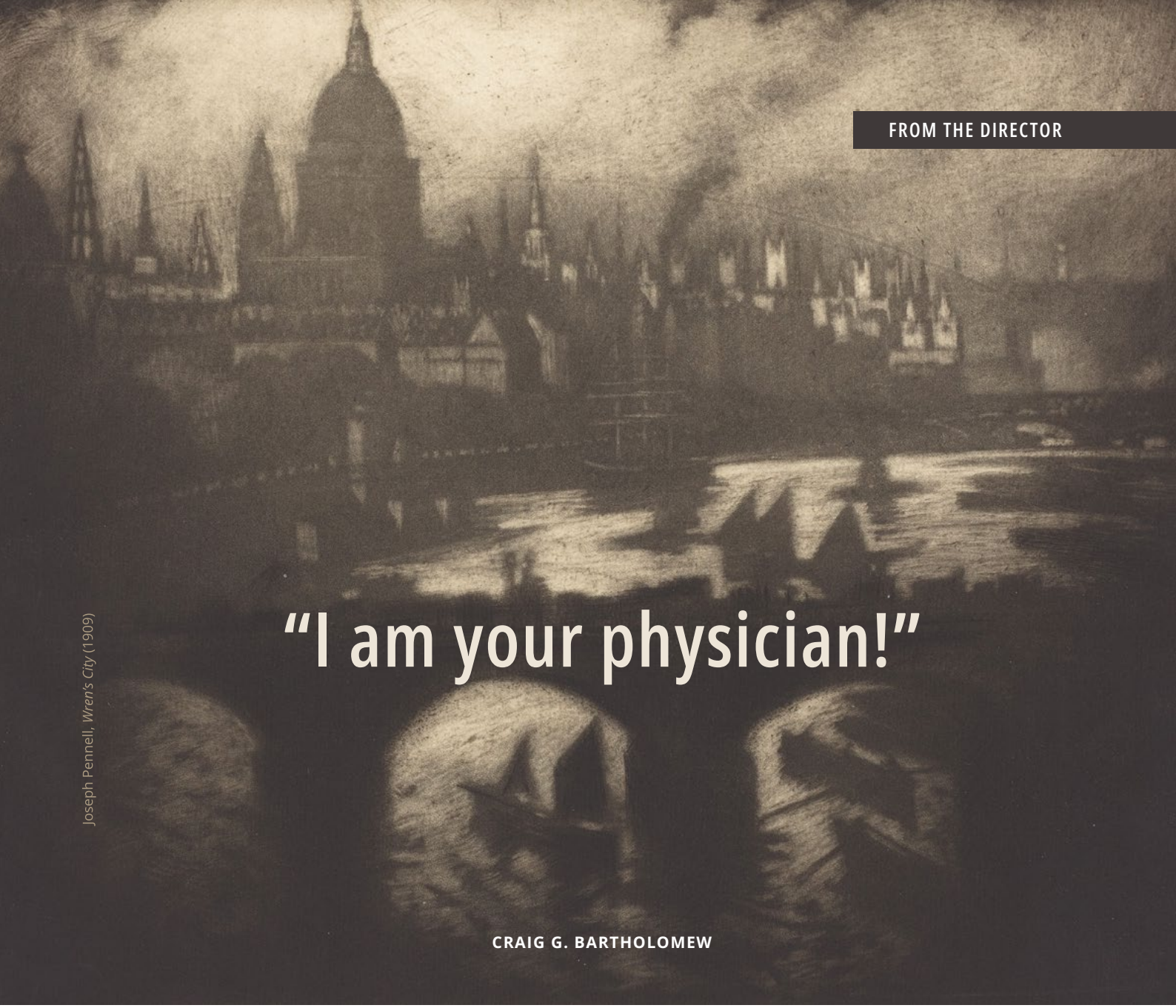


Joseph Pennell, *Wren's City* (1909)

"I am your physician!"

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

Speakers of modern Hebrew, mainly Jews, have a delightful way of greeting one another, namely *shalom*. Shalom is generally translated as "peace" in the OT of English Bibles, but it means more than a feeling of peace. In Jeremiah 29 we find a letter Jeremiah sent to the exiles in Babylon. It includes the following message from God:

> 4 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek *the welfare* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *welfare* you will find your *welfare*.[1]

1 NRSV Bible quoted throughout.

The Hebrew word translated as "welfare" is the word shalom. As you will see from these verses shalom includes far more than feeling good; it is about *faring well*, about flourishing in all aspects of life: building and indwelling houses, horticulture and eating, and marriage and children. It is hard to read these verses and not to hear an echo of that great park of delight, Eden, that we read about in Genesis 2:4-25. It is as though God says to the exiles: while you are in exile in Babylon your mission is to develop a bit of Eden in the land of your great enemy whom God has used to punish you and take you into exile.

Wellbeing would therefore be a good translation of shalom in this passage. Personal wellbeing, certainly, but it is obvious from these verses that shalom cannot be reduced to individual wellbeing. It includes social dimensions of life like building, dwelling, gardening, farming and family life, seeking the wellbeing of the city in all its dimensions. Here then is a poignant biblical insight: no person is an island so that an

individualistic approach to wellbeing is terribly inadequate, ignoring as it does all the myriad ways in which we interact with one another and the world around us, all of which are constitutive of wellbeing. Wellbeing is deeply personal but it is also inherently public.

If Genesis 2 provides us with a rich picture of wellbeing, Genesis 3 reminds us that following on from the rebellion of the first couple, our way back to Eden is barred. An effect of sin is that we need restoration or healing. In Matthew 9 we read:

> [10] And as he [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. [11] When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" [12] But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [13] Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Here Jesus compares sickness to sin, a poignant analogy. Part of wellbeing is health but in a fallen world we are subject to disease and the breakdown of health. When Jesus speaks of being sick and needing a physician he is, of course, referring to physical sickness. This dialogue with the Pharisees is interesting in many ways.

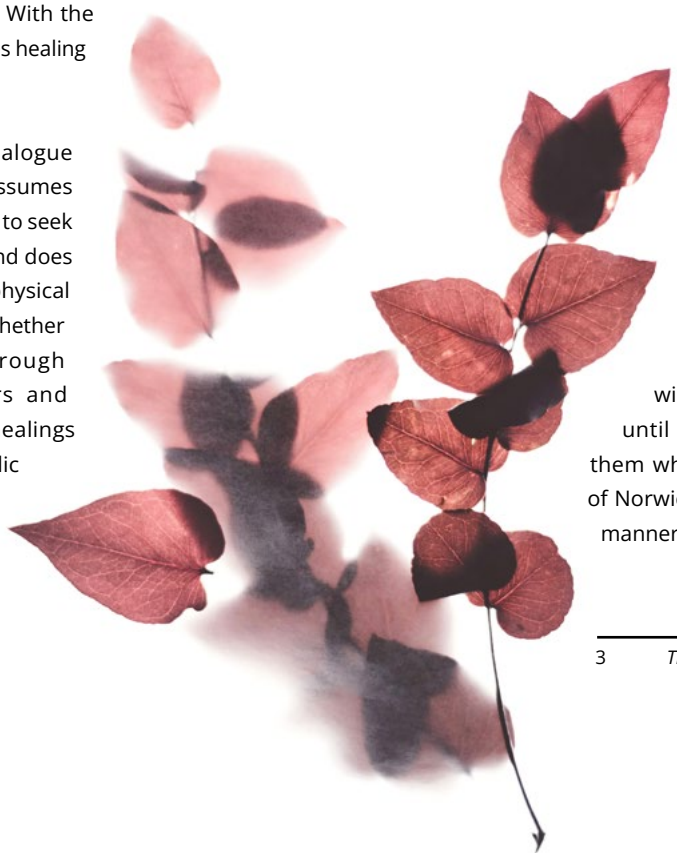
Lohfink observes that when Jesus began his public ministry, the Jews were suffering under Roman oppression. The Zealots were preparing for a violent revolt to usher in God's rule. "Jesus took no notice of all this and publicly asserted that the reign of God was already appearing. If he was asked how one might recognise this, he pointed to his own miracles, for he was moving through the cities and towns as a kind of healer. Wherever he had been, people could point to those who had been restored to health."[2] With the arrival of the kingdom comes healing and thus health.

But note that in his dialogue with the Pharisees Jesus assumes that it is normal for the sick to seek out a physician. God can and does heal miraculously but all physical healing comes from God, whether it is miraculous or through the ingenuity of doctors and medication. Miraculous healings cluster around Jesus' public ministry as a sign of the arrival of the kingdom. However, although the kingdom has come it is also still to come. Thus, while physical healing is always a possibility and should be sought, this side of the final consummation of the kingdom it is not guaranteed.

Jesus' analogy of sickness with sin is also telling because as we know humans are psychosomatic unities, and health cannot be restricted to physical health. There is mental health, emotional health, relational health, societal health, and so on. Our deepest problem is estrangement from God, and when that relationship is restored, the Spirit begins his work of making us whole in all our relationships.

In Exodus, soon after the Israelites leave Egypt and enter the wilderness they go without water for three days (Ex 15:22-27). They come to the waters of Marah but cannot drink from them because the water is bitter. Commenting on the Hebrew word translated "bitter" (מרה), Lohfink notes that "the water of this oasis was not just bitter. It was water that could bring sickness and even death."[3] Acting on God's instruction, Moses throws a piece of wood into the water and it becomes sweet or pleasant. Now the water becomes lifegiving, and God tells the Israelites that he has tested them and that if they listen and obey he will not bring upon them the diseases suffered by the Egyptians during the plagues, "for I am the LORD who heals you."

In his 1545 translation of the Bible, Martin Luther translated this phrase evocatively as "*ich bin der HERR, dein Arzt*", "I am the LORD, your physician"! Note that in context this healthcare of God's is what we might call preventative medicine, the provision of healthy water rather than contaminated water. In the West we take healthy water for granted, but if, for example, we have been living in Gaza recently we would not do so.



Health and wellbeing are gifts of the kingdom. We should seek them for ourselves and for our neighbour, wherever that neighbour may be. Physical health is an important element of these gifts but neither health nor wellbeing can be reduced to it. It is only in the eschaton that these gifts will be fully given and received; until then we should strive after them while remembering with Julian of Norwich that all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

2 Norbert Lohfink, *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 35.

3 *Theology of the Pentateuch*, 39.

Félix Vallotton, *Bather and Child (La baigneuse à l'enfant)* (1893)

Just a Touch of Love

KEVIN O'DONNELL

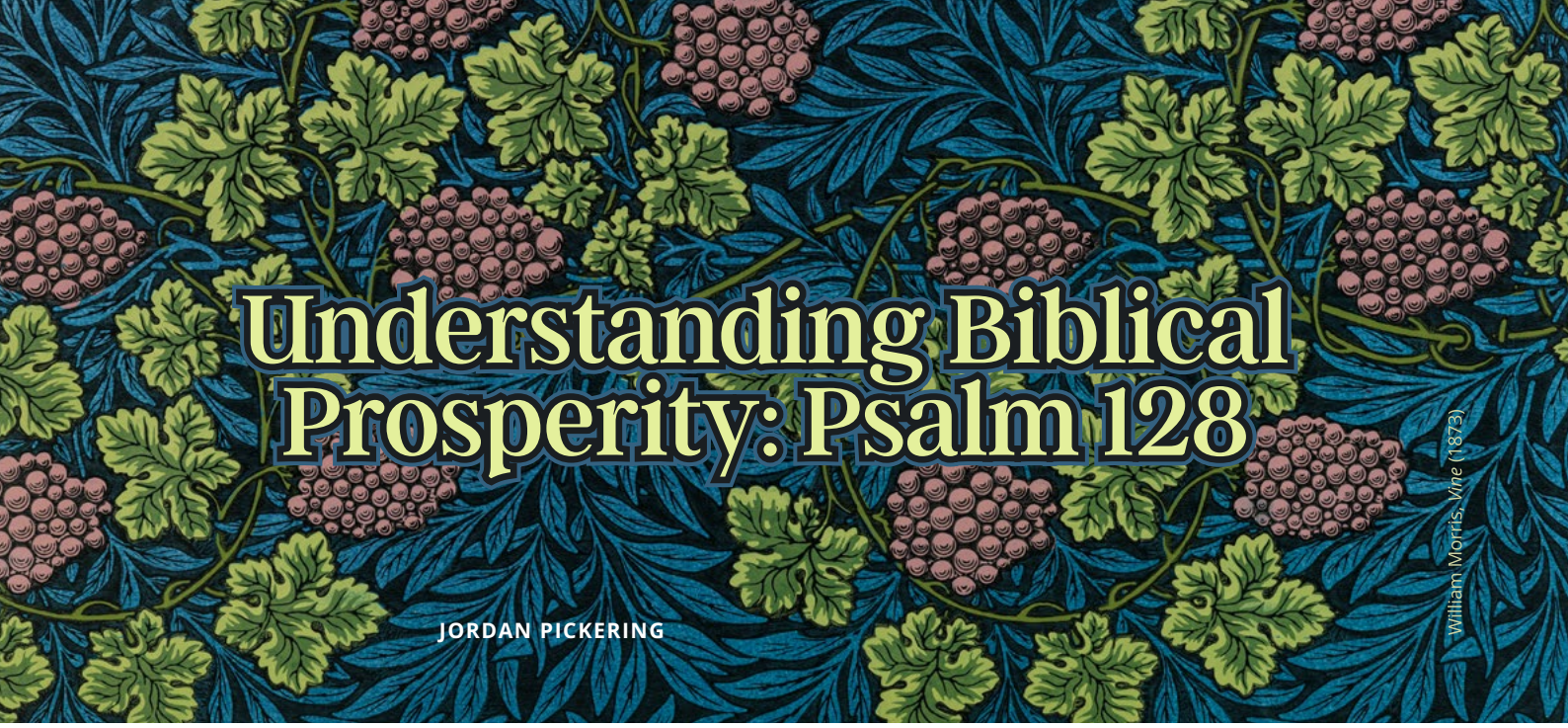
In the early days of the BBC TV series, *EastEnders*, a mother had just lost a child to cot death. She sat motionless on the sofa when the local matriarch, Lou Beale, entered. Lou said two words, "Say nothing!", and then embraced her. They sat in silence for several minutes until the tears started to flow. That scene has stayed in my memory, and I refer to any similar experiences as a "Lou Beale moment." I think, more recently, of an occasion when I had been going through a painful time myself. A person just touched my shoulder as I was trying to pray. Nothing more was ever said. It meant something. I have not forgotten it.

Touch can be a great healer if motivated in the right way. Touch need not be physical – an embrace or a hand on a shoulder – but can happen through words, or a look. Touch is about listening, too, making the person feel respected and included. I mentioned just now a time of great stress I was experiencing. I will be honest that I found it impossible to pray for a time and could not countenance any religious symbols. They were all trigger points for pain. That's how dark it was. The only thing that held me at that time was a mental picture I had one day as I sat in a Sussex village. I was trying to pray, unsuccessfully, as the image came to me of Jesus reaching out his hand upon one of the needy people from the Gospels. The phrase, "just a touch of love" came into my mind and has never gone away. I felt lost and confused, but I was being held, nonetheless. The same sentiment can be found in aspects of healthcare when a sympathetic ear, having patience, being honest that you don't know an answer, or a gentle touch of the nurse or carer that responds to a need. Touch, in all these ways, is a healer, though quiet, tender and gradual. One cannot push the accelerator.

The Gospels give several examples of Jesus in this way. The healing of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:21-33) has him grasping her hand and saying the words, "*Talitha Kum*," "Little girl, get up" (I have heard one translation as "little lamb, get up"). Then again, the healing of the leper (Mk 17:11-19) shows the relief and gratitude he gave to Jesus. To even go near such a person was taboo in the Jewish traditions. To speak with such men was a healing touch in itself, apart from the spiritual power that emanated towards them. Similarly, the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' robe (Mt 9:20-22) broke taboo and though initially surprised, Jesus responded with kindness.

In conclusion, the greatest example of the touch of God was the cross itself when God entered the darkness of human sin and suffering. The experience of the touch on my shoulder underlines everything, not only in the ministry of Jesus, but in human nature, too. I am so glad that I had that experience. It was the beginning of a gradual healing. Just a touch of love.

Kevin O'Donnell is an author, a priest of the diocese of Arundel and Brighton, and an auxiliary chaplain at the basilica of Notre Dame de Pontmain in France.



Understanding Biblical Prosperity: Psalm 128

JORDAN PICKERING

The relationship of the gospel to prosperity is a controversial topic. Some claim that God promises material blessings to the faithful, others deny the materiality of blessing altogether. And, of course, there is a range of views in between.

Psalm 128 is a rich and beautiful poem that gives us anchors for understanding prosperity in God's economy.

A Literal Translation

1 *A song of ascents.*
The good fortune of everyone who fears the LORD
Who walks in his ways.
2 The labour of your hands surely[1] you shall eat
Your good fortune
and good (things) to you.
3 Your wife like a fruitful vine
In the recesses of your house
Your children like olive shoots
Around your table.
4 Behold, surely thus shall the man be blessed who fears the LORD.
5 May the LORD bless you from Zion
(That you)[2] look upon the good of Jerusalem
All the days of your life.
6 (That you) see the children of your children.
Shalom upon Israel.

Verb Shortage

Hebrew often implies a "being" verb without using one, which in Psalm 128 leaves us with a lot of nouns and a lot of options. English translations understandably try to add these verbs in, which makes definite things that the Hebrew text leaves ambiguous. Should "Your wife like a fruitful vine" be read as a description? A promise? A hope? Your Bible's translator will have decided on one, but the Psalmist didn't.

This immediately confronts us with one of the infuriating and beautiful things about biblical poetry: it leaves open matters that we'd sometimes like a little more closed. Psalm 128 is especially happy to sketch a picture and let us fill in some of the lines.

I have attempted to capture in my translation the effect of leaving out so many verbs. To me it sounds like a beatitude or a toast: it's a list of short but expansive declarations of the good life for Israel.

Wasting a Wish?

Of all the wonderful things that might top this list, the first blessing might seem underwhelming: May you get to eat the food that you worked for.

When you think about it, though, what is worse than having nothing to eat, and working hard only for someone else to take what you earned? "The fallow ground of the poor would yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice" (Prov 13:23).[3]

The blessing of eating the fruits of your labour implies two wonderful things that we tend to take for granted until they are gone: In the first of a series of nods towards Genesis, it means that you have been spared the worst of

1 Or "When you eat the labour of your hands, happy are you."
2 This construction can express a promise. See John Goldingay, *Psalms*, Volume 3: 90-150 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 512.
3 Regarding this kind of blessing, Ecclesiastes 2:18-26 agrees that there is "nothing better."

God's curse on the ground, and it means that injustice has been sufficiently curtailed that your wages are still yours.

Family Man

The second blessing is directed at family – a fruitful wife and a bustling dinner table. If, again, regular pregnancies aren't on your divine-blessings wish list, it's worth appreciating some of the hints of the wider goodness involved here, such as "fruitfulness" being suggestive of more general abundance (cf. Prov 31), the absence of loneliness, or the fact that this is a home of such size and calm as to have recesses into which the family can retreat.

But more importantly, in Genesis 3, God pronounces trouble upon both the ground and the womb. The archetypal domains of male and female are cursed in Genesis but blessed here. This blessing is good not because big families are always desirable but because it means the resurrection of all of humanity's stillborn hopes.

Two Kinds of Blessing

While the noun *'ashrei* ("good fortune" or "happiness") dominates verses 1-3, verses 4-6 feature the verb *barak* ("to bless"). While the former describes a state of being, the latter is best understood as an expression of divine favour.[4]

We might be forgiven for getting caught up in the psalm's material blessings, but *barak* brings our focus back to the divine Giver. Verses 1 and 4 bookend the description of this blessed Israelite with relational and covenantal ideas: favour with God, fear of God, imitation of God.

Perhaps here again we have notes of Genesis, in which we were created to image God and to walk with him. Even if not, it underlines that the ideal Israelite is firstly a person who desires to share God's character and to walk in God's footsteps. Blessing is what flowers within a right relationship with God.

Whose *Shalom* and When?

The last two verses echo the same blessings (repeating "good" and "children") culminating in a wish for the *shalom* of Israel. "Shalom" is prosperity language that encompasses peace, health, happiness and more. We often translate it as "wellbeing" in an effort to capture its breadth. In verse 5, the blessings now come *from Zion*.

Our present connotations with Zionism may distract us from the better associations that are at work here – again from the early chapters of Genesis. Zion or "the city of God" is regularly connected to "garden of God" concepts, and links to Eden are common in Zion theology (e.g., the rivers of Gen 2:10 and Ps 46:4).[5] In the Old Testament, prosperity is regularly circumscribed by both relationship and place, as hinted at here. Blessing operates within right relationship with God *and* the temple-like sacred spaces in which God meets his people. Prosperity achieved outside of God's order is not necessarily a blessing and may even belong to the curse.

Finally, depending on whether the psalm was written pre- or post-exile, these latter verses may be especially poignant. Zion theology gained force after the exile because it expresses a yearning for Israel's full restoration. Pictures of blessing such as this one might have been as much an expression of loss as of expectation, given that the enjoyment of one's labour and the security of one's life were far from guaranteed in occupied Israel.[6]

As a psalm in the mouth of people in exile, or scarred with its memory, it takes on the tone of a plea that once again they might ascend Mount Zion and feel streams of blessing flowing out of God's dwelling-place among them.

4 In my evaluation, this was persuasively demonstrated in C. Mitchell, *The Meaning of ברך "to bless" in the Old Testament* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987).

5 See H.-J. Krauss, *Theology of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), 80.

6 See, for example, Nehemiah 9:36-37.

Helene Schjerfbeck, *Maria* (1909)

Your Wellbeing and Mine

The blessings in Psalm 128 are modest and earthy, but behind their materiality, they express no lesser hope than in the defeat of the curses that beset humanity at the fall. Furthermore, against the backdrop of Israel's exile, this poem came not to express what is owed us as believers but what can so often *elude* us. It expresses hopes that are anchored in the story of fall and redemption, and a prayer for God's presence to be among his people. In this way, blessing in the OT is deeply spiritual.

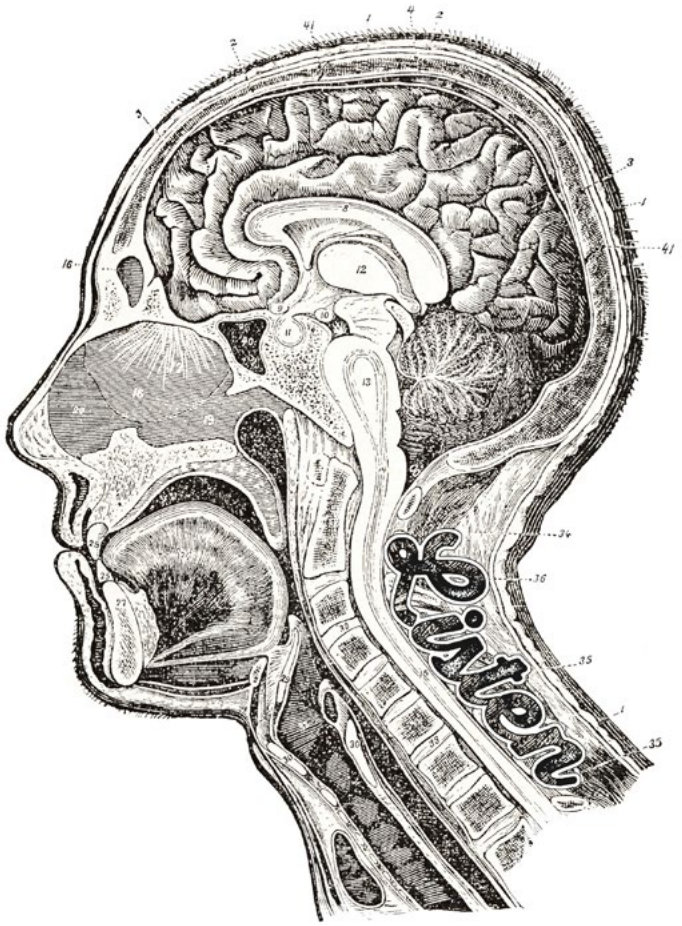
As NT people, we often spiritualise away the materiality of God's blessings in an effort to divest our hopes of any worldliness. However, Paul's reference to "every spiritual blessing" (Eph 1:3) likely doesn't mean that our blessings are *immaterial* as much as that they belong to *the coming age*.[7] The difference between blessing in the OT and NT is not one of materiality versus spirituality, but rather a change in the environment of relationship in which God intends to offer the fullness of his blessings. The Old Covenant was not capable of creating in Palestine a place of divine-human relationship in which love was unbroken and hearts did not stray. The incarnation of Christ created a new way of discipleship in which we are indwelt by his Spirit who rewires us from within, but even for us, every "now" comes with a "not yet." While we now have a foretaste in the church, the creation of this place of blessing is still in our future.

Affirming the materiality of blessing is right because we are invited not just to know the Lord's goodness but to *taste and see* it in a full-bodied way. At the core of God's character is his unreserved favour and generosity, but as a people still prone to corruption, our eyes can even now be turned toward the gifts rather than the Giver. God is at work to fulfil our *ultimate* good, not merely to meet our lesser desires. It is only in the new creation, at the end of our long perseverance, with relationship unhindered, that we'll dwell fully within God's *shalom*.

7 In the same way, Paul says we will be raised with a spiritual body, which means an "imperishable" one or one that is "of heaven," not meaning one that is "ghostly" or "immaterial" (1 Cor 15:35ff).

Dr Jordan Pickering is Director of Media at KLC, an Associate Editor of TBP and an Associate Fellow of KLC.

Vincent van Gogh, *Olive Trees* (1889)



Practical Wisdom:

THE BEGINNINGS OF A FRAMEWORK FOR BODY LITERACY

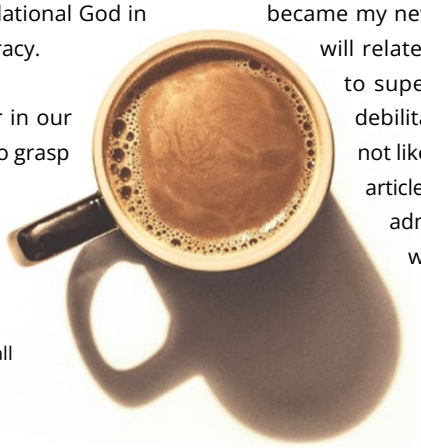
GENEVIEVE WEDGBURY

It strikes me as especially important for Christians that practical wisdom is related to moral virtue in relation to body literacy, which I define as the ability to read your body and make sense of it in a way that enables you to make good choices for its wellbeing.[1] By establishing body literacy as part of what it means to be wise in practice, it also establishes it as part of what it means to be morally virtuous. The lack of it, therefore, points to the opposite. This is alarming, particularly since Aristotle expresses the unity of all the moral virtues; to be lacking in one may mean we are lacking in them all.[2] Indeed, what is refreshing in Hughes' exposition of Aristotle's text is his belief in what I am calling a holistic understanding of *phronesis*, i.e. wisdom related to practical action. There is a subtle and nuanced interplay between the components of practical wisdom, just as there is with body literacy. There is a living quality to it; it is both reasoned and experienced. I would go so far as to say it is relational. For us as Christians, this means we can solicit the help of a relational God in developing our understanding of body literacy.

How have we managed to travel so far in our faith in two thousand years and yet failed to grasp the importance of looking after our bodies, seeing them as part of our worshipful response to God and a way in which we reflect him? I feel trepidatious when suggesting this. It seems personal, and I baulk at the thought of hurting anyone who is already suffering under the limitations of their bodies in a world which so often seems antagonistic to their thriving.

I can only offer, by way of empathy, that I too walk this tightrope, and I have come to realise that I have far more agency over my health and wellbeing than I thought by the daily choices I make. This may be daunting to some, and it can be frustrating at times. But overall, it is an exciting journey, rewarded when I bear the fruits of good choices that make a marked difference to how I experience the abundant life that Christ has called me to live (Jn 10:10).

I love being a mum to a very busy two-year-old and caffeine became my new best friend, as I'm sure many of you will relate to! That morning caffeine hit seemed to supercharge me. But then, in the form of debilitating migraines, my body told me it did not like this daily choice I was making. I read an article by Dr Rangan Chatterjee,[3] a celebrity GP I admire for his holistic approach to medicine, which listed common dietary triggers for migraines. They include gluten and



1 This article is inspired by the chapter on practical wisdom in G. J. Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2001), in which he draws from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics.*

2 Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, 109: "For with the presence of the single virtue of practical reason all the virtues are present".

3 https://drchatterjee.com/blog/the-cause-behind-the-pain/

dairy, which I already avoid, but also, eggs and shellfish, which were new to me. With Lent coming up, it was clear this was an opportunity for a reset, and in line with Dr Chatterjee's advice, an elimination from my diet of these known aggravators.

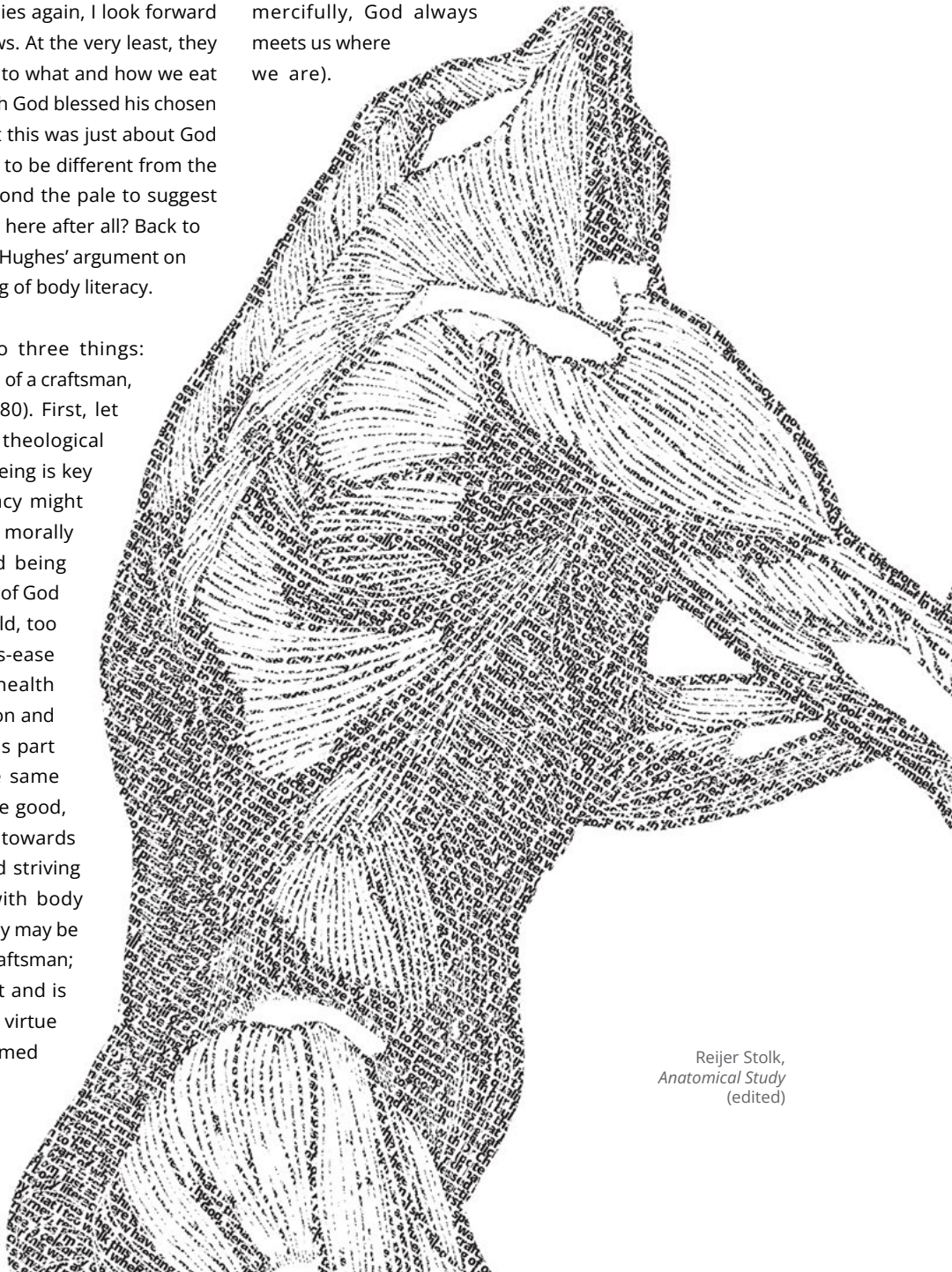
Don't we know that people must make far, far harder choices in their day-to-day lives, but nevertheless, I still felt the chagrin of my situation; slowly more and more things (potentially) being off the menu. Is this normal, I ask myself? Is there something unusual, even wrong, about having to be so careful all the time? And then it occurred to me that perhaps there is something interesting in assuming that we should not have to be careful at all?

When I resume my doctoral studies again, I look forward to reviewing the Levitical dietary laws. At the very least, they demonstrate that careful attention to what and how we eat was part of the means through which God blessed his chosen people. It is generally assumed that this was just about God setting his people apart. They were to be different from the surrounding cultures. But is it beyond the pale to suggest that maybe there was more at play here after all? Back to practical wisdom and a brief look at Hughes' argument on Aristotle's text for our understanding of body literacy.

Practical thinking is related to three things: theoretical thinking, the practical skill of a craftsman, and the moral virtues (Hughes, 880). First, let us look at theoretical thinking. A theological understanding of health and wellbeing is key to understanding how body literacy might form part of what it means to be morally virtuous. We freely speak of God being Good. But what if we were to speak of God being Health? Does it seem too bold, too insensitive perhaps, within the dis-ease of our human experience? Yet, health marks both the beginning of creation and its fulfilment.[4] By locating health as part of God's essential identity, in the same way his goodness compels us to be good, his healthiness should compel us towards health. It is a moral obligation and striving towards it a virtuous practice, with body literacy a tool. Secondly, body literacy may be equated to the practical skill of a craftsman; it is something that must be learnt and is not always intuitive. Thirdly, moral virtue is also something that must be formed through practice, as does body literacy. Like honing a practical skill, it is often a case of trial and error, and a refining of one's understanding of what is the morally virtuous choice as pertains to our whole-person health.

What does living a fulfilled life mean to you? And does safeguarding the health that you have been given and striving towards it as a universal good form part of that?

Hughes spends some time reflecting on Aristotle's understanding of the point of practical wisdom. He states that its purpose is to achieve a fulfilled life. He defines fulfilment as "a way of living a particular kind of life thoughtfully" (Hughes, 93). A life that is both reflective and intentional. What does living a fulfilled life mean to you? And does safeguarding the health that you have been given and striving towards it as a universal good form part of that? It does for me as I experience a greater availability to God, if you like, when I feel well (though mercifully, God always meets us where we are).



Reijer Stolk, *Anatomical Study* (edited)

4 See Genesis 2 and Revelation 22

Hughes believes that Aristotle's construction of means and ends is not binary; rather, one shapes the other. He calls on the virtues to display this point. Kindness, for example, may be a universal term, but the particulars of what it means to be kind in any given circumstance rests upon the moral judgement of the individual. Shaped by reason, experience, and discernment, the practice of this skill then refines the understanding of kindness itself (Hughes, 102). This is useful when it comes to talking about body literacy, as we learn the art of making wise and healthy choices for ourselves. It is both art and science. We know when our bodies are not happy with our choices with a myriad of low-level physical complaints, but which are nevertheless irksome and can worsen if not checked. Education about how our bodies function can help us to make sense of our experience and aid us in making healthier choices.

By creating a theological framework for body literacy, I hope eventually to make at least a small contribution to the church to be able to respond to the western health crisis of our time, by compelling followers of Christ to attend to their bodies as well as their souls. Our actions towards them are as important as any of our actions in our Christian lives. What I like about Hughes' take on Aristotle's work is its relational feel; the interplay between the different components, such as reason and emotion in moral judgment. So too, a journey into body literacy will be mindful and responsive to our situations. I hope this softens what might appear at first a burden. Like any skill or craft, and like all the virtues, body literacy can be prayed about, learnt about and refined through experience. But with health embedded in a theoretical understanding of the nature of God, what it cannot be is discarded as irrelevant to what it means for us to grow ever more deeply into Christ.

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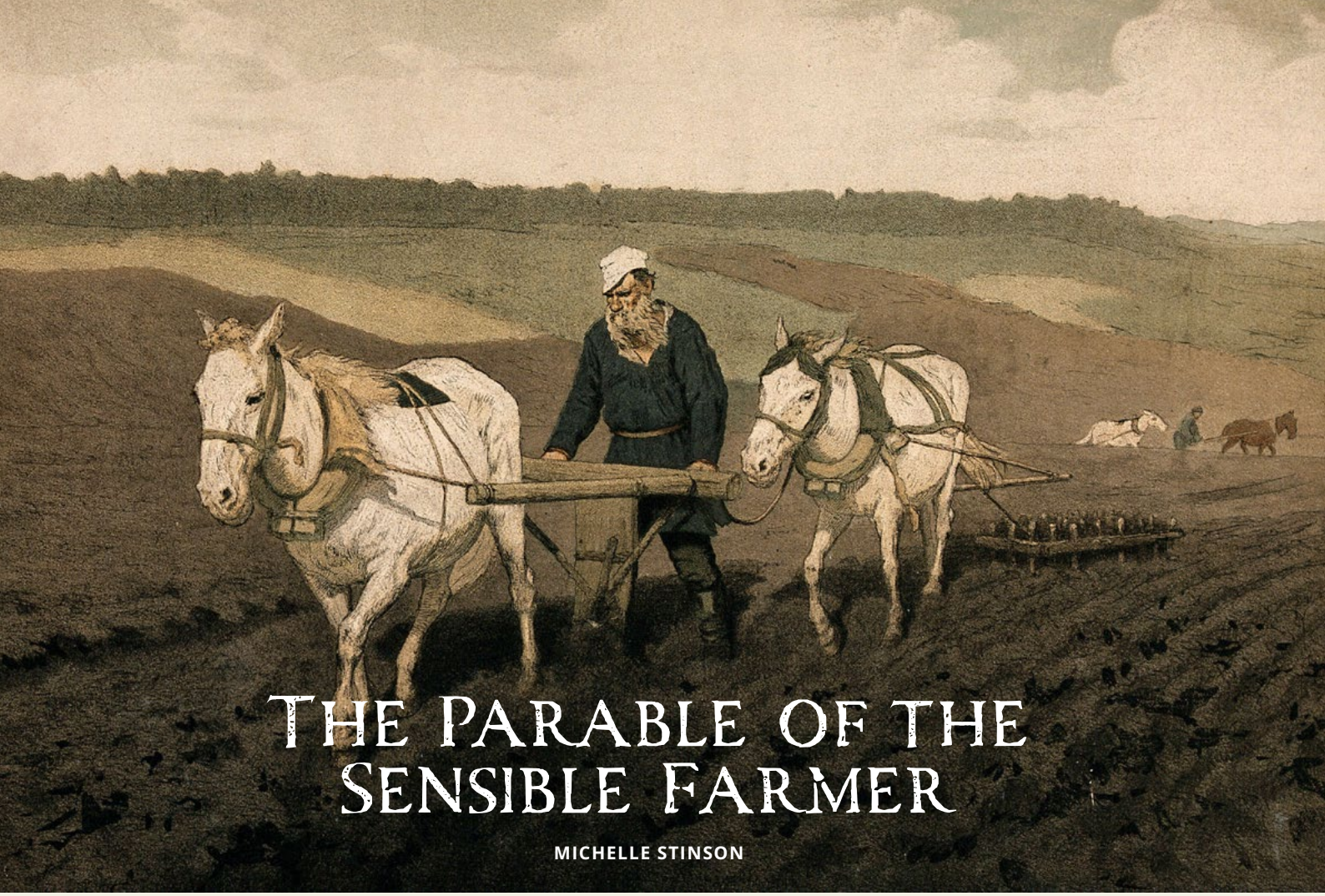


The Parable of the Sensible Farmer

MICHELLE STINSON

In his essay "Solving for Pattern," contemporary farmer and essayist Wendell Berry argues that "a good solution always answers the question, 'How much is enough?'" He notes, "The good health of a farm implies a limit of scale, because it implies a limit of attention, and because such a limit is invariably implied by any pattern."[1] While Berry's concern here is the "side effects" of industrial agriculture, his sage advice about scope and limits is as pastoral as it is practical. This arena of agriculture is right at home in the Hebrew Bible. Images and illustrations from fields and farmlands appear regularly within the text. One of the better-known agricultural images of Judah as a metaphorical "vineyard" occurs twice within the Book of Isaiah (Is 5:1-7, 27:2-6; cf. Matt 21:33-44). Tucked into this same book, amid chapters of woe and anticipated judgment (Is 28-31), agriculture again takes centre stage as the prophet delivers what some scholars have aptly referred to as "the Farmer's Parable" (Is 28:23-29). Sharing deep resonance with Berry's question, "How much is enough?," the prophet Isaiah invites the audience to consider the actions of a sensible farmer as an expression of God's wisdom in the world.

1 Berry expands on this idea: "A healthy farm incorporates a pattern that a single human mind can comprehend, make, maintain, vary in response to circumstances, and pay steady attention to." Wendell Berry, "Solving for Pattern," in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 142.

The Farmer's Parable

This Farmer's Parable breaks the flow of impending doom in the surrounding material. Here the prophet – in the style of a wisdom teacher – issues an emphatic call to listen, employing four imperatives in rapid succession: "Turn your ear and hear my voice; pay attention and hear my message" (Is 28:23).[2] With the attention of the audience sufficiently commandeered, the prophet begins a three-part agrarian lesson, aptly beginning with the start of the agricultural year:

> 24 Day after day does a ploughman plough in order to sow?
> Does he continuously open and harrow his soil?

The prophet's message commences with two straightforward rhetorical questions pertaining to ploughing and sowing. If the goal is to sow seed, does a ploughman endlessly plough? Does the farmer open the ground and turn over the soil continually if the intent is to plant a crop? Even with a limited exposure to the world of farming, I know that the answer is "of course not." One ploughs in order to ready the soil for planting.

2 All biblical quotations are the author's own translation. While I have followed the MT in referring to the farmer with a masculine pronoun, women would have been co-laborers in the farming family of the ancient world.

The violent actions of ploughing and harrowing are not ends in themselves.

The prophet continues with another set of rhetorical questions, this time relating to sowing seed:

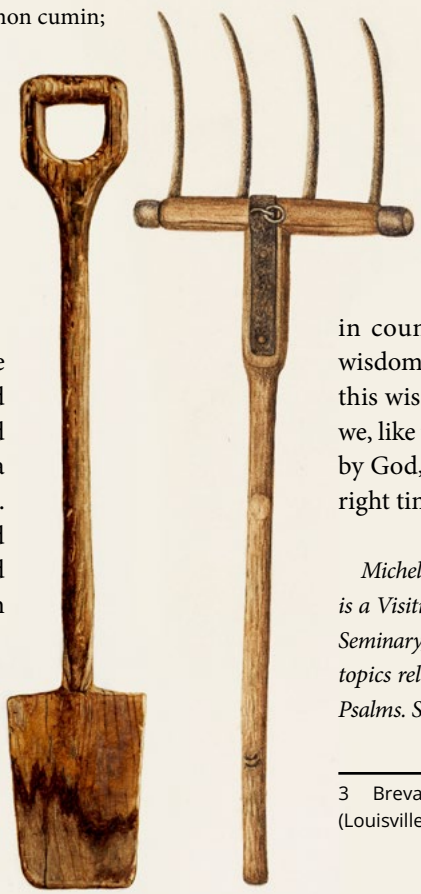
> 25 When he has levelled its surface,
> does he not scatter black cumin
> and toss common cumin?
> Does he not put wheat in rows
> and barley in its proper place,
> and emmer as its border?
> 26 For he is instructed in right principles;
> his God teaches him.

Here we find a diversity of crops in this proverbial farmer's field: black cumin, common cumin, wheat, barley, and emmer. And with each seed, the prophet highlights different methods for sowing. Tiny seeds like black and common cumin are best broadcast in a field. Larger seeds – like wheat, barley, and emmer – can be put in marked out rows and plots. Each seed is sown in the most appropriate way. The prophet concludes that it is God who has taught the farmer his skill.

The prophet continues the instruction in verses 27-28, now considering the methods of processing the harvested spices and grains.

> 27 Black cumin is not threshed with a sledge,
> nor is a wheeled cart rolled over common cumin;
> but black cumin
> is beaten out with a rod,
> and common cumin with a staff.
> 28 Grain is crushed for bread,
> but it is not threshed forever;
> he drives the wheeled cart
> and horses over it,
> but does not pulverise it.

Four different tools and techniques are described for processing the harvested crops: rod, staff, threshing sledge, wheeled cart. Each type of seed is dealt with in a way suitable to its size and characteristics. To treat all the harvested crops alike would be ruinous! Small seeds like cumin would easily become lost under the hoofs of an oxen pulling a threshing sledge. The added weight of a sledge or wheeled cart, however, was essential for removing grain from the stock. Still, as verse 28 acknowledges, there is a limit to the productive effort of these heavy farming implements. The prophet acknowledges that grains need to be finely ground for bread flour, but this work should be done at the hearth … not the threshing floor!



God the Wise Farmer

Much of this farming advice recalls the kind of practical instruction one might find in an *Old Farmer's Almanac*. However, when read within its historical context, there seems to be more to this Farmer's Parable. While verse 26 acknowledges the role of God in the practical instruction of farming practices, the parable concludes with another reference to God, in this case, God's deep wisdom in discernment:

> 29 This too comes from the LORD of Hosts;
> he is wonderful in counsel,
> and he increases sound wisdom.

As seen in this parable, this "sound wisdom" involves discretion and discrimination. It is wisdom based on proper limits and sensible methods.

Unlike the "parables of the vineyard" in Isaiah 5 and 27, this passage offers no direct interpretation. For Judah, in the midst of impending invasion by the Assyrians, this parable may have held words of unexpected hope. Could it be that the inevitable judgment, like ploughing, would not last forever? And like the parable's sensible farmer, might God also know what tool to use in order to achieve a purposeful goal without destroying the nation? Might the pain of Judah's present moment belong, as Childs remarks, "to a larger agricultural plan"?[3] For modern readers, this parable may offer a similar invitation to trust in this same God who is "wonderful in counsel" and who "increases sound wisdom." In our turbulent times, we need this wisdom more than ever. And so may we, like the parable's sensible farmer taught by God, know the right thing to do at the right time in the right measure.

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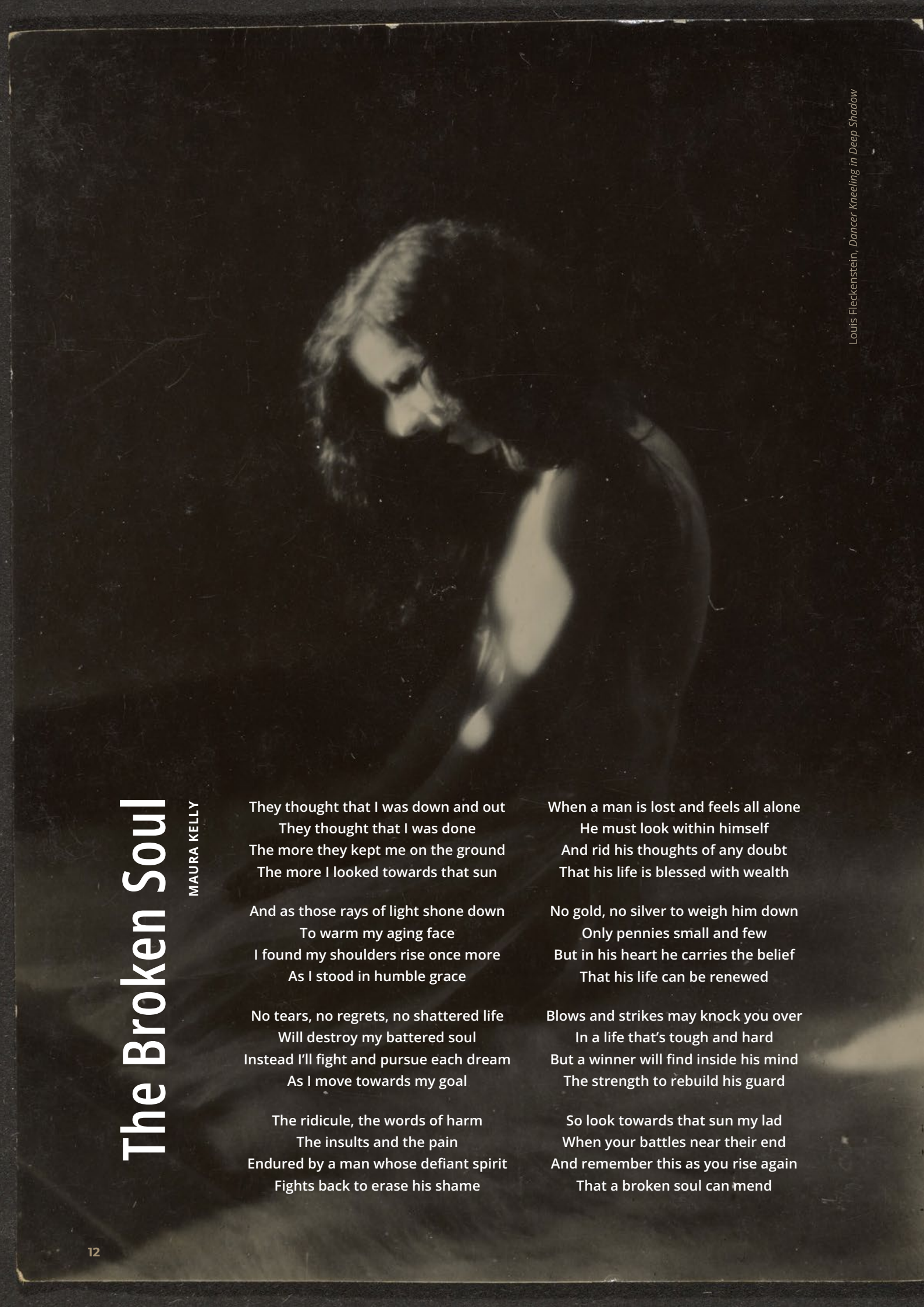
3 Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 210.



Louis Fleckenstein, *Dancer Kneeling in Deep Shadow*

The Broken Soul

MAURA KELLY

They thought that I was down and out
They thought that I was done
The more they kept me on the ground
The more I looked towards that sun

And as those rays of light shone down
To warm my aging face
I found my shoulders rise once more
As I stood in humble grace

No tears, no regrets, no shattered life
Will destroy my battered soul
Instead I'll fight and pursue each dream
As I move towards my goal

The ridicule, the words of harm
The insults and the pain
Endured by a man whose defiant spirit
Fights back to erase his shame

When a man is lost and feels all alone
He must look within himself
And rid his thoughts of any doubt
That his life is blessed with wealth

No gold, no silver to weigh him down
Only pennies small and few
But in his heart he carries the belief
That his life can be renewed

Blows and strikes may knock you over
In a life that's tough and hard
But a winner will find inside his mind
The strength to rebuild his guard

So look towards that sun my lad
When your battles near their end
And remember this as you rise again
That a broken soul can mend

Ancestral Threads: The Art of Remembering

CAS MONACO

I remember family gatherings as a child where my maternal grandmother would assemble all the women around a big red blanket box for the ritual display of the heirloom quilts. My grandmother, a stalwart woman, would carefully lift each quilt, one by one from the wooden chest. Then, as she ceremoniously unfurled each one, she would point out the intricate designs and tiny stitches that held together the colorful patterns.

She instructed us to remember. These precious heirlooms reflect the work of our grandmothers and great grandmothers. Somewhere along the way, just to be sure, she pinned notes to each quilt to help us remember. Those notes, written in pencil in her distinctive handwriting have long since faded, but the quilts, the memories and the ritual remain.

All these years later, I do not really remember if my keen interest in these ancestral artifacts were related to my grandmother's stories, the quilts themselves, or a combination of both. Something about my curiosity must have prompted my mother, the keeper of the quilts back then, to pass them down to me.

Stories Matter

My grandmother always championed our ancestral history and did her best to etch in our minds the importance of these quilts and our ancestors. She worked diligently to prepare a small booklet, *Some Forebears and Descendants of Captain Abner Seelye*,[1] from the notes of her late sister Anita Celeste Seeley Payne (1902–1958), and left scads behind for me, my siblings and our cousins as a perennial reminder of her and our relatives.

My grandmother always championed our ancestral history and did her best to etch in our minds the importance of these quilts and our ancestors.

My Great Aunt Anita had traced the history of the Seeley family dating all the way back to Edward Fuller (1575–1621) before her untimely death. According to her documented discoveries, Edward, his wife (unnamed), their son Samuel and Dr. Samuel Fuller fled England on the British ship the Mayflower bound for the Americas. The Mayflower set sail on September 16, 1620, from Plymouth, England and dropped anchor on November 11, 1620, near the tip of what is known today as Cape Cod, Massachusetts. *The Mayflower Compact,* the first governing document of the Plymouth Colony, was signed by forty-one of the fifty men aboard that same day – including Edward, my twelfth great-grandfather. Edward and his wife died soon after leaving their son Samuel in the care of his uncle.

Later, we learned, Captain Abner Seeley ((1768–1841) to whom this compilation is dedicated, fought in all eight years of the American Revolution (1775–1783). It appears likely that Anita traced his forebears and descendants to allow for lineage-based enrolment in the Mayflower Society and the Society for The National Society Daughters of the American Revolution. Unsurprisingly, many of the quilting designs familiar to us in the United States today were introduced by British settlers and colonists, including some of our family's ancestors.[2]

1 Iris Seeley Bridwell, *Some Forebears and Descendants of Captain Abner Seeley, From the Notes of Anita Celeste* (Seeley) Payne, November 1, 1961.

2 See Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt: A History of Cloth and Comfort 1750–1980* (New York: Potter Style, 2004). My research uncovered a rich history of quilting, some of which is included in this beautifully illustrated publication.

Piece by Piece

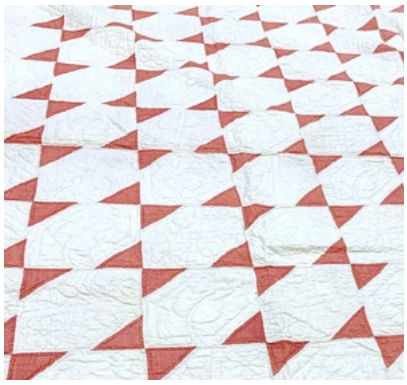
The art of quilting originated in ancient China, Egypt and India and involves stitching two pieces of fabric together with a layer of padding in between. Apparently, quilting emerged in England in the thirteenth century. By the seventeenth century, professionals in London, Canterbury and Exeter stitched quilting into silk breeches and coverlets worn by the wealthy while, in the domestic sphere, various designs were pieced together by women, often in community, to mark birthdays and weddings and other special occasions.

The Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) brought with it colorful mass-produced fabrics, and quilting became more and more accessible. Women frequently used scraps of fabric, often stored in "grab bags," and pieced together colorful and elaborate coverlets for beds or window and door hangings to fight back the cold. Eventually, quilting came to North America by way of English and Dutch settlers who passed down the skill from mother to daughter, as evidenced by my collection below.

The Sawtooth

The Sawtooth Pattern found its way to the American colonies by way of European immigrants between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The Sawtooth design belongs to the Medallion family of patterns and focuses on the center with blocks that branch out symmetrically or asymmetrically. Celeste Margaret Reynard Freeman (1823–1894), my third great grandmother, quilted this sometime between 1880–1920.

Half Snowball



The Half Snowball, also from the Medallion family, originated with the Amish in the late nineteenth century. The Snowball design was created as an optical illusion that from a distance resembles circles like snowballs. *Double pink* or *cinnamon pink* fabric rose to popularity in the 1840s and 1850s. This quilt is attributed to my second great grandmother, Ambrosine Celeste Freeman Britton (1854–1941).

Grandmother's Flower Garden

Grandmother's Flower Garden appeared sometime after World War I and Grandmother's Flower Garden styles are as various as the fabrics. Beautiful designs emerge as hundreds of multicolored hexagons, painstakingly pieced together, form flower gardens, garden paths, and even full landscapes. This colorful quilt is attributed to my great grandmother, Mary Catherine Britton Seeley (1876–1956).

The Iris – Mountain Mist

The Iris Mountain Mist provides an example of a modern hand-appliqué quilt and one that would have taken much more time to create than any of the other quilts in the collection. The trim, pieced together in different but similar shades of green, perhaps illustrates the fact that green, a hard-to-set dye, was difficult to come by at the time. This beautiful coverlet was quilted by my grandmother Iris Amby Seeley Bridwell (1905–1988).

Notably many familiar quilt patterns are African in origin and became popular through the work of enslaved

Africans in the mid-seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century. Researchers recently discovered that an elaborate code language was embedded in familiar quilt patterns. Quilts purposefully hung from porch railings or open windows provided crucial information for people who sought safe passage on the Underground Railroad to eventual freedom.[3] The Shoo Fly is one of those patterns and is displayed as the only "anonymous" quilt in the group.

Shoo Fly

The Shoo Fly quilt here is much more rudimentary in style. Surprisingly, this practice quilt passed my grandmother's muster and bears no name. The uneven stitches and the still visible pencil marks display the work of a beginner and was most likely sewn in the late 1920s or early 1930s.

Irish Chain

I was in my late twenties when my mom passed away suddenly from lung cancer – just a few months after her mother, my grandmother. In a handwritten will she left the heirloom quilts to me, but not before piecing one together for me. One of her quilting friends finished the work she began and even marked with my mom's initials the one square she had managed to quilt before her death. The Irish Chain pattern, one of the earliest patchwork designs, originated in the United States in the early nineteenth century. This quilt is attributed to my mother, Iris Margaret Bridwell Kelly (1936–1988).

From One Generation to the Next

The Scriptures often remind us to look ahead, to anticipate our eternal inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us – an inheritance we long to behold. My grandmother taught us and is still teaching us that it is also important to look back, to remember those who have gone before us, to honor the memory of our mothers and grandmothers whose collective legacy is preserved in these simple and beautiful artifacts.

As I worked on this article, I pulled out the quilts from my cedar chest, and just like my grandmother before me, I carefully unfurled each one. I admired the intricate handiwork, the flourish of color, and repeated the names of my mother and grandmothers whose blood runs in my veins, and I am honored that my mother entrusted me with the care of our earthly inheritance. Although I do not have children of my own (nor do I quilt), I have pieced together these words to honor the memories of those who have gone before us and to preserve the ritual of the quilt. In due time, I will pass on these ancestral threads to my niece, Elaine, the next Keeper of the Quilts.[4]

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3 See Jacqueline L. Tobin, Raymond G. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 104–105.

4 Julianne Walther, a professional quilter and certified quilt appraiser, provided her expertise and some of the information related to the heirloom quilts shown here.

A Civilisational Threat

THE IMPACT OF SMARTPHONES ON HEALTHY FORMATION

JASON FLETCHER

We are living in revolutionary times. Far reaching changes have been taking place in society at great speed. Over the past seventy-five years, a series of new technologies have become embedded into our lives: television, film, personal computers, gaming, mobile phones, the internet, and smartphones. This last innovation has had a particularly profound social impact. Alarm bells are ringing increasingly loudly.

What we need in order to keep our bearings amidst bewildering technological change is theoretical clarity. In particular, we need an anthropology that explains clearly what we are and the conditions that make our flourishing most likely. Only then will we be able to discern how new technologies might contribute to or undermine the flourishing we seek for ourselves and our children.

At Heritage School, Cambridge (heritageschool.org.uk), we approach such macro-questions as Christians, and, more specifically, we do so within the Charlotte Mason tradition. Charlotte Mason (1842-1923) was a Christian educational theorist and reformer who founded the Parents National Education Union (PNEU) in the late 19th century. It was her work that inspired us to start Heritage School in 2007.

My specific concern in this article is the threat posed by smartphones, but my reference to them should be taken to include excessive screen use more generally. In what follows I will elaborate three fundamentals of Charlotte Mason's educational theory before drawing some conclusions about why we should see smartphones as a serious, even civilisation-level, threat.

Knowledge

Most of us would agree that knowledge is at the heart of education. But we need to clarify what we mean by the term. In contrast to a one-dimensional, utilitarian view of knowledge as mere information or data that helps us perform a function, Charlotte Mason saw knowledge as something far richer and three-dimensional and as something *necessary* for healthy formation.

We cannot make sense of this claim unless we locate her thinking within a Christian framework. As a Christian, she believed, to put it simply, that reality is two, not one; it is made up of matter and spirits, not just matter. Next, she believed that persons are a unity of two, made up of bodies and souls, not just bodies. These two points may seem removed from the practicalities of school life, but Charlotte Mason was right that any adequate theory of education must build from the bottom up. We need, after all, to know what we're aiming at as educators, and to do that we must have an answer to the question: what is a person and how do persons grow? It is worth noting, by way of contrast, that she understood clearly how impoverished is a materialist account of persons. Such a philosophy, she said, is both inadequate and unnecessary, inadequate because "there is more in man than this philosophy has ever dreamt of", and unnecessary

because "other philosophies give a more successful account of the phenomena that a human being presents."[1]

What was Charlotte Mason's answer? She believed that we are "embodied spiritual beings" who have been made in the divine image. Next, she believed that we are born with an internal spiritual dynamism which propels us towards the enjoyment of relations with God and with other created things and beings, and that we flourish only to the extent that we are able to make good these manifold potential relations.

This anthropology, then, is the key to understanding her conception of knowledge, and it explains why the word she most uses to describe knowledge is "relation." What she means when she talks about knowing is the formation or the development of a bond of connection, a relation, to something or someone. In using the term relation she understands that this connection involves giving and receiving. As we reach outward and get in touch with creation, with others, with the best of human culture past and present, and with God, we receive something back. We are fed by it. And the effect is that we become, as Charlotte Mason would say, larger people. "By knowledge one grows, becomes more of a person, and that is all there is to show for it."[2]

Thus conceived, the *telos* of education is clear: to help children establish as many life-giving relations as possible. So central is this idea that Charlotte Mason describes education as "the science of relations," the study of how best to enable children to establish and deepen them. "The setting up of relations, moral and intellectual," she writes, "is our chief concern in life."[3]

Attention

A second closely related concept is that of attention, which she describes like this: "Attention is … simply the act by which the whole mental force is applied to the subject in hand."[4] And it is, she says, "of supreme importance".[5] One reason for this is that it enables a child to maximise his or her potential. "It is impossible to overstate the importance of this habit of attention … for whatever the natural gifts of the child, it is only so far as the habit of attention is cultivated in him that he is able to make use of them."[6]

However, for Charlotte Mason, realising potential, rather than being a vague, well-meaning cliché, takes on a definite, more urgent significance when set in the context of her theory of becoming. It is only when a person applies the whole of his or her mental force to the subject in hand, that is, when a person really gives of himself or herself patiently, even reverently, to something or someone else, that the knowledge-as-relation that leads to growth becomes possible.

She illustrates, by contrast, the problem of inattention, with respect to a young child: "Watch him at his investigations: he flits from thing to thing with less purpose than a butterfly amongst the flowers, staying at nothing long enough to get

1 Charlotte Mason, *School Education* (London: Kegan Paul, Trech, Trubner & Co, Ltd, 1924), 54.
2 Charlotte Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education* (London: Kegan Paul, Trech, Trubner & Co, Ltd, 1925), 325.
3 Mason, *School Education,* 78.
4 Charlotte Mason, *Home Education* (London: Kegan Paul, Trech, Trubner & Co, Ltd, 1930), 145.
5 Mason, *Home Education*, 137.
6 Mason, *Home Education*, 147.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the habit of attention. Whatever one's natural gifts, it is only so far as one cultivates the habit of attention that one is able to make use of them.

the good out of it."[7] Without attention, without staying at it long enough, we remain undernourished and growth is stunted.

Agency

A third fundamental for Charlotte Mason, intertwined with the previous two, is her understanding of agency. As noted above, she believed that a person is a unity of two, of body and soul. Affirming the existence of soul (or mind) as distinct from matter is essential if we are to speak meaningfully about agency. For Charlotte Mason, agency is at the centre of what it means to be human. "The will," she says, "is the man."[8]

One application of this conviction is the emphasis she places upon what she calls self-education. As we have seen, attention leading to knowledge-as-relation demands *self-giving*. Real education cannot be done to you; it must be done by you. She regularly criticises spoon feeding and "cramming" as shallow and shortsighted. "Self-education," she writes, "is the only possible education; the rest is mere veneer laid on the surface of a child's nature."[9]

Because agency is so central to her anthropology, the Prime Minister of the government of Mansoul as she expresses it, it is not surprising that she sees the strengthening of the will as central to education. "It is time that we realised that to *fortify the will* is one of the great purposes of education."[10] She wanted children to learn, in the face of numerous challenges and threats, to wisely direct their own lives.

She recognised, however, that the gradual strengthening of a child's will is a long-term and subtle process. "A vigorous self-compelling will," she writes, "is the flower of a developed character."[11] Of first importance is the curating of desire through an inspiring, ideas-rich curriculum, one where "precept and example flow in from the lives and thoughts of other men, men of antiquity and men of the hour, as unconsciously and spontaneously as the air we breathe."[12] Ever humane, she understands too that, for all of us, will-power flags. Children need, she says, rest and diversion, after which they can return to a task with fresh energy. Another essential tool in the hands of parents and educators to support the strengthening of will-power is habit formation. We owe it to children, she says, to help them establish good habits, lest bad ones become established by default. Likening them to rails for a locomotive, she writes, "It is easier for the child to follow lines of habit carefully laid down than to run off these lines at his peril."[13]

She saw, then, two possible outcomes for every young person: the directed life or the drifting life. On the one hand, she writes, there is "the possibility of a drifting, easy life led by appetite or desire in which will plays no part." On the other hand, there is "the other possibility of using the power and responsibility proper to him as a person and willing as he goes."[14]

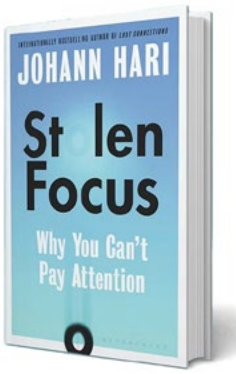
Conclusions

Having explored some of the fundamentals of Charlotte Mason's educational theory, let's return now to the presenting issue. What light might they shed on why smartphones pose such a serious threat? Hopefully, the lines of critique are readily apparent.

Many years ago, I found a book by Nicholas Carr helpful – *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember*. "What the Net seems to be doing,"

7 Mason, *Home Education*, 140.
8 Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, 133.
9 Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, 240.
10 Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, 131.
11 Mason, *Home Education*, 139.
12 Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, 137.
13 Mason, *Home Education*, 109.
14 Mason, *Towards a Philosophy of Education*, 131-132.

he wrote in 2010, "is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation."[15] Unlike 2010, the internet is now instantly accessible 24/7 through smartphones and, as Johann Hari explains in his more recent book *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention*, the most powerful companies the world has ever seen are aggressively seeking to capture and hold our attention – in order to make money. He quotes Professor of Neuroscience Earl Miller of MIT, who believes that smartphone-induced distractions have created in our culture "a perfect storm of cognitive degradation".[16] They are, he argues, undermining our capacity to make deeper connections, which are essential for real creativity: "Your mind, given free undistracted time, will automatically think back over everything it absorbed, and it will start to draw links between them in new ways." We need, he says, to give our brains "opportunity to follow your associative links down to new places and really [have] truly original and creative thoughts."[17]



Another of Charlotte Mason's helpful insights is that thought travels in what we might call trains-of-association. If we are not careful, she explains, we could find our thought-life hijacked. She describes such a dehumanising state of affairs rather bluntly: "To be at the mercy of associations, to have no power to think what we choose when we choose, but only as something 'puts it into our head,' is to be no better than an imbecile."[18] One need not wonder too long what she would think about screen-time statistics today, or about, for example, the phenomenon known as doomscrolling.[19] In his book, *Stand Out Of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy*, building on insights from Neil Postman, James Williams argues that information super-abundance, particularly as served up through smartphones, has created a crisis of self-regulation. He sees our increasing inability to direct our own lives as a serious political concern and concludes that "the liberation of human attention may be the defining moral and political struggle of our time."[20]

The problem, then, with the excessive and obsessive screen use that characterises smartphone culture is that it strikes directly and forcefully, like an axe, at two of the deepest roots of the tree of our humanity: attention and agency. It is severing our capacity for the knowledge-as-relation that is the necessary condition for growth and human flourishing. With roots thus compromised will we really be able to bear fruit, or endure drought and storm? The stakes could hardly be higher, and the cost in the broken lives of our young people is both irresponsible and tragic.[21] I believe it is no exaggeration to say that the social revolution we are living through is a civilisational threat.

Anchored as we have been at Heritage School in the theoretical clarity of Charlotte Mason, we have never been tempted by ed-tech, and we have always recognised the opportunity cost of screen time and the threat posed by smartphones to healthy formation. In our community, we nurture a culture that overwhelmingly prioritises the embodied and the real – and the book. Although many sensitive people are concerned, it seems to me that Christians have a particular reason to be so. We are, after all, people of the book, who understand that patient, attentive engagement with a text and deep listening are at the heart of spiritual formation.

Despite the scale of the crisis, there is always reason to be hopeful. The establishment of Smartphone Free Childhood and Smartphone Free Schools campaigns here in the UK is one such reason. My hope is that this movement and others like it will gather pace, and that with collective action we can create robust communities of resistance, and that this might in turn contribute to a wider redefinition of prevailing social norms.

Jason Fletcher is the founding headmaster of Heritage School in Cambridge, which was established in 2007. Heritage has attracted attention recently because of its principled commitment to screen-free learning.

15 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), 6.
16 Johann Hari, *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 39.
17 Hari, *Stolen Focus*, 37.
18 Mason, *Home Education*, 139.
19 Doomscrolling is the compulsive consumption of material online, particularly bad or negative news stories.
20 James Williams, *Stand Out of Our Light: Freedom and Resistance in the Attention Economy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), xii.
21 See Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (London: Allen Lane, 2024).

Elijah and the Healing of Depression and Fear: 1 Kings 19

CHRIS WRIGHT

Jan Muller, *Elijah Fed by Ravens*

The story of Elijah's collapse and restoration in 1 Kings 19 comes as quite a surprise. For, in 1 Kings 18, we see Elijah at the pinnacle of his ministry. There he is on Mt Carmel, taking on the whole army of the prophets of Baal single-handedly in the name of the living God of Israel, and achieving a stunning, fiery victory. But here in chapter 19 he is in the depths of suicidal despair, defeat and fear, running for his life and praying to die.

A. The Ingredients of Elijah's Depression

1. Emotional factors

Shock (vv. 1-2). After Mt Carmel, Elijah probably had high expectations. Such a signal defeat of the god Baal must surely lead to a full-blown national revival. Instead, the next day, he received news of this terrible threat to his life from Queen Jezebel. It must have been a severe and unexpected shock, going from being the hero of the moment to being a wanted man with a death threat hanging over him. It was the ruin of all his hopes and plans.

In 1 Kings 18, we see Elijah at the pinnacle of his ministry. But here in chapter 19 he is in the depths of suicidal despair, defeat and fear, running for his life and praying to die.

Fear (v. 3a). This too is unexpected. We think of Elijah as an incredibly courageous man, yet here he drops into the very opposite: "Elijah was afraid and ran for his life!"

Christians, including pastors and missionaries, are not immune to such emotions. We are not insulated against sudden bad news or real threats. And we are not (and should not be) emotional stoics who feel nothing (or pretend to). It can happen to any of us. Maybe it already has.

2. Physical factors

Isolation (v. 3b). Perhaps it was out of kindness to his servant that Elijah left him behind at Beersheba. We do not really know, but the result was that Elijah was on his own. Now, he had been on his own before, of course. But this time, in his present frame of mind, his isolation became an insidious thing. Isolation is a perfect incubator for anxiety and depression.

Exhaustion (vv. 4-5). Just think for a moment of that long, tense day on Mt Carmel, followed by his marathon run to Jezreel (18:46). Then, immediately, he decides to head south to Beersheba, which is in the extreme south of Judah. The man was physically shattered. In such circumstances it is not at all surprising that Elijah sinks into deep despair.

Spiritual depression is quite often linked to physical factors such as weariness, hunger and lack of sleep. Such

things in themselves do not *cause* depression, but they certainly can exacerbate it and make it even harder to resist or just "shake it off" (which is not something we can do or should ever tell others to do).

3. Psychological factors

A "total-failure" complex (v. 4b). Read between the lines of what Elijah says to God. This is a total collapse of nerve, a sense of utter failure, leading to suicidal depression. And it seems so irrational (as depression often does). He had run away to save his life – but now he wants to die anyway. We need to use our imagination to grasp the mental turmoil in Elijah's head as he ran, finally all alone and in the depths of despair.

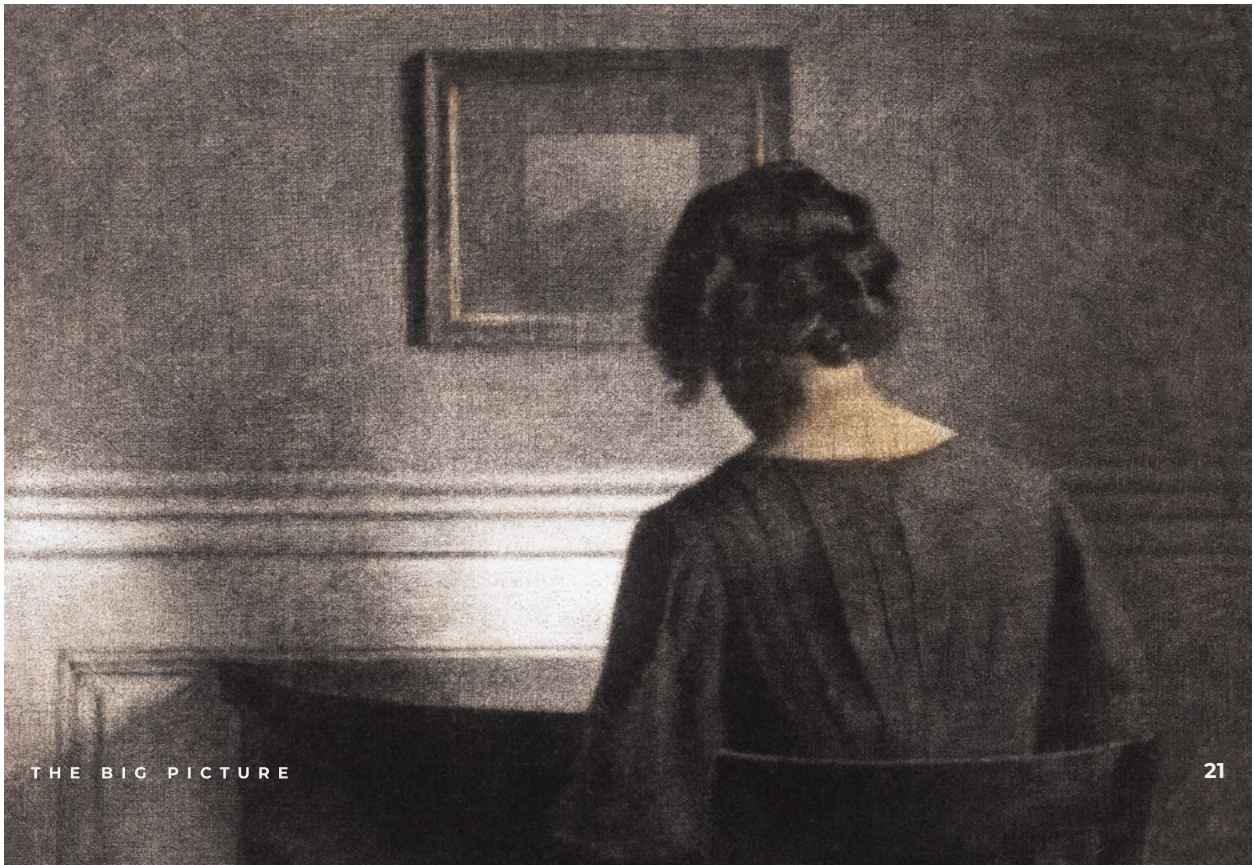
Distortion of the facts (vv. 10, 14). When someone is depressed, it usually does no good to tell them that they are only imagining things. Depression is not just fanciful. Sometimes it is related to facts but involves a distorted or partial reading of the facts. Elijah is selective and partial on some facts. For example, he makes much of his own zeal for the LORD. But there were others too who had not been unfaithful to Yahweh, and he not only knew it, he had met some of them, such as Obadiah (18:1-15). And he exaggerates some other facts. For example, he complains, "I alone am left." But what about his own servant, and Obadiah, and the 100 prophets in a cave somewhere?

Here, then, is another frequent ingredient in spiritual depression. We see only part of the whole picture – and usually the worst part. We get things out of perspective and when we sink into that bog of damaging and depressing thoughts, sometimes God has to take us aside and bring us back to *his* view of reality – which is what God eventually did with Elijah.

4. Spiritual factors

Failure to believe God's answer to his prayer. On Mt Carmel, Elijah had prayed that God would give unmistakable proof that "these people will know that you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again" (18:37). And that proof had come with the shouts of the people when the fire of the LORD fell on the restored altar and the sacrifice: "The LORD [not Baal!] – He is God." But now, in his depression and fear, he cannot even believe that it had really happened or that they had really meant it. His faith fails, even in the face of the evidence he had prayed for and had seen and heard for himself. This is astonishing. And yet it is not untypical. For in the throes of spiritual depression, even God's past answers to prayer, however wonderful and even spectacular, can seem like unreal, mocking memories.

Satanic attack. This is not mentioned explicitly, of course. However, the worship of Baal and the whole system of Canaanite idolatry was unquestionably bound up with the work of the one whom the Bible calls the devil or Satan. *And Elijah had challenged it!* And Satan fought back. Satan is a defeated enemy but never accepts defeat (until the time he will finally be destroyed). Look at the way he constantly plagued the ministry of Jesus. In the same way, we may discern his hand here in the circumstances that produced Elijah's suicidal thoughts, fear, and despair. We hardly need to be reminded that Satan, though defeated by Christ at the cross, is still alive and active in today's



Peter Ilsted, *Young Girl by a Semi-circular Table* (1909)

Here he is running away from his mission in disobedience and despair and God sends him *an angel* with fresh baked bread and a jar of clean, cold water. Here is God effectively mothering his servant.

world. He still fights back viciously against those who dare to challenge his dark world. This is one reason why acute depression quite often follows after some signal spiritual victory or "successful" period of ministry for the Lord.

These, then, are some of the ingredients of Elijah's depression. Let us turn, with relief, to the Master Therapist – God the healer at work.

B. Ingredients of the Divine Therapy

I marvel at the beauty and simplicity of the way God gently and yet firmly nursed his ailing servant back to wholeness and active service.

1. God gives him sleep, food, and drink (vv. 5-7)

God meets Elijah at the point of his most pressing and urgent need – his physical exhaustion, hunger, and thirst. God did not turn up demanding a serious spiritual counselling session. God did not rebuke him, call him out as a failure, or tell him to turn around and get back to work. On the contrary, not just once but twice, God refreshed Elijah with the gift of sleep and the provision of food and drink.

Now *sometimes* (but by no means always), that is all that is really needed to cure an episode of spiritual depression, if it is primarily linked to physical factors such as exhaustion. So, God showed his love for Elijah in the simplest possible way. He let the poor man sleep!

And the food! The menu and table service are provided by an angel this time. Here he is running away from his mission in disobedience and despair and God sends him *an angel* with fresh baked bread and a jar of clean, cold water. Here is God effectively mothering his servant. We may notice with regret that there is no mention of Elijah saying even a word of thanks. He just ate, drank, and went back to sleep! And God let him. For that was his greatest need at that moment. It may well be yours too. If so, receive God's permission, and let him care for you as his beloved in the simplest gifts of his grace – sleep, food and drink.

2. God takes him back to the roots of his faith and his mission (vv. 8-9)

Refreshed by the sleep and food, Elijah sets off for Mt Horeb, or, Mt Sinai (it was just an alternative name for the same place). But why did God take him to Sinai? Sinai was the place where God had revealed himself to his people, with great power and many signs. It was the place where God had established his covenant with his people. It was the place where God had given to the people of Israel their identity and mission, the place where God had given

instructions for the tabernacle, in which God had come to dwell in the midst of his people. It was the place where God had given Israel his guidance or instructions for how to live as a redeemed and holy people.

Sinai was, in a sense, the birthplace of Israel as a redeemed people with a mission for God, in relation to God's ultimate purpose to bring blessing to all nations on earth.

So, God brings Elijah back to Sinai, as if to say, "This is where you need to see things afresh. This is where you need to remember who I am, the LORD God of Israel, the I AM WHO I AM God. This is where you need to see your own calling as my prophet, in the light of what happened at this place centuries ago through my servant, the prophet Moses. Let's get back to basics, Elijah."

Sometimes this is also what depressed and broken Christians need to do. Go back, with God. Perhaps hear again the authoritative words of Jesus, "All authority in heaven and earth is given to me, so go and make disciples." Perhaps go back to that point in your own life where you heard that specific calling of God. Go back to the Bible itself, and to that great overarching story of the mission of God – the story within which God has called you to play your part. Go back, with God.

3. God questions his behaviour in the light of his mission (vv. 9, 13)

Only when he has got Elijah back to Sinai does God begin the real probing work of healing Elijah's depression and restoring him to service. And God does so in a typically surprising way. Elijah was very familiar with the stories of what happened at Mt Sinai and so the God of Sinai put on quite a show – wind, earthquake, and fire, such as old Moses had witnessed. But "the LORD was not in" any of those phenomena. So, clearly God was not trying to *scare* Elijah back to work. The God of Sinai can be as quiet as "a gentle whisper."

But a whisper can be as penetrating as a thundering shout, when it is God asking the questions. Into Elijah's brokenness, depression, fear, and negative self-pitying thoughts, God drops this persistent question.

"What are you doing here, Elijah?" Every word counts.

"*You* … Elijah" – whose name expresses your mission, "Yahweh is my God," what are *you* doing? What is all this running away from the job Yahweh gave you? "And what are you doing *here*," in the light of all that this place stands for? How do you square your behaviour with the knowledge of God and his people that you know is resonant in this place?

Sometimes this is how God deals with us also. Sometimes he uses the gentle rebuke, coupled with a question that allows us the freedom to express our inner thoughts (like a skilled counsellor). If such gentle divine questioning (whether in our own hearts or through the faithful ministry of a perceptive friend or pastor) leads to the stirring of repentance, then that is the first step up and out of the bog of self-pity and despair.

4. God sends him back on his mission with reassurance (vv. 15-18)

God did not drop Elijah from his service just because of this collapse and failure. God puts Elijah back together again and then sends him back to work with an even greater mission than the first (that is also typical of God).

And Elijah's mission goes on, for Elijah's God is our God. It is this God who knows our every weakness, who meets us in our frailty and sometimes in our failure and defeat, and who gently refreshes, restores, and reassures us too, with fresh work to do for him.

Rev Dr Chris Wright is Global Ambassador and Ministry Director of Langham Partnership (www.langham.org), the author of many books including commentaries and is a Senior Research Fellow at KLC. This article is an abbreviated form of a chapter first published in Jonathan Bonk et. al., eds., Missionaries, Mental Health and Accountability: Support Systems in Churches and Agencies *(Pasadena: William Carey Publishing, 2019), 2-10.*

SPIRITUAL TRAUMA & HEALING FOR THE CHURCH

MICHAEL WAGENMAN

Abraham Manievich, *Birch Trees*

When we think about health and wellbeing, we often have the individual in mind, but we don't often attend to the way in which institutions and communities can be healthy or unhealthy and can in turn affect the wellbeing of their members.

The Canadian psychologist Dr Hillary McBride and Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries teamed up to bring us the Holy/Hurt podcast (holyhurtpodcast.com), which explores spiritual trauma and healing. It is a key resource for Christians and churches to begin understanding the lived experience of spiritual/religious trauma and how to accompany those in need of healing. As a pastoral counsellor and spiritual director (pastoroasis.com), I had a conversation with Dr McBride and the CEO of Sanctuary (sanctuarymentalhealth.org), Dr Daniel Whitehead, about this important topic.

MW: My research on the power of the church as a civic institution began in 2010, just after the news broke in Canada about the clergy sex-abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church. With the claims about abuse of power in the church, I felt it was important to address the prior question: What is the positive side of the church's power? But it doesn't take long doing this kind of research to find out that abuse of power in the church is complex and widespread. Your Holy/Hurt podcast addresses this topic as well. Can you tell us how the idea for the podcast emerged for you, what it seeks to accomplish, and what its reception has been?

HM: As a psychologist, I am listening closely to the stories my patients tell about what hurts them, who they are, their inner longings, where they are wounded. I have long believed that religion and religious practices can be places of rest, comfort, meaning and stability. However, in working intimately with people with psychological injuries, it has become impossible to ignore that religious and spiritual experiences often have a role in their distress, mental-health concerns, and even the enduring legacy that lives on in their mind/body as trauma. As I listened to their stories, and I heard unifying themes, I knew I needed to learn more to better understand how to help the people I work for. I started researching, writing, and

speaking publicly about spiritual trauma and did so for a few years, teaching workshops, listening to more stories, and doing more research. This demanded I look at my own experiences of spiritual trauma, which until this point had been living mostly in the background of my awareness. It was my patients' bravery that helped me be brave enough to look at these places inside myself. Then, after hearing a popular podcast series about a spiritually and psychologically abusive church in America, I could hear the host and guests describing trauma without knowing that is what it was, without using that language, and I felt compelled to create more resources for people to understand how trauma happens, how it lives in them, and what to do to mend the wounds they carry. Although my goal is to empower survivors, tell their stories, and give them language and frameworks to make sense, I realized in creating this project that it is also a love letter to the church. The stories that have emerged since the release of this podcast have been so powerful. As people are engaging with it and are telling us about how it is impacting them, we are hearing that they are feeling relief, understanding, more trust in their bodies and space from the crushing shame they felt pinned under. I recently heard someone tell me that it is "the opposite of gaslighting." There was such demand for more material that I turned the podcast into a book and audiobook, which are set to come out April 15.

MW: We are coming to understand better that when someone has a life experience that is overwhelming, it is *traumatic*. Trauma isn't necessarily what happens to you but how you experience an emotional/relational wound because of what happens to you. Why is this growing understanding of trauma important for Christians?

HM: Although the church as I have experienced it, by and large, has longed to be a place for people who are weary and hurt to come and find rest and healing, churches have not always been at the forefront of trauma theory, neuroscience, and trauma-informed and trauma-safe approaches to building community. This has resulted in people who have trauma histories not feeling supported in a way that meets their needs. Additionally, I believe Christians, even when meaning well, can add to the trauma of their brothers and sisters. We also need to be honest about the intergenerational legacy of trauma that the church has as it relates to colonization and the Doctrine of Discovery. Our church history reveals that trauma is not something that happens "out there" but is a very big part of the way we are as churches in North America. Understanding trauma allows us to be better neighbors, create healthier communities where we can consider our wounds, even mend them together, see the beautiful and good things about the people who have suffered in our midst, and create communities where people with trauma can flourish. These things may seem to focus only on the most wounded amongst us, but the great surprise is that they actually support flourishing and health for us all. All our systems and the people within them benefit when we consider trauma.

MW: As a psychologist, you've probably worked with people who have been hurt by churches or church leaders. How does trauma show up in the body and why is attending to our embodied existence so important for healing?

HM: There are so many ways that trauma can show up in the body, some of them are more obvious in that they are connected to a specific memory, thought, sensation,

person or event. For example, a person who has been hurt by a church leader might walk past a church and feel their heart race and chest tighten and their pace quicken. We also have the classic post-traumatic-stress symptoms, such as flashbacks or intrusive thoughts and feelings, hypervigilance and dissociation. But most people I see who have (spiritual) trauma have their bodies tell the story of the trauma in ways that aren't immediately linkable to a specific event. They might struggle with vaginismus and never put together that their body is speaking about the long-term impact of purity culture. For others, it is the autoimmune response that comes from years of having been pushed beyond their limits while also having to numb all their feelings about it. Others might rush to the ER with what they believe is a heart attack only to learn it's rather that their anxiety has spilled over into panic.

In faith contexts where people have been told not to listen to their bodies, or that their bodies betray them, these good, normal, and appropriate symptoms of their trauma can be used as proof of the body's badness. It is actually the body speaking up to say "Hey, I'm not feeling safe, what happened was not ok." It reminds me of when Jesus appears and invites people to look at his wounded body, not as proof of its weakness or badness, but as part of the story he is telling about what he has been through and how real it was. I wish we could learn to treat our bodily symptoms as messengers worth listening to.

MW: Sometimes we can make everything so "spiritual" that our belief doesn't touch our everyday experience. When it comes to faith, trauma and holistic healing, what is your one big aspiration for the broader church?

HM: My biggest hope is that we can start to see caring for others and listening to our bodies as spiritual practices. I want a faith that is embodied, I want a spirituality that allows us to thrive, that listens to the wounded among us and within us as part of how we can come to know God more and be the love of God in the world more.

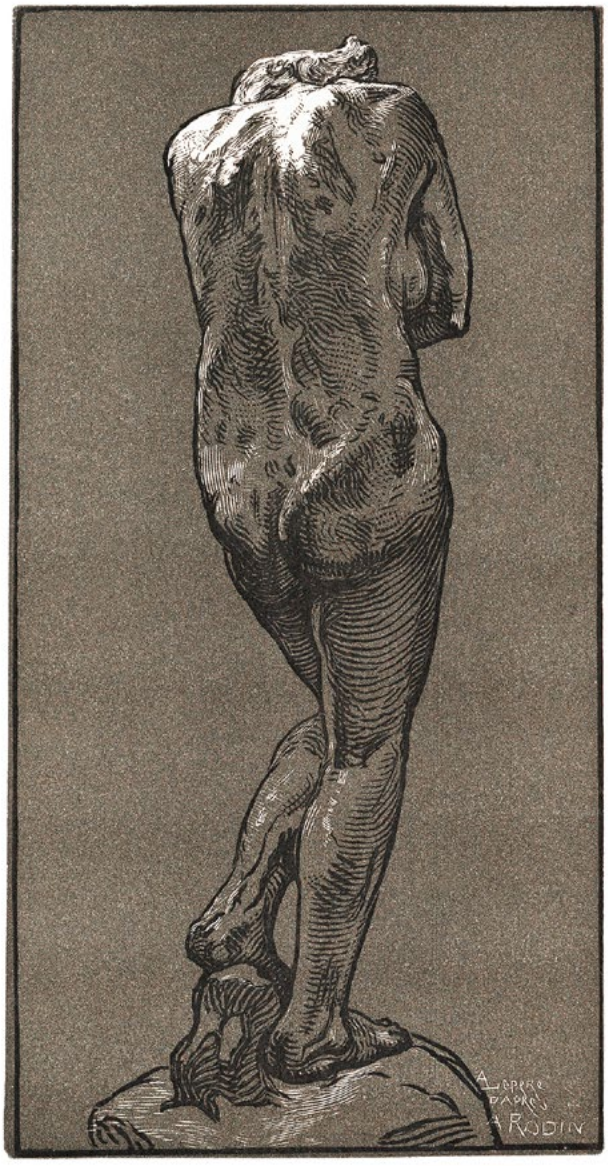
MW: Daniel, as the CEO of an organization that seeks to support health and wellbeing in congregational settings, what can you tell us about the Sanctuary Course for those who would like to participate in these conversations?

DW: I am so thrilled that more churches are talking about being trauma informed; this is such a necessary step. The Sanctuary Course takes a broader approach to mental health, helping church communities develop a holistic understanding that encompasses not only trauma, but the full spectrum of mental-health challenges that people may experience.

Churches often choose to offer the course because it addresses a crucial gap. While most church leaders encounter mental-health challenges regularly in their congregations, few have received formal training in this area. The course provides a foundation for creating whole communities where mental-health challenges can be discussed openly and met with theologically grounded wisdom and compassion.

Through eight sessions, the course brings together clinical insights, theological reflection and powerful stories from Christians who share their own mental-health journeys. These real-life testimonies help reduce stigma and create space for authentic conversations in church communities. It helps churches move beyond simply reacting to crises and toward proactively creating cultures of mental-health awareness and support. The Sanctuary Course offers a comprehensive foundation that can transform how churches understand and respond to mental-health challenges in their communities. In this sense, I see it as a great precursor to engaging with trauma-informed ministry – one that actually models what a trauma-informed approach should look and feel like.

Dr Michael Wagenman is Senior Research Fellow and Director of PhD Studies at the Kirby Laing Centre.



Auguste-Louis Lepère, *Nude Statue*

Creatine Supplement

AN EXAMPLE OF PROGRESSIVE NUTRITION

NICOLE FARAH AND DIANA SALGADO

The fitness industry has launched a variety of supplements promising "easy solutions" to lose weight, gain muscle mass and improve mental sharpness. Among the supplements available, it is surprising – particularly to nutrition professionals – that some of those whose benefits are best supported by scientific research are not the most marketed, either by diet zealots or big corporations. One of these is creatine monohydrate, commonly simply called creatine.

Creatine has been on the market since the early 1990s, when it was mostly used by athletes. Athletes were gaining muscle mass and enhancing their endurance and recovery after physical activity, among other benefits.

We are fascinated to know that there is a substance in nature that can enhance our bodies in such ways. It is important to mention that creatine is already synthesized in the human body, and we also obtain it from consuming animal protein, for example. However, in recent years scientists have observed the benefits of supplementing with creatine even if you are not an athlete. It has been shown that creatine can improve short-term memory and reasoning and help during all stages of a fitness journey – attractive benefits for our busy modern lives. Those seeking to lose weight can lose fat and gain muscle, fitness enthusiasts can increase muscle mass and those convalescing from an injury can retain existing muscle mass.

So much has been discovered in modern nutrition about how molecules work in our bodies and how to make the most of them. We believe there is still so much to discover about our metabolism. As society moves towards different ways of working and living, who knows what nutrition and the supplement market will look like in the next 30 years? We may be able to improve our bodies by supplementing with the right substances not only to run faster but also to overcome illnesses.

We have to point out that the fitness industry will certainly find ways to commercialize supplements with questionable nutritional benefits. Here the influence of social-media diet zealots often leads to two problems in particular: "self-supplementation" and "fear-supplementation." Self-supplementation is the tendency to pick one's own supplements without consulting a professional. This can lead to people purchasing products that are unlikely to work and can in some cases be harmful. Fear-supplementation, on the other hand, causes people to avoid certain products that can be beneficial to them because of an ungrounded fear of their potential negative effects. Here, creatine is a prime example. It has been argued that creatine leads to hair loss in men, water retention and kidney problems. However, we believe some of these arguments are misinterpretations of scientific research. The best way to supplement is undoubtedly by asking an expert.

Self-supplementation is the tendency to pick one's own supplements – products that are unlikely to work and can in some cases be harmful. Fear-supplementation causes people to avoid beneficial products because of ungrounded fears.

Some readers may be unconvinced about the wisdom of all this. We acknowledge there are arguments about how far we entrust our wellbeing to novel scientific advice. But most of us take this approach to medical care. With so much information available online, it is important that we keep prioritizing sound research, and, crucially, effective communication around the results of such research.

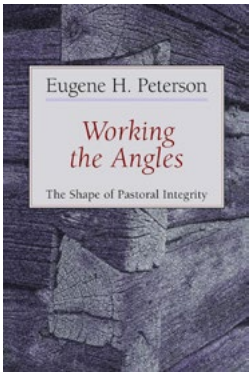
Nicole Farah is a certified personal trainer, bodybuilding coach, nutritionist and health communication enthusiast. Diana Salgado works on research projects to decrease food waste and improve food safety in circular-economy projects in the UK.

Preaching the Bible for All its Worth: Psalms

CRAIG G. BARTHOLOMEW

The Psalms expresses in a powerful way the communion that is at the heart of biblical religion. It is a collection of 150 of the worship songs that emerged during the life of OT Israel and could only emerge out of a profound sense of how "I [YHWH] bore you on eagles' wings and *brought you to myself*." (Ex 19:4) Once the covenant, the legal relationship between God and Israel, was established at Sinai, God gave instructions for the building of his portable residence amidst his people, namely the tabernacle. At the peak of these instructions in Exodus 25:1-30:10 we find in Exodus 29:42-46 a remarkable section in which YHWH speaks in the first person and expresses in a profound way the communion that the covenant initiates:

> 42 … at the entrance of the tent of meeting
> before the Lord, where I will meet with you,
> to speak to you there. 43 I will meet with the
> Israelites there, and it shall be sanctified
> by my glory; … 45 I will dwell among the
> Israelites, and I will be their God. 46 And
> they shall know that I am the Lord their
> God, who brought them out of the land of
> Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am
> the Lord their God.



The Psalms emerges in response to God speaking, dwelling among his people and meeting with them. Israel's history after Sinai was turbulent and, amidst all the exigencies of life, the Psalms expresses the response to God by his people. "Everything that a person can possibly feel, experience, and say is brought into expression before God in the Psalms."[1]

The Psalms was the hymn and prayer book of God's OT people, and it is a beautiful thing that we have it in our Bibles. A cursory glance through the Psalms will reveal that it is divided into five books, namely:

- **Book 1:** Psalms 1-41
- **Book 2:** Psalms 42-72
- **Book 3:** Psalms 73-89
- **Book 4:** Psalms 90-106
- **Book 5:** Psalms 107-150

In my view it is no accident that the psalter has been edited into five books. The Pentateuch consists of five books and the

1 Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 39.

psalter mirrors that collection. In Hebrew the Pentateuch is called the *Torah*, a word that means instruction. If the Pentateuch instructs God's people how to live, the Psalms provide us with the resources for living in communion with God and responding to him amidst all that life throws up. Prayer and worship are always a response to God's revelation of himself:

> One hundred and fifty Psalms are arranged in five books. … the five-book arrangement establishes the conditions under which we will pray, shaping a canonical context for prayer. … The significance of the five-book arrangement cannot be overstressed. It is not a minor and incidental matter of editorial tinkering; it is a major matter of orientation so that prayer will be learned properly as human answering speech to the addressing speech of God, and not to be confused or misunderstood as initiating speech.[2]

If the Pentateuch instructs God's people how to live, the Psalms provide us with the resources for living in communion with God and responding to him amidst all that life throws up.

The Psalms was the hymn book and prayer book for Jesus, for the early church and for the church ever since. It needs to be meditated on, prayed and sung.

During the last several decades, however, attention to the overall editing of the psalter has yielded surprising new results, results that anyone planning to preach on the Psalms should be aware of. It turns out, for example, that the Psalms has an introduction (Ps 1-2) and a conclusion (Ps 145-150).

Psalms 1 and 2 are enclosed in a "Blessed are …" (NRSV: "Happy are") *inclusio* or bookends in Ps 1:1a and Ps 2:12b alerting us to blessedness as the main theme of this introduction. Psalm 1 begins with the blessed individual believer who delights in the *torah* of YHWH. It moves on to the plural only when it comes to the wicked. Psalm 2 moves from the individual in Psalm 1, to the tumult of the nations, alerting us to the fact that God's instruction – and blessedness – applies as much to individual believers as to nations.

The literary shape of the psalter is, however, far more detailed than this. Each of Books 1-4 ends with a liturgical formula "Blessed be the LORD … Amen." However, Book 4 (see Psalm 106:48), concludes the formula with "hallelujah" (Praise the Lord), which becomes the consuming focus of Book 5. As Peterson says of this move from Amen to Hallelujah:

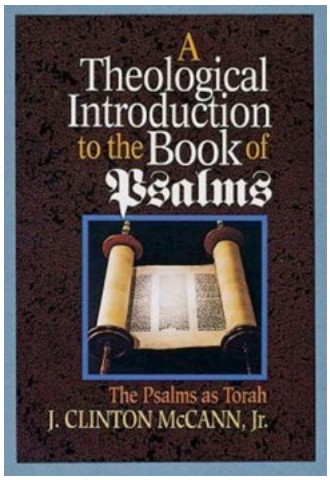
> The shift from Amen to Hallelujah modulates the great Amen-affirmations of the first four books into a celebrative conclusion to the five-book Psalter. This grand conclusion bursts the confines of the liturgical formula and booms out

2 Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 35.

Winslow Homer, *Autumn Treetops* (1873)

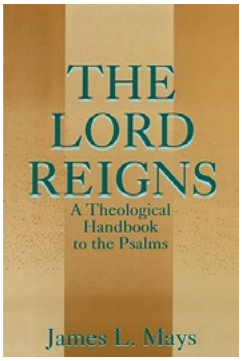
five hallelujah Psalms (146-150), one for each 'book' of the Psalter. Each of these five concluding Psalms begins and ends with the Hallelujah. … The last Psalm, the 150th, not only begins and ends but pivots each sentence on the Hallelujah: praise the Lord, praise God, praise him … thirteen times - a cannonade of hallelujahs, booming salvos of joy.[3]

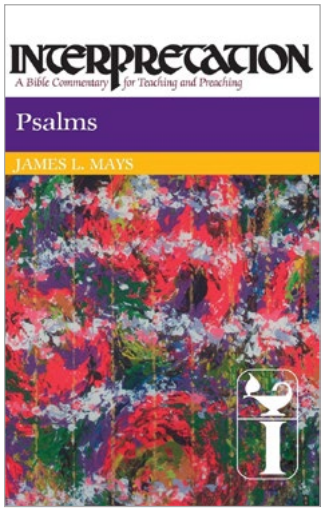
The literary shape of the psalter also reveals that Book 4 contains the centre of the whole, especially with its kingship psalms of the 90s. Not surprisingly, therefore, it has been rightly argued that the theme of the Psalms is *the kingdom of God*, the same theme as that of Jesus' public ministry.



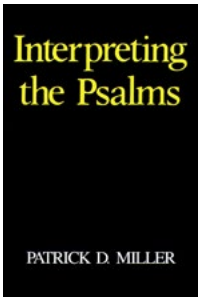
Such literary analysis of the psalter as a whole continues to be explored. Amongst other things this exciting development reveals to us that the psalms are not only to be prayed but to be attended to *for instruction*. J. Clinton McCann highlights this aspect of the Psalms in his groundbreaking book, *A Theological Introduction to the Books of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).[4] Only Isaiah exceeds the Psalms in terms of the number of times an OT book is quoted in the NT, and in this book and his other works, McCann shows how attending to the discrete, original witness of the Psalms flows naturally and powerfully into the NT, rather than imposing Messianic interpretations back on selective psalms before doing the hard work on the Psalms itself.

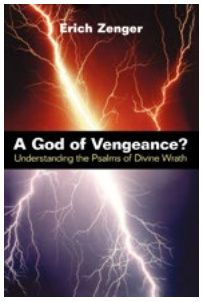
All of this not only relates to this theme of *TBP* but is wonderfully fertile ground for preaching the Psalms. Amidst a great many, here are some useful resources. Some years ago, colleagues and I published **Craig G. Bartholomew and Andrew West, eds., *Praying by the Book: Reading the Psalms* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002)**. This small book makes available the recent approaches to the Psalms. **James L. Mays, *Psalms*. Interpretation Bible Commentary (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994)**. Mays has a strong approach to the individual psalms and the canonical shape of the whole Psalter. A very helpful, one-volume commentary. See also **Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994)**.

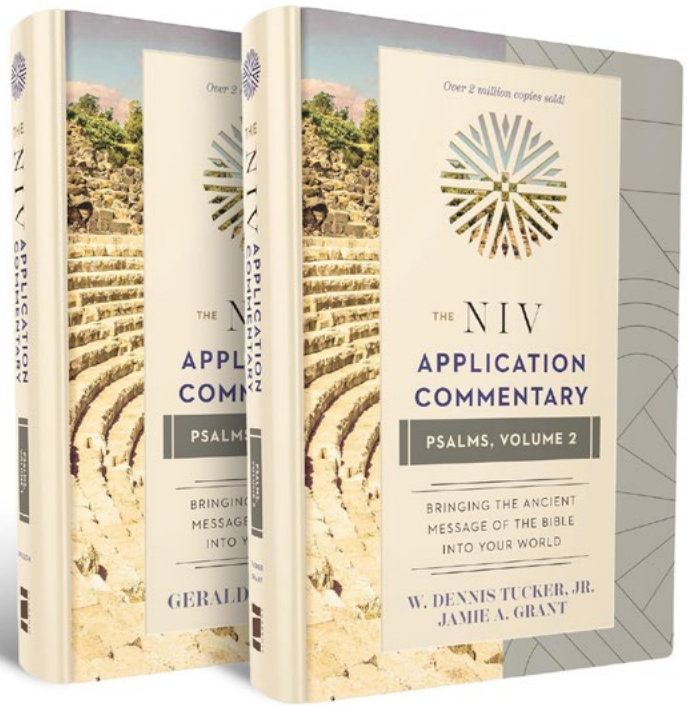




Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986). **Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996)**. The two volumes of the **NIV Application Commentary** – volume 1 by **Gerald Wilson (2002)** and volume 2 by **Dennis Tucker and Jamie Grant (2018)** are also very useful.







3 Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 36.

4 See also J. Clinton McCann, *The Book of Psalms*. New Interpreter's Bible Commentary. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); and Gordon J. Wenham, *Psalms as Torah: Reading Biblical Song Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkey's* (1909)

"Now through the Church..."

How can Christians Navigate the Current Cultural Crisis?

IAN GEARY

"His intent was that, now through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms."

(EPHESIANS 3:10, NIV)

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

ANTONIO GRAMSCI[1]

To some, the West is in cultural crisis, locked in a battle between liberalism and illiberalism. To the former, the root of the problem is populism. To the latter, the loss of Western culture's Christian roots.[2] The role of the church in this crisis demands our attention, because the tendency has arguably been to let culture and political agendas take precedence over the kingdom of God. As Paul Kingsnorth says:

> Civilizational Christianity puts civilization first and Christianity second. Its proponents are less interested in whether the faith is actually true or transformative than in what use it can be to them in their ongoing culture war.[3]

Kingsnorth goes on to argue that this moment of cultural crisis is a reflection of the health of the Christian church:

> In Western Europe, ... our founding religion is now defunct as a guiding force and a cultural glue. A question logically arises from that observation: Is the decline of Christianity responsible for our current malaise? Is our lack of faith at the root of our loss of confidence and the ensuing inversion of our old values? The answer to this, in one sense, is obviously yes. As another historian, Tom Holland, demonstrated in his book *Dominion*, it was Christianity that formed the Western mind. When such a sacred order dies, there will be upheaval at every level of society, from politics right down to the level of the soul.[4]

Karl Barth's theology was one born out of crisis. In a 1948 speech about the failure of Modernism to avert the devastation of war, he said:

> Western civilisation is out of joint. Instead of leading us to still further heights, the progress of the centuries has suddenly brought us to the depths of two world wars which have left a sea of ruin behind them and destroyed millions upon millions of lives, though no one can say what they all really died for. ... There is no doubt that in recent years the whole conception of a Christian civilisation in the West has been pitilessly exposed as an illusion.[5]

1 Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, vol. 1, Quaderni 1–5 (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1977), 311. English translation quoted from *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

2 See Jens Zimmermann, *Incarnational Humanism – A Philosophy of Culture for the Church in the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), Preface.

3 Paul Kingsnorth, "Against Christian Civilization," *First Things*, 12 December 2024, https://firstthings.com/against-christian-civilization/.

4 Paul Kingsnorth, "Against Christian Civilization."

5 Timothy Gorringe, "Nevertheless! January 1942–Spring 1951," *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony, Christian Theology in Context* (Oxford, 1999; online ed., Oxford Academic, 2011).

The face-off between a hyper-liberalism on the one hand and pungent, populist illiberalism on the other is a profound challenge for Christians. It requires objective and theological reflection, not knee-jerk responses. The political events of our day, polarising and baffling as they are, require explanation not posturing and moralising – an engaged church, certainly, but eschewing co-option by the left or the right.

In many Western democracies, we see the contest between liberalism and illiberalism – a culture war that arguably leaves Christians politically homeless. It occasions a simple but profound question: what constitutes faithful witness within this scenario?

Postliberalism is one largely constructive response to the crisis, yet deeper work is needed to ensure this doesn't drift from its Christian underpinnings or, as Wright and Bird observe, become a tool of abuse by the powerful.[6] The liberal and illiberal poles are both "morbid symptoms" of a modernity that has been sundered from its Christian roots. If postliberalism cannot break the binary, it will fail.

Five Lessons from John 4

Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman in John 4 is remarkably instructive for our cultural engagement and offers several practical routes by which the church can operate as a faithful witness.

6 Tom Wright and Michael Bird, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (London: SPCK, 2024), 173.

Anton Dorph, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well*.

A) Jesus elicits and receives *hospitality* (v7): Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a glass of water. Jesus' request begins a conversation, which breaks down their rigid barriers of race and gender and reveals a central truth in the gospel. Jesus comes to bring peace and life – to tear down barriers and not erect them. By offering and receiving hospitality from people of different cultures and political views, we can model better social and political relations.

B) Jesus uses water to talk about *vital spirituality* (v10-14): The request for water allows Jesus to turn the conversation to God's living water, the Holy Spirit. At the heart of our cultural crisis is spiritual hunger too – a void that liberalism and illiberalism cannot address. We have the ability to meet spiritual thirst with an embodied gospel that is spiritual, but not if we continue to keep our faith sequestered in the private domain of our lives and keep our politics in the secular one.

C) Jesus highlights *eschatology* and *truth* (v21-24): Jesus shared the truth, the gospel. In this postmodern age, it is more important than ever that we pursue peace *without* surrendering truth.

D) Jesus shares *hope* (v25-26): The Samaritan woman talks about her hopes in the Messiah. Jesus is able to tell her that he *is* the Messiah! The politics of left and right offer a narrative of hope: they are theologies in disguise. This may have its place in politics, yet the Christian hope corresponds to a deeper, eternal reality. We must attend to where people have misplaced their hope, and we must incarnate the gospel of hope.

E) Jesus has an *impactful presence* and many believe (v40-42): Jesus stays with them, and they conclude, "This man really is the saviour of the world." Hospitality, truth, spirituality and hope can, by God's grace, make a big difference. Yet, there is an incarnational component: Jesus does not parachute in like a professional politician, he stays with the people.

Breaking the Binary

In Andy McCullough's excellent book on John's Gospel, he points out that it is Jesus who cuts across binaries:

> The Samaritan woman posits a binary worldview – this mountain or that mountain? Who is right, us or you? So often, in many places, culture wars are framed in terms of irreconcilable opposites, of left or right, of conservative or liberal. Jesus refuses to be drawn. Refuses to choose sides. As a sage, he is able to say, "both are right" or, as here, "both are inadequate." In the binary-breaking new world that Messiah is ushering in, "which mountain" becomes a non-question, because we will worship by the Spirit.[7]

7 Andy McCullough, *Made Flesh: John's Gospel, Mission and the Global Church* (Welwyn Garden City: Malcolm Down, 2024), 101.

Andy Edwards, *Christmas Truce Statue* (2014), commemorating the truce observed between frontline soldiers in 1914, apparently spontaneously set in motion by the singing of carols.

We need Christ and his Spirit to identify these non-questions and orientate our culture and its politics to the eschatological age. With God's help, we can embody the gospel and create new and healthy spaces to "break the binary" in our own age.

Here are three ways we can break our political binaries:

1) Rooted Advocacy: "When advocacy becomes detached from real action it becomes warped by the ideology and the politics of the culture wars."[8] In an insightful paper on Christian social action, Jon Kuhrt underlines the need for advocacy to be rooted in lived experience, focused on the person and conveyed with integrity.

2) Faith-Based Facilitation: Developed by The Salvation Army,[9] this five-step process seeks a relational and discursive way to resolve challenging issues. While it might not resolve complex political problems completely, it helps to avoid destructive discourse and misunderstanding.

3) Local leadership: Alfred Salter, a London MP in the last century with a strong religious faith, dedicated himself to being a real, transformative presence in local people's lives. He was associated with authentic and virtuous local leadership and built the local Labour Party on an ethic of municipal service. In a similar way, the church is a local community that can model a better society, working for the common good in their area. From such a base, its members can operate politically at a national level too.

These sketches are only a preliminary offering; deeper, more robust work is needed.

8 Jon Kuhrt, "Justice, Empowerment & Faith: The Future Direction for Christian Social Action," *Grace and Truth*, 17 December 2023, https://gracetruth.blog/2023/12/17/justice-empowerment-faith-the-future-direction-for-christian-social-action/.

9 Dean Pallant, *To be Like Jesus: Christian Ethics for a 21st Century Salvation Army* (Salvation Books, 2019), 23-24.

God in his freedom is not bound to any political ideology, and as his ambassadors, the church is compelled to critique both liberalism and illiberalism. Our gospel message precedes and transcends these terms anyway. Christianity must speak on its own terms and not be confined by the discourses of the day.

Postliberalism is a matter of much discussion in UK politics and holds much promise, but on its own it is insufficient. The recently published postliberal manifesto claims that they associate themselves with "an order of the world that is founded on a politics of virtue and bonds of belonging, flourishing and love."[10] Yet this good goal can go adrift if not rooted in the life of the church. To respond wisely and faithfully in this era – and to follow Jesus in breaking the binary – the church needs to exercise its political and social imagination and forge a new way forward.

Ian Geary has two decades' experience in UK politics and is the author of the essay collection, Faith, Politics and Belonging: A Reflection on Identity, Complexity, Simplicity, and Obsession. *He is studying for a PhD in Divinity at the University of Aberdeen.*

10 Adrian Pabst and John Milbank, "What is Postliberalism Now? The Old Order of Rampant Individualism is Dying. The West Must Make a Decisive Break with the Past," *The New Statesman*, 13 December 2024.

Alfred Salter is here remembered for his service and welcome.

AI, Economics and the Christian Perspective

NAVIGATING THE ETHICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

ROBERT TATUM

By: Association for Christian Economics' (UK) members Andrew Henley (Cardiff University), Richard Lewney (Cambridge Econometrics), Rowlando Morgan, Michael Pollitt (University of Cambridge), Chris Rimmer and Robert Tatum (University of North Carolina Asheville)

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming our society, with impacts that touch upon industry, culture, economics and personal lives. As we find ourselves amidst this technological revolution, crucial questions arise not only about the economic implications of AI but also its ethical and theological influence. Concerns ranging from income polarisation to the moral use of technology suggest a need to reflect on how AI aligns with Christian perspectives on work, decision-making and wisdom.

The Economic and Social Impacts of AI

The economic implications of AI are vast, raising questions about the balance between cost and benefit. From a purely economic viewpoint, AI is both a potential advancement in productivity and a catalyst for challenges in labour markets. For instance, AI could significantly polarise the labour market, leading to wider income disparities. Those with the skills to make effective use of the technology may find expanded opportunities, while those whose work is easily automated could face diminishing prospects. These dynamics pose a significant challenge to achieving economic justice and fostering human dignity in the workplace.

AI's environmental footprint is another concern. The technology requires significant computational power, drawing parallels to cryptocurrency mining in terms of energy consumption and resource demands. There is also a cultural dimension to consider; as AI permeates society, it may contribute to the erosion of human relationships and take us further away from community-orientated, outdoor lifestyles that some view as biblically ideal.

The potential of AI to increase productivity and improve resource management should not be overlooked, yet it also presents risks, such as spreading misinformation, facilitating fraud and influencing political systems. The key is to responsibly guide AI's development to maximise its benefits while mitigating harmful externalities. Furthermore, technological advancements could allow for reduced work hours, lower work intensity and more extensive retirement periods, echoing trends identified by economists over time.

While AI may possess advanced processing power, pattern recognition and decision-making capabilities, it lacks the moral judgement, empathy, serendipity and contextual understanding that define wisdom. Wisdom is a distinctly human quality, deeply rooted in experience and, from a Christian perspective, ultimately derived from God.

AI could enhance this shift, offering more opportunities for leisure, creativity and human flourishing – if regulated and managed appropriately.

AI, Wisdom, and Decision-Making

A crucial distinction that emerges in discussions about AI is the difference between intelligence and wisdom. While AI may possess advanced processing power, pattern recognition and decision-making capabilities, it lacks the moral judgement, empathy, serendipity and contextual understanding that define wisdom. Wisdom is a distinctly human quality, deeply rooted in experience and, from a Christian perspective, ultimately derived from God.

> But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. (James 3:17, NRSV)

AI, in contrast, operates on algorithms and data without the capacity for true moral reasoning.

This distinction becomes critical when AI is used for decision-making. For example, if AI were tasked with determining the "greater good," it might recommend isolating individuals who pose a health risk to others, such as a leper. However, a human approach, grounded in compassion and wisdom, might involve embracing and healing those marginalised by society, much like Jesus did in biblical accounts. This illustrates that rational or seemingly intelligent decisions made by AI can differ significantly from those rooted in deeper human wisdom and understanding. Thus, it is vital to recognise AI as a tool that enhances human productivity and problem-solving, not a source of wisdom or moral guidance or expressions of divine love.

Moreover, the proliferation of AI raises concerns about disincentivising the acquisition of foundational knowledge. For instance, if AI can generate complex code in seconds, what incentive remains for individuals to learn the basics of programming? In this manner, AI may be cannibalising existing knowledge at the expense of hindering the development of new knowledge. It used to be said of university students that they would read book reviews rather than the books themselves; now AI saves them the trouble of even reading the reviews. If everyone relies on a summary provided by AI, where will original thinking come from? In many disciplines, patents serve to protect innovations at the cutting edge of knowledge, preventing stagnation. Prior to the widespread use of AI, access to various areas of expertise came at a cost, ensuring the value of intellectual property. However, with AI making much of this knowledge available at little to no cost, we risk undermining the incentives for future discovery and creation. This question touches on broader themes of learning, growth, and the role of AI in human development.

Photo: Erick Butler

Photo: Trevor Bobyk

Biblical Principles as a Compass

Biblical principles offer a valuable framework for navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by AI.

A foundational story in Genesis is that of the Tower of Babel, which can be seen as an early attempt by mankind to use technology – the world's largest skyscraper – to demonstrate their superiority and make a name for themselves. God frustrates their plans and scatters the people into different people groups – speaking different languages – in order to limit the ability of humans to come together for evil. AI has the potential to create new towers of Babel, and this is not God's will for humanity.

Foundational concepts such as justice, stewardship and the intrinsic dignity of work provide ethical guidelines for the responsible application of AI technologies. These values remind us that AI, despite its vast potential, should serve to enrich human life without eroding the moral and spiritual foundations of society. For instance, the principle of Jubilee – an occasion for economic reset and equality – could inspire contemporary policies aimed at reducing wealth disparities and ensuring that the benefits of AI are distributed equitably, promoting both liberty and economic security. Similarly, the economic principles underpinning sabbatical rest and debt forgiveness focus on limiting the power of the economically dominant to safeguard the wellbeing of those who are less privileged. By enforcing rest and forgiveness, these principles encourage economic equity amongst diverse members of society. Modern institutions such as the weekend, labour-market regulations and bankruptcy laws reflect the spirit of these biblical economic provisions. However, it remains unclear how such principles could be directly applied to the governance of AI.

Regulation and Responsible AI Development

Economists, like theologians, don't believe in unregulated markets. We believe that markets are highly developed social institutions that work best when operated according to clearly specified rules that prescribe their behaviour. Technological advances, like AI, don't happen in a vacuum and can be directed by regulation and by human preferences for how they are used. The idea that science simply presents new technology as something that is done to us or that is benign in itself is a misunderstanding of human nature and human history. The regulation of the use of the car is a good example of how effective regulation can be. By contrast, the failure to appropriately regulate social-media platforms has produced unintended harm to our children and to our democracies.

As AI technology advances rapidly, the need for effective regulation is increasingly apparent. AI should be viewed primarily as an information-gathering tool rather than a mediator or decision-maker. This regulatory approach is rooted in a balanced perspective: AI is not a new phenomenon but an extension of previous technological advancements. The goal is to harness AI's capabilities responsibly, ensuring that it serves human needs while adhering to principles of

justice, care and compassion. Recognising AI as a tool – and not as a source of wisdom – emphasises the importance of human stewardship over technology, fostering a society that values both innovation and the enduring virtues of human dignity and moral agency.

Harnessing AI for Good through Ethical Use and a Thoughtful Transition

AI's integration into society marks a significant transitional period. This shift necessitates careful reflection on its ethical implications from a Christian perspective. AI influences not only the economy but also how we value human life, work and relationships. There is an urgency to balance the positive and negative aspects of AI. On one hand, AI has the potential to improve productivity and resource management; on the other, it could exacerbate social inequalities, spread misinformation and disrupt political systems. Proper oversight is essential. However, the appropriate design of the institutions and regulations to provide that oversight is a challenging concern. At the very least, training in the use of AI should include ethical training, in the same way that an MBA may include ethics among its core requirements.

Recognising AI as a tool – and not as a source of wisdom – emphasises the importance of human stewardship over technology, fostering a society that values both innovation and the enduring virtues of human dignity and moral agency.

AI's transformative power is reshaping economies, cultures and theological perspectives. While its potential for increasing productivity, creating leisure time and transforming industries is immense, this power comes with responsibility. To ensure AI serves the common good, it must be developed and applied in ways that align with ethical and theological principles. Central to this process will be distinguishing between wisdom and intelligence, as well as recognising that AI is meant to enhance rather than replace human decision-making.

As society navigates this AI-driven transition, it is essential to root our approach in timeless values of justice, stewardship and human dignity. By applying biblical principles and fostering thoughtful regulation, AI can become a force for positive change – enhancing human life, supporting community wellbeing, and aligning technological progress with a moral and spiritual vision for the future. In Christian theology, work is seen as an act of creation, a way to emulate God, and care for the world. The use of AI, therefore, should contribute to enhancing human work, creativity, and rest, fostering opportunities for meaningful connection and service.

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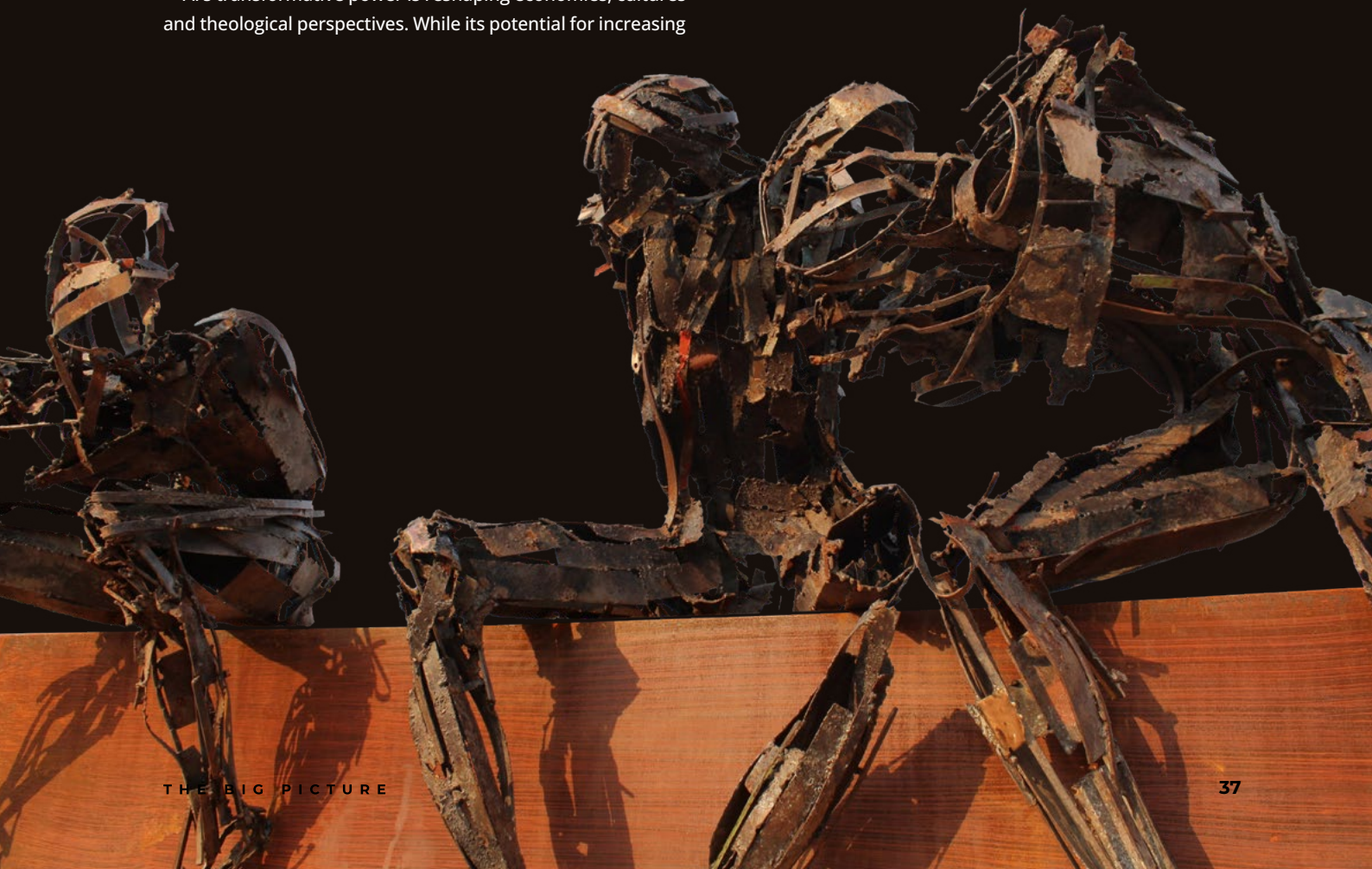

Whatever Happened to Healthy Families?

LUCIA STELLUTI

Last summer a well-known Italian magazine, *Micromega*, devoted an entire issue to the family with the title, "Against the Family: Critique of an (Anti-)Social Institution" (4/2024). The collection of essays had the stated goal of showing the distortions, violence and abuses of the family institution, supporting the idea that the family is a place of oppression for the individual and a factor in social disintegration.

By contrast, Jean Mark Berthoud declares that it's on the wellbeing of the family that the wellbeing of the whole community depends.[1]

The family has a pro-social character inscribed in its divine DNA. At creation, God established the identity of the family and directed its design outward from itself, toward its neighbour and the world for the glory of God. The family is not closed within the home but embraces the whole of society and is called to live in a constant balance between the individual and the community, fostering and serving the health and wellbeing of both.

But is this always the case? In reality, there are innumerable distortions that *Micromega* magazine has taken the opportunity to list in detail. The modern "family portrait" is a picture of absent parents, delegated responsibilities, indifference to education and formation, homes increasingly full of inward and outward conflict, and, in the most extreme cases, oppression and abuse. Is it possible to criticise the real dysfunctions of the family without throwing out the baby with the bathwater?

1 Jean Mark Berthoud, "Famiglia" in *Dizionario di Teologia Evangelica*, ed. Pietro Bolognesi, Leonardo De Chirico, and Andrea Ferrari (Marchirolo: EUN, 2014). See also "The Model Family: The Role & Character of the Family in Christianity" (https://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=14-10-023-f&readcode=&readtherest=true)

Scripture describes sin as a historical fact, which has hijacked the family and its dynamics, taking it in a different direction from that originally established by the creator. We must not be family purists and deny the evidence. In fact, if one picks up the Bible, one will see from the very first pages that it does not conceal any of the distortions that have characterised the life of families. From Adam's breaking of the covenant onward, we observe educational neglect, abandonment, abuse, exploitation, violence, oppression. Scripture gives us a faithful and realistic picture of the state of health of this institution throughout ancient history and in so doing it declares the truth about the contemporary family as well.

The biblical account, however, is not an attempt to justify such unhealthy, deviant and usurping traits, because they have nothing to do with the original order of creation. On the contrary, such distortions are firmly condemned, confirming the goodness of the original divine plan, how mankind has abandoned it and failed to carry it out in his own strength, and the need for redemption in Christ to restore it.

This concerns all families. Even the family in which Christ is worshipped has to reckon with sin on a daily basis, and it is precisely the confession of this reality that makes it open to transformation. The family can still promote health and wellbeing, both inwardly and outwardly, only because it is a good work of God who designed, created and ordained it. But also, because God, in the unique and historical work of Jesus Christ, can redeem, heal and revive it in the world.

One of the characteristics of Reformed theology is to continually re-examine what is believed and to redirect the traditions of thought and life in the light of Scripture. This reorientation of the family's educational responsibility by the power of the Holy Spirit has a variety of repercussions for individuals, the church and society.

Two ways in which Christian families can certainly promote health and wellbeing are by engaging in the integral education of its members and by promoting schooling. First, family education must not neglect any aspect of human life according to its three fundamental relationships: with God, with oneself and one's neighbour, and with the world. Nothing is outside the educational orbit of the family: not only biblical catechesis, but also technological and digital discernment, care for creation and sex education all have their rightful place.[2] These are just some of the areas that are so important for the wellbeing of contemporary society. The family is the first place of discipleship,[3] and the health of the church and society also depends on this divine command being lived out responsibly.

2 Lucia Stelluti, "Famiglie che educano. Responsabilità e sfide per un ruolo da riscoprire," *SDT* 71, no. 1 (2024): 5-59.

3 Andreas and Margaret Kostenberger, *Equipping for Life: A Guide for New, Aspiring & Struggling Parents* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publication, 2018), 113.

Since God has established his authority over all things, parents have a duty to graciously show that every aspect of life is intrinsically related to him, and that we should live it in his presence, according to his will and in covenant with him (Deut 6:6-9, Ps 78:1-4, Eph 6). Today we hear a lot about educational issues, but it seems to be a subject reserved for experts. Perhaps, as Christians, we should ask ourselves whether we have neglected this parental responsibility to the detriment of the deep wellbeing of our families and communities.

Second, as educating communities, families who embrace the tasks and limits assigned to them by God, in continuous interaction and collaboration with other spheres of life, are called to assume a crucial public role. Indeed, they are responsible for passing on a Christian worldview as a precious inheritance. For this reason, commitment to schooling has always distinguished Christian communities. Families should recover this fundamental part of their educational responsibility, rather than depending totally on the initiative of others in this field, by supporting projects of Christian education financially, and whenever possible, by choosing home-schooling or Christian schools for their children.

The gospel perspective calls families to be promoters of a culture of community wellbeing, not only on the personal level, but also by encouraging in practical ways the flourishing of schools, art, science, etc. God-given authority for parents in raising their children always has a public implication, be it positive or negative. In his recent book on authority, Jonathan Leeman asks, "Are you using your authority to create life, prosperity, and vitality for others? Or do you look at your domain and say, 'It's mine!' and use it for your own purposes and glory?"[4]

In the face of ideological portrayals of the family, which depict it either as an irredeemable black monster or as an ideal place of purity and holiness, the Bible invites us to take a realistic look at our families and the family in general, and by the power of the Holy Spirit to grasp the challenges of integral discipleship and public engagement for the prosperity of everyone concerned.

Wherever they are, Christian families should always be promoters of health and wellbeing, both within themselves and for the extended communities, declaring with words and deeds that true and whole wellbeing is only in communion with Christ and according to his will.

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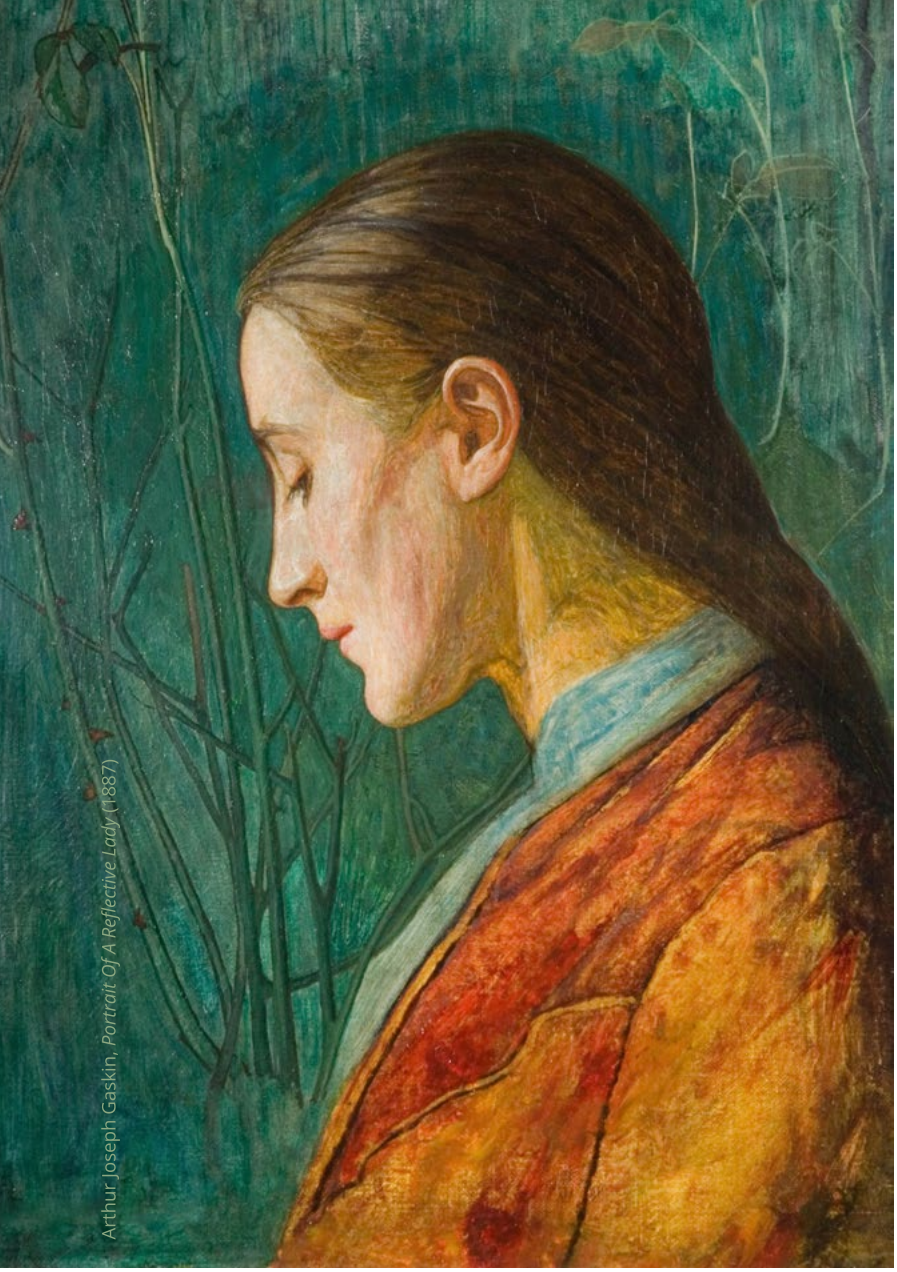
4 Jonathan Leeman, *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), xvii.



Arthur Joseph Gaskin, *Portrait Of A Reflective Lady* (1887)

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF AND LOSS

A Reflection on Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Living with Grief*

DANI LECLAIR

Our conception of grief often wrongly assumes that grieving is a linear process. An example of this assumption is Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.[1] Under this model, we move through the five stages of grief in a specific order, and then we are done grieving. What many people don't know is that this model was developed in research examining peoples' reactions to their own terminal illnesses, and it was then applied to people grieving for the deaths of others.[2] Not only that, but most patients followed their own progression from one stage to another, sometimes doubling back and sometimes missing stages entirely.

The lived experience of grief is certainly not linear. It changes; sometimes we switch back and forth between states, and other times we transition permanently from one state to another. It evolves, and it does not ever go away. This March marks the one-year anniversary of my best friend's death. Between the warming weather, the significant dates, and the moods of those around me who also loved Sean, I am reminded of what it was like for me to be wholly immersed in my grief.

I never felt understood by the five stages of grief. When I did grief counselling, my therapist and I instead conceptualised my grief with a timeline analogy:

> Grief is like being torn away from our normal timeline, and thrown into a new timeline where many things look the same, and the people around us are going on as if nothing happened. But for us, something has changed, and this new timeline is wrong. At first, there's a period of shock where nothing makes sense, we don't know how to live, and we're desperate to go back. After a while, we start to get our bearings and build a new life for ourselves here. We may always feel different in our new timeline and we oftentimes intensely miss our old timeline, but that can be a testament to how important our previous timeline was to us.

This timeline analogy gave me the space to understand the magnitude of my loss without the pressure to be okay again. When I stopped visualising Sean in three-dimensional lifelike detail, it reminded me that he was

1 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1973).

2 Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut, and Kathrin Boerner, "Cautioning Health-Care Professionals: Bereaved Persons Are Misguided through the Stages of Grief," *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying* 74, no. 4 (2017): 455–73.

Charles Marie Dulac, *Hymn to Creation: Holy Spirit of God* (1894, edited)

not disappearing from me forever. It validated to me that adapting to his absence did not mean leaving him behind.

The timeline analogy is, in part, a by-product of present-day counselling research, which describes two states of grief:[3]

Acute grief represents the moments where the loss is all-encompassing and where we are processing the loss. We feel that processing in emotional ups, downs and numbness, in physical reactions in our bodies, in disruptions to our routines and daily functioning. We feel acute grief much more in the early days of loss.

Integrated grief represents the moments where we make meaning of our loss. We learn how to feel close to the person we've lost without their physical presence, and we adopt new traditions. We feel integrated grief when time has passed, and integrated grief can be part of our lives in a balanced way.

Given that grief is so often misunderstood, I was hesitant to read Nicholas Wolterstorff's 2024 book, *Living with Grief*.[4] One very important choice he made was to include excerpts of his writing from when he was in the early days of his grief over the death of his young adult son.

> The world looks different now. The pinks have become purple, the yellows brown. Mountains now wear crosses on their slopes. Psalms and hymns have reordered themselves so that lines that previously I scarcely noticed now leap out. "The Lord will not suffer thy foot to stumble." Photographs that once evoked the laughter of delighted reminiscence now cause only pain. … The pleasure of seeing former students is colored by the realization that they were his friends and that while they thrive he rots.[5]

These excerpts immediately build trust with a bereaved reader that his book will not condone the unhelpful platitudes of bereavement that are all too often religious in nature:

> "They are in a better place."
> "God will never give us more than we can handle."
> "You'll see them again one day."
> "It was part of God's plan."
> "At least they're not suffering anymore."

His first publication, *Lament for a Son*, was written when Wolterstorff was in acute grief. The stark contrast between the emotionally charged language in *Lament for a Son* contrasts with the contemplative tone of *Living with Grief,* and leads me to believe that a reader in the early days of grief might relate better to Wolterstorff's exploration of grief in *Lament for a Son*. Conversely, readers like myself, who are reflecting on the wider significance of loss in our faith lives, can read *Living with Grief* to learn the perspective of another bereaved Christian.

Nora McInerny is a widowed author and speaker, and her TED Talk on grief disputes the term "moving on." This phrase implies that loss is something that can and should be left behind in our lives.[6] But many bereaved people speak in the present tense of those who have died. Because that person still *is*. "Once it's your grief and your

3 Katherine M. Shear, "Complicated Grief" *New England Journal of Medicine* 372, no. 2 (2015): 153–60.

4 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Living with Grief* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2024).

5 Wolterstorff, *Living with Grief*, 25.

6 Nora McInerny, *We Don't "Move on" from Grief. We Move Forward with It*, TED Talk, 2019.

front row at the funeral, you get it. You understand what you are experiencing is not a moment in time, it's not a bone that will reset, but you've been touched by something chronic." Our life is forever coloured by the life, love and death of a person we care about.

Like McInerny, Wolterstorff challenges society's notion of "moving on," explaining that instead of owning our grief, our society endorses narritival disowning of grief, a process in which we restructure our life narratives so that our loss no longer matters. When he listed the multiple ways that we can instead own our grief, such as mourning and taking action on other tragedies in the world, growing more empathetic for others in grief, and re-ordering our values to fit the new context of our lives, I could easily see the similar path that I had taken in my bereavement journey.

I am a changed person from my grief. As a student aspiring to a career in clinical psychology, the loss of my best friend to suicide certainly affects my approach to mental-health support work. Sitting with someone in a tough moment makes me feel close to Sean because I have an understanding through lived experience of what might be helpful for a person who is struggling, and the effects of his death can weave into the network of forces that prevent further such tragedies from happening.

Although my grief is a catalyst for better supporting other people facing hardship, a life-altering loss is certainly not the only way to be of service to others. Wolterstorff's book is an excellent resource for the grief-adjacent – those in the support network of a bereaved person. It explains the philosophical and psychological mechanisms of how grief works and why it is adaptive, supplemented with advice on what to say (and not say) to a person in grief. Wolterstorff challenges our assumptions about grief which may be unhelpfully informed by our culture of linear thinking and our faith-based clichés.

The overarching theme of *Living with Grief* is a philosophical exploration of God's role in tragedy. For me, I am immensely grateful to my parish, who chose to grieve *with* me by praying with me, being by my side at services that were very difficult for me to face, and for continuing to check in with me long after I got my last sympathy cards. They offered no explanations of how God makes Sean's death okay. As such, I never stopped feeling God's love and support, even though I may never understand how a benevolent God can create a world in which these tragedies happen.

Once it's your grief and your front row at the funeral, you get it. You understand what you are experiencing is not a moment in time, it's not a bone that will reset, but you've been touched by something chronic.

Wolterstorff explores two theological understandings of grief that serve to dismiss grief, then highlights Karl Barth's writings, in which Barth explores the limits of our understanding of God's omnipotence, that things go awry against our wishes of how God would act, and that God grieves with the bereaved.

> [God] would rather be unblest with his creature than be the blessed God of an unblest creature … In the decisive action in the history of His covenant with the creature, in Jesus Christ, He actually becomes a creature, and thus makes the cause of the creature His own in the most concrete reality and not just in appearance, really taking its place.[7]

This excerpt is a testament to how faith is compatible with grief, despite religion (and culture) often serving to dismiss the importance of grief in our lives. By exploring how Christian and secular culture misses the mark about grief and of the meaning of tragedy in the Christian faith, I hope that a grief-adjacent reader can become more responsive to the lived experience of grief, and I hope that a bereaved reader can feel supported in their grief journey.

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7 Quoted in Wolterstorff, *Living with Grief*, 80.

Louisa Starr Canziani, *Head of A Woman Superimposed Over Italian Building*

Towards Easter Sunday 2025: *Who am I?*

Gert Swart, *Propeller Cruciform, 1996-2024*

AN EXHIBITION BY GERT SWART

JORELLA ANDREWS

South African sculptor Gert Swart hopes to infuse his upcoming exhibition, *Towards Easter Sunday 2025: Who am I?* with the energy of the studio, with the energy of sketches, working drawings and experiments of thought in process. He intends visitors to feel as though they have stepped into just such a working space that requires navigation and active – even challenging – participation.

Swart has said that the 2025 exhibition will be focused on themes and phenomena that have been important to him throughout his life as an artist: those of portals and thresholds. For the exhibition, he is working on what he has described as "a labyrinth of portals." He says:

> At first sight, the space may seem overwhelming; a space in which one is likely to get lost. But as you find yourself drawn to a particular portal and as you begin to engage with it, the idea is that you will begin to find yourself in some way. Perhaps you will re-find a dimension of yourself that was somehow mislaid. As you find orientation, you might decide to tackle other portals that felt less immediately intuitive or appealing.[1]

All the sculptures will be displayed together in one large space. Some key works forming what Swart calls "the central spine of the exhibition" have had a long prior life. They were displayed in the Tatham Art Gallery in 1997 and are now reappearing there reworked. The resurrected and reinstalled works in question are *Pieta: Ground Zero*, *1986-2022* (originally titled *After Michelangelo's "Pieta": A Concourse*, *1986-1996*) and *Propeller Cruciform*, *1996-2024*, which Swart describes as the exhibition's central piece, the one in relation to which all the other pieces are orientated.

Also evident across the works for display in 2025 is a re-engagement with key symbols that were present in the 1997 exhibition: chairs, propellers, trees, boats, the abacus, oars, horns, hands and cruciform shapes. They are at once mysterious and compelling, offering symbols that engage the viewer personally, biblically and politically. An exploration of just one piece, *Pieta: Ground Zero* – the first work to be encountered by visitors upon entering the exhibition space – makes this clear.

In art historical terms, "pietà" (which literally means "pity") refers to works of art depicting the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of the adult Jesus on her lap. Perhaps the best-known example is Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1499), housed in St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City, which is surprisingly stoic in its portrayal. Swart's interpretation is likewise devoid of the sentiment that pietàs have traditionally tended to evoke.

The sculptural core of *Pieta: Ground Zero*, which dates to 1986, is a carved coffin-shaped form with a rudder on both ends, locked in opposite directions, suggesting a stalemate. A set of found oars was positioned on top of it, unused. The work's chair-structure, made from welded mild steel, was added in the early 1990s. In 2019, just as the threat of the Covid 19 pandemic loomed over the world, Swart felt compelled to

1 Gert Swart cited in: Jorella Andrews, "Towards a Labyrinth of Portals: A Space for Exchange," 17 September 2024, https://www.gertswart.com/post/towards-a-labyrinth-of-portals-a-space-for-exchange.

take the work out of storage, to repaint and rework it. This led to the oars being repositioned and tipped with red, as though saturated with blood. But the main addition was a substantial base on which, in Swart's words, he painted "a target-like insignia, to signify 'ground zero': the area directly below a nuclear explosion where everything gets vapourised. An area of total annihilation!"[2]

Gert Swart, *Pieta: Ground Zero, 1986-2022*, Painted wood and mild steel, 168 x 168 x 62 cm.

In Swart's *Pieta*, it is above all the wounded body of South Africa that is being held. Swart recalls:

> Its genesis goes back to a sketch I made during tumultuous political times in South Africa, around 1985. The sketch was of a coffin/sarcophagus with some sort of a chess game being played out on its top surface. ... I immediately knew that this idea went even further back in my subconscious and stemmed from a double-exposure photograph that my father (a fledgling policeman at the time) had taken before I was born, and that appeared in one of his photo albums.[3]

A double exposure is an accidental image that occurs when an analogue camera fails to spool, causing two shots to overlap on the same frame. And yet how politically astute it was! This photograph happened to superimpose a group of white people "sitting around drinking, in party mode" with an image of a dead black man in a mortuary. The latter was an image that the dead man's family may have asked Swart's father to take. Swart speaks of this photograph having haunted him ever since he can remember and of this "true lie" of an image causing him to understand "even in those tender formative years of my childhood ... that all was not well in the South Africa I was destined to grow up in."[4]

In Swart's *Pieta*, it is above all the wounded body of South Africa that is being held.

The earliest piece to be exhibited in *Towards Easter Sunday 2025: Who Am I?* is *Self Portrait* from 1985, another wooden chair-based sculpture, placed on or rising from a new yellowwood plinth – the yellowwood being the national tree of South Africa. The form appears to be morphing into a landscape of trees that speak of the material's origins. But these tree forms, and the way in which the piece has been shaped overall, also recall a collection of bones, a strange skeleton. The work is in a prime position within the exhibition

2 See: https://www.gertswart.com/portfolio-collections/my-portfolio/pieta-ground-zero.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.

Gert Swart, *Self Portrait* (1985), Camphor wood, 154 x 18 x 23 cm

space, at its far end opposite the entrance, from where it can survey the entire scene. What does this chair-like, tree-like, bone-like entity see?

It sees a period of time between 1997 and 2025, and a journey that has been turbulent personally for Swart, and in the greater context of ongoing, post-apartheid political unrest and inequality. For Swart, the two realms cannot be pulled apart. This period began with the highs of the Tatham exhibition and his receipt of the prestigious Helgaard Steyn Award for Sculpture in 1997, but these were followed by a series of extreme life challenges, through which he was supported, not without considerable shared hardship, by his wife Istine. These included a sudden paralysis of his left arm, followed by slow rehabilitation, and a longstanding chronic illness. The progression of his ideas has been slow. "More than that," he says, "on a psychological level, I had to regain the will and desire to make meaningful sculptures once again, sculptures that can now, in hindsight, truly address the searing question of who I am, that is evoked in the title of the exhibition – in particular, who I am positioned before what I believe is the greatest portal of all; that which was formed through the agony and resurrection glory of that first Easter."[5]

As I have been visualising Swart's emerging exhibition, the vision of the great biblical prophet Ezekiel – the "Valley of Dry Bones" (Ezek 37:1-14) – has been pressing into my thoughts. The Scripture begins as follows: "The hand of the Lord [...] set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led

5 See Swart's remarks on the home page of his website: https://www.gertswart.com/

Gustave Doré, The Vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones

me all around them. There were a great many of them on the surface of the valley, and they were very dry. Then He said to me, 'Son of Man, can these bones live?'" Ezekiel's reply was that only God could know the outcome. God's response was to command Ezekiel to start prophesying life over them and, indeed, they began to gather tendons, flesh and skin, and be infused with breath so that "they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast army." In his own way, Swart too was prophesying over the bones as he continued to create over those difficult decades. On Armistice Day 2024, he wrote to me:

> I like the way Ezekiel has to walk back and forth through the dry bones before he is compelled to prophesy, and that is what I am hoping to achieve in my exhibition. When the bones are revivified, taking on form and character, they still need that vital breath (from the four winds) and, perhaps, the breath needed can be likened to the creative impulse/will (findings, portals) needed to link the individuals to the whole (vast army).

Gert Swart, *YEARNING, 1998-2024. (Tribute to Istine.)*

In my 1997 Contemplation exhibition catalogue, there are photos of the first tree-forms I made in 1983 while at art school. I wanted to take discarded pieces of wood (railway sleepers) and carve tree-forms out of them, thereby giving the wood back its former dignity. The parallel to this was that, in South Africa, the indigenous, disenfranchised peoples should be given back their dignity. What was very disturbing about this analogy was that it was like taking a piece of human flesh and carving it into a human form! It is only the creative "breath" that can give it true meaning.[6]

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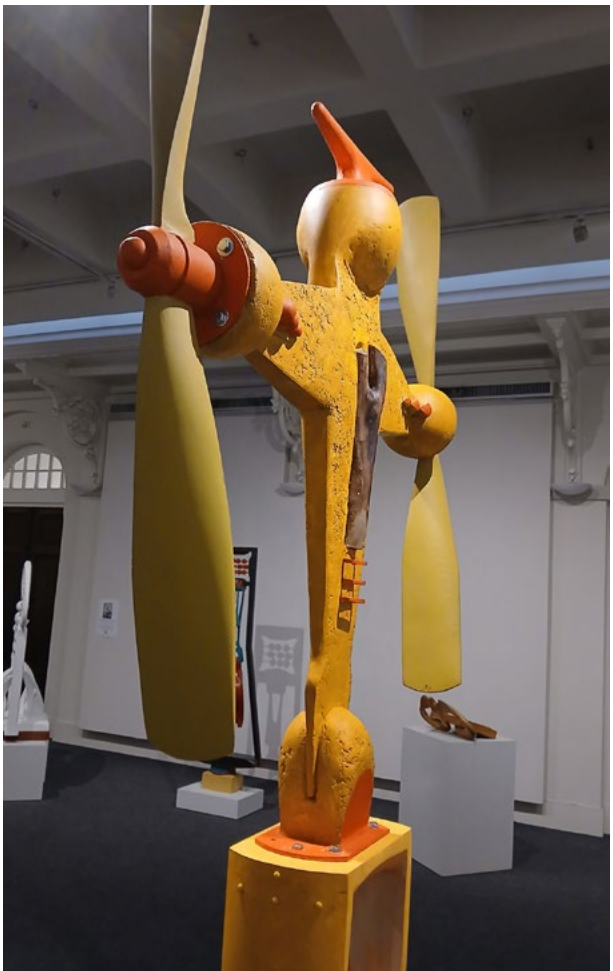
6 Gert Swart, private correspondence, 9 November 2024.

Gert Swart, *Propeller Cruciform, 1996-2024*



Gert Swart, *Beyond the Garden of Eden* (2025)

the Ocean at the End of the Lane

JORDAN PICKERING

Neil Gaiman has long been known for dark and fantastical stories, but with disturbing abuse allegations being made against the author in late 2024, including his victim's claim that he insisted she call him "master," it might be that he has been giving vent to some of his dark fantasies in the real world too.

In *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the middle-aged narrator visits his childhood home and relives the family turmoil he went through as a seven-year-old boy. The troubles began with his discovery that their lodger had committed suicide in their white Mini. While the grownups see to the mess, he meets his neighbour Lettie, who brings him home to her mother and grandmother. These women immediately come off as *unusual*. At the back of the house is a duck pond that Lettie calls her ocean, and claims that her family voyaged across it from the old country to settle there when she was a baby. They seem to have supernatural insights into the contents of a concealed suicide note or the neighbours' private thoughts. Granny claims to have been witness to the creation of the moon. Lettie insists she is eleven, and only smiles when he asks *for how long* she has been eleven.

The sad death of this lodger, it turns out, has drawn the attention of a spirit from the old country and she is now causing discord. Believing it to be a small matter, Lettie takes the boy on her mission to banish the spirit again, but the spirit draws them further out into the fringes of the farm and she is more formidable than expected. Though the boy has only one instruction – not to let go of Lettie's hand – the spirit separates them just for an instant, and this sets off the chain of events that plunges his small world into chaos.

The spirit plants in him a worm-like passageway by which she enters into the real world, and it's no coincidence that the very next day a beautiful young woman, Ursula Monkton, becomes his and his sister's nanny. To keep her doorway close by, Ursula forbids the boy from leaving home and visiting Lettie, and she seduces his father, enlisting him as a cruel punisher of any rebellions.

Eventually, when Ursula won't leave voluntarily, granny must make a risky intervention in the spirit realm and summon the hunger birds. These are creatures who clean up ruptures in the unseen order and they will tear Ursula permanently from the world. Only, an icy shard of Ursula's evil presence has lodged itself in the boy's heart, and the hunger birds insist they must devour him too.

The book regularly raises questions about whether the magical telling of events or the natural one is more true. Does the nanny get fired or *eaten*? Does Lettie sacrifice herself for the boy or go to be with her dad in Australia?[1] While this is, on one level, a staple of the magical-realist genre, it is especially

1 Apologies for the spoiler, but I don't think plot surprises are what make this book worth reading.

poignant here because of how it interacts with the book's main themes of trauma and memory.

The driving predicament of the story – the narrator's opening of a doorway for mischief into his world – is a beautiful expression of every child's response to family disharmony: the belief that they are to blame. "I felt guilty. It was, I knew, my fault. If I had kept hold of Lettie's hand, none of this would have happened" (p. 202). *He* carried the evil spirit home. He caused his father's bewitchment. He brought the abuse upon himself.

The blurring of the lines between the real and the magical also asks us to consider what kinds of stories we live by. Gaiman draws on a version of the Christian story – complete with the three women being a kind of trinity – to speak about his narrator's route to redemption. Having been redeemed by an act of cosmic sacrifice, the boy asks to stay in their world. "No," the women say, "You get on with your own life. Lettie gave it to you. You just have to grow up and try and be worth it" (p. 221). As an adult, returning again to the women's house, he asks, "And did I pass?" to which the old woman replies, "You don't pass or fail at being a person, dear" (p. 231). His story too is a balance of grace and responsibility.

"Doing fine, thank you, I would say, never knowing how to talk about what I do. If I could talk about it, I would not have to do it. I make art, sometimes I make true art, and sometimes it fills the empty places in my life. Some of them. Not all."

Yet, Gaiman's real-world failings underline the danger of letting fantasy bleed into our own stories.

As people try to understand what he has become, Gaiman is now cursed to have his stories autopsied for evidence of his own inner darkness. While he denies that *Ocean* is in any way autobiographical, he also describes it as intensely personal and as drawing liberally from his childhood. How much of his true self does he give away?

His narrator describes awkward adult conversations at dinner parties. "Doing fine, thank you, I would say, never knowing how to talk about what I do. If I could talk about it, I would not have to do it. I make art, sometimes I make true art, and sometimes it fills the empty places in my life. Some of them. Not all" (p. 5). In our autopsy report, we note that his art is a way in which he processes an inner emptiness that he can't verbalise.

When talking about the nanny, Ursula, who in their final showdown is found asleep, naked, in her beautiful human

Vergvoktre (DeviantArt)

form, the narrator says, "She really was pretty, for a grown up, but when you are seven, beauty is an abstraction, not an imperative" (p. 157). In our autopsy report, we note that seeing beauty as an *imperative* suggests a worrying compulsiveness about desire.

When circling shadows are trying to catch the boy, they taunt him with visions of his future. "How can you be happy in this world? You have a hole in your heart. You have a gateway inside you to lands beyond the world that you know. They will call you, as you grow. There can never be a time when you forget them, when you are not, in your heart, questing after something you cannot have … you will die with a hole inside you, and you will wail and curse at a life ill-lived. But you won't grow" (pp. 185-6). In our autopsy report, we note that his inner damage is something experienced as *insatiable* and *incurable*.

The human problem, perhaps, is that we belong connected to a bigger life-giving body, but we have been severed from our source.

Is this the real Gaiman? Who knows? The wonder of humanity is imagination – the ability to inhabit things we've not experienced. On the other hand, who doesn't resonate with the feeling that darknesses inhabit us and entice us to pursue fantasies that we hope will patch holes in our hearts (but know that they won't)?

If Gaiman is in fact guilty – he denies all wrongdoing – his redemption story didn't seem to take permanent root. Even in the story, the narrator is redeemed by the self-sacrifice of his neighbours but discovers that he has returned to the ocean at the end of this lane at various points of his life, without meaning to and without remembering that he had. The real Gaiman would seem also to have an uncured wound, one that has the power to grievously wound others around him.

It's easy for Christians to be glib about the healing power of the real redemption story. It's a story that calls us to be remade into the image of the divine Son and in some way *grants us the power* to be remade. Yet, it is fair to say that the results often appear mixed. Our cure is not immediate. Not simple. Only ever incipient.

Nevertheless, there are important ways in which Christ's story is different to Gaiman's retelling, and these, I think, at least explain why Gaiman's is doomed to fail. Augustine described human nature as *curved inward on itself*. Gaiman's narrator offers a wonderful statement of the child's world being this way: "I was a normal child. Which is to say, I was selfish and I was not entirely convinced of things that were not me … There was nothing that was more important to me than I was" (p. 207). We don't, I think, grow out of this entirely. Gaiman's story has self-sacrifice at its heart, but it offers only a debtor's ethic as the way forward: live in a way that makes the sacrifice of others "worth it." We understandably might assume with Gaiman that the holes in our hearts require us to look inward, to attempt to find our own cures and to press them into the void. Paradoxically, though, we can't repair our own heart without curving inward all the more, and we might also fail to see the blundering mess we leave in our wake.

Christianity, by contrast, insists that the sacrifice *removes* all debts, and death to self becomes the model of our discipleship: we are free from debt but also bound to uncurl and direct ourselves outward. The human problem, perhaps, is that we belong connected to a bigger life-giving body, but we have been severed from our source. The wound that we all nurse isn't healed by being sutured up, but only by being put back together. The gospel doesn't perfect our self-sufficiency; it properly relates us to our world and to our God. It is only by being reconnected to divine life and to one another that we are made whole.

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Henri Charles Guerard, *Seven Crows*

A Liturgy for Beginning a PhD Mid-Life

SARA OSBORNE

O Sovereign Lord of All Creation,
Omniscient Father,
God Before Time,
Meet me today in my need, I pray.

I am ever
mindful of
My age,
My frailty,
My weakness,
My fatigue,
My memory,
My many responsibilities for others.

I am tempted towards
Feelings of inadequacy,
And haunted by
Whispers from the enemy
Who would call me
An Impostor,
Ill-prepared,
And undone.

Remind me today that my work is yours—
That I, myself, am yours.
And that no Christian work is ever accomplished
By mere mortal hands.

Let me acknowledge my weakness, like Paul,
Without being crushed beneath its weight.
Let me own the courage and confidence of David
Without succumbing to the snare of pride,
Lest I set myself in opposition to you
And your work of grace in my life.

Give me renewed vision by your Spirit;
Lead me in your Truth.
Guard my mind and heart from error;
Hem me in by your Word.

Forgive me for my vain comparisons -
For lusting after the energy of my youth,
For envying the accomplishments of my peers,
For questioning the ways
you have prepared me for this task.

Let me not forget how you have
Shaped me through suffering,
Moulded me through parenthood,
Cared for me through community,
And **enriched me** through my many teachers.

Bring your faithfulness to mind often,
That I might bless you with my breath
And worship you with my writing.
Remind me of your sufficient grace always,
That I might run in its path daily
And bring glory to its Holy Fount.

Today, as I labour, Lord,
Give me a sharp mind attuned to your wonder.
Give me a humble heart open to correction.
Give me articulate language for clear expression,
That this work might be a blessing to others.

Let me not read and
write in isolation,
But be ever
mindful of
My spouse,
My children,
My friends,
My neighbours,
Your church,
And even the lost.

Take this research and writing as an offering of faith
And my weakness a conduit for your strength,
That these labours might bear testimony
to Christ's sanctifying work
And the Holy Spirit
which sustains my very life and breath.

Amen.

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Arent de Gelder, *Jacob's Dream*, c.1715, Oil on canvas, 66.7 x 56.9 cm, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

To *See* Something

OTTO BAM

It is just over two years since KLC took over ArtWay's English face. The website founded by Marleen Hengelaar-Rookmaaker has been a much-loved resource in the world of art and faith for more than fifteen years. While Marleen continues her work as the editor of the UNESCO-designated Dutch face of the website, I have taken on the editorship of the English face, publishing resources and articles that help readers understand and engage more deeply with art. We have also over these two years worked on a complete redesign of the website, a colossal task that it was almost impossible not to underestimate. But here we are! ArtWay's resources can now be found on a brand-new website.

The technical work now mostly complete, I can again focus more of my attention on writing and editing. In my reading I recently came across references to a painting by the Dutch artist Arent de Gelder depicting Jacob's dream from Genesis 28. It was copied by many artists during the nineteenth century, including the landscape painter John Constable and was a favourite of the critic William Hazlitt, who wrote that "No one else could ever grapple with this subject, or stamp it on the willing canvas in its gorgeous obscurity but Rembrandt!"[1] De Gelder was the last student of Rembrandt van Rijn, and, for a long time, as we see from Hazlitt's statement, *Jacob's Dream* was thought to be the work of the master rather than the student. It was only late in the nineteenth century that the painting was correctly attributed. The American painter Washington Allston turned to verse to voice his admiration for the painting, which, in its,

1 A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover, eds., *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 9 (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1903), 50.

random shadowings give[s] birth
To thoughts and things from other worlds that come
And fill the soul, and strike the reason dumb.[2]

Reading how these artists and critics admired the painting, I found an image of it online and studied it carefully. I was struck by the thought that, if I had not read what Hazlitt and Allston had written about the painting, I would have been unlikely to pay any attention to a digital version of it. It has a limited palette. Earth tones dominate, and so it does not immediately grab one's attention in a digital medium. But having paid closer attention, I was convinced that the painting – with its unique composition and striking eruption of light that pours down towards an astonished Jacob who lies in the corner, surrounded by a vast and shadowy landscape – was capable of holding open a place in the mind that one can return to in order to understand a certain spiritual reality that the mind, left to itself, would find hard to comprehend. It is an image of hope for us pilgrims who at times might feel like we've lost our way: revelation comes when we least expect it and by sheer grace.

I resolved to write a meditation on the painting. The first words that made their way onto the page as I started writing the meditation were the following:

> We look at an image presented to us in pixels. I wonder how many paintings will be underestimated in these times because they are poorly represented by our screens. Consider the paintings of Van Gogh, which enjoy almost inestimable popularity around the world today. His paintings display beautifully on screens, with their bright colour palettes and clear and pleasing organic shapes. His idiosyncratic brush strokes are clearly visible even in photographs. Of course, his work needs no help in winning us over. His paintings bring the depths of the heart right to the eyes so that feeling and perception are entirely united. But neither does the digital medium hinder us from enjoying them. Not so with paintings that have a more subdued palette, which rely more on the effects caused by very subtle contrast of colour and the texture of paint layered on canvas – paintings that appeal to touch as much as to sight. Indeed, our screens, while they do bring about a wonderful democratisation of fine art, also exile our bodies and make of us little more than eyes. The senses of touch, smell and hearing are not appealed to. It falls to writers to help us encounter paintings imaginatively, to place us in front of beautiful art (and not just in front of art, but all manner of things worth contemplating), engaging our senses to see more than flat, pixelated surfaces. In former times writers had to describe paintings because fewer people had the privilege of seeing works held in private collections. We must be each other's hands and feet, because having only eyes we will not see.

2 Washington Allston, "On Rembrandt; Occasioned by His Picture of Jacob's Dream," *Lectures on Art, and Poems* (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1850), 276.

Well, here I was attempting to write about a painting I had only seen digitally. But it hangs, as I knew, in a gallery not far from Cambridge! The next day I took the train to Dulwich Picture Gallery in the South of London, the oldest public art gallery in England. Though not a very large gallery (compared to the National Galleries), it has an impressive collection including works by Raphael, Rembrandt, Poussin, Velázquez and many others.

But I had come for one painting in particular. I walked in and there it was, one of the first paintings that greeted me. I stood in front of it for a long time, observing its contrasts and shadows, its arid landscape veiled in shadow and the soft, yet magnificent brilliance of the celestial light bursting in the sky; scribbling notes as I pondered the scene.

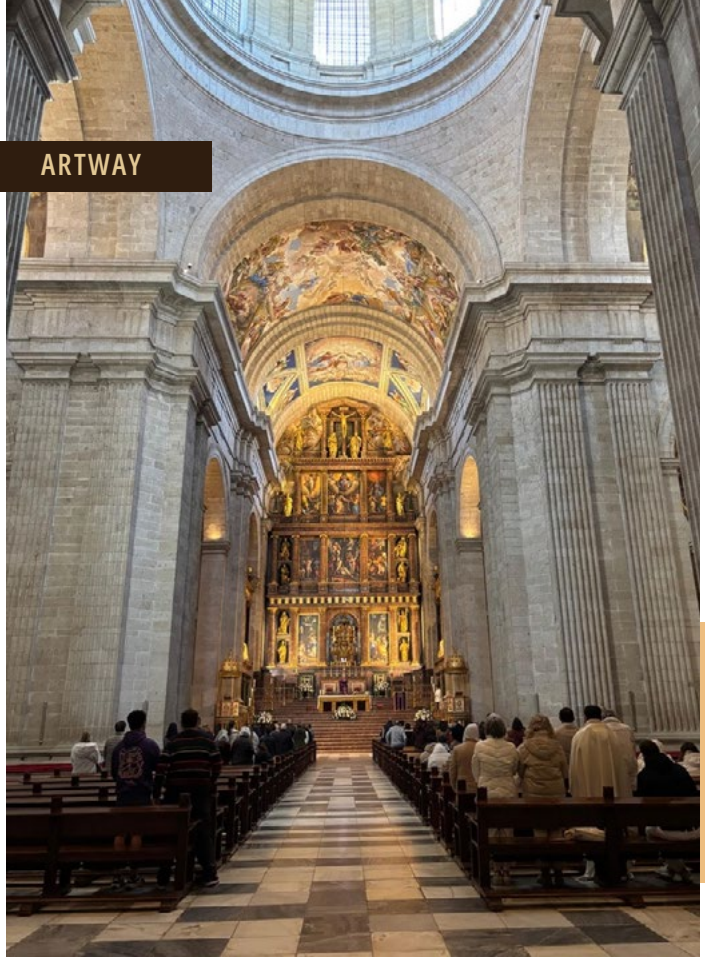
John Ruskin wrote, "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way."[3] We do not all have these marvellous paintings on our doorstep (I do not know how long I will have the privilege). But as Christians we know that all around us there is something to see. *Jacob's Dream* is a profound depiction of the wonder that might find us – especially when we come away from the things that keep us busy and distracted – in a world that teems with the wondrous life and glory of God. This is why Ruskin could say, "To see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion, all in one."[4]

As for what I wrote having seen the painting in person, you will find it on ArtWay.eu – and much else besides.

Otto Bam is the Arts Manager for the KLC, the editor of the English side of artway.eu and an Associate Fellow of the KLC.

3 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, vol. 3 (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1856), 287.
4 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, 287.

Vincent van Gogh, *Blossoming Acacia Branches* (1890)



The basilica of El Escorial Monastery.

ArtWay goes to Madrid

At the end of March, ArtWay's editor Otto Bam and his wife Elizabeth travelled to Madrid to address a group of artists on the work of The Kirby Laing Centre and ArtWay.

Otto was invited by Maria Tarruella, one of the founders of La Fundaçion Via del Arte, an organisation based in Madrid that aims to renew and promote contemporary art that engages with the sacred. Otto gave his talk at the organisation's weekly event, Belleza de Cristo (Beauty of Christ), hosted in the studio of the sculptor and photographer Javier Viver. The talk focused on some of the key ideas of Hans Rookmaaker and was followed by lively discussion. It was particularly encouraging to witness the rich ecumenical dialogue that can be facilitated through the arts.

At the heart of Via del Arte's work is El Observatorio de lo Invisible (The Observatory of the Invisible), a summer school of art and spirituality which is held annually in the beautiful setting of a monastery. According to their website, the Observatorio invites attendees to "learn from an established artist in a workshop within a particular artistic discipline, be it painting, dance, film, theatre, poetry, sculpture, photography or music. At the same time, they share, create, pray and dialogue, in the context of forums, lectures and polyphonic prayers." The concept provides much inspiration for similar initiatives in the anglophone world.

It was a wonderful time of mutual learning and exchange. We are grateful to Maria for her hospitality and we look forward to future collaboration between ArtWay and La Fundaçion Via del Arte!

Otto addresses artists at Belleza de Cristo in the studio of Javier Viver.

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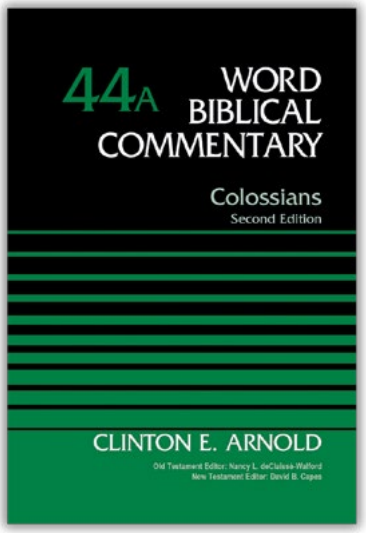

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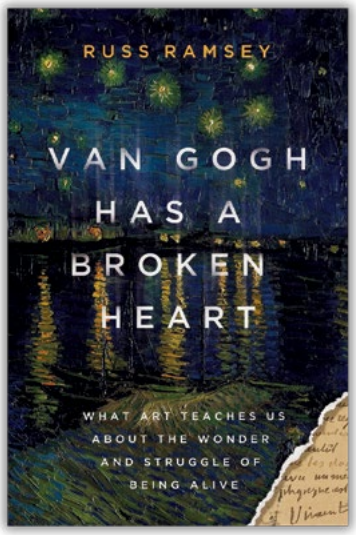

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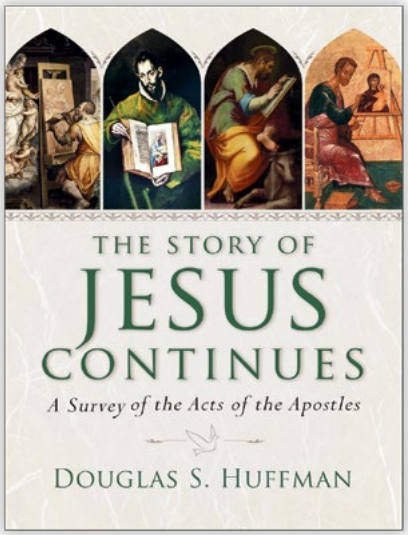

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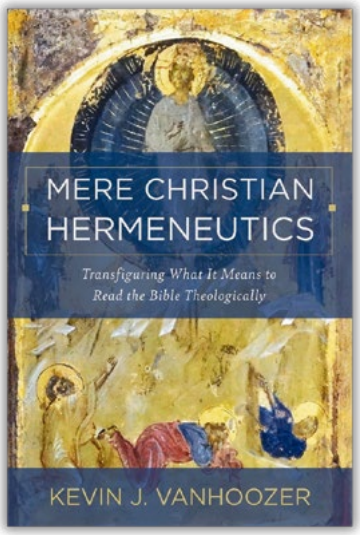

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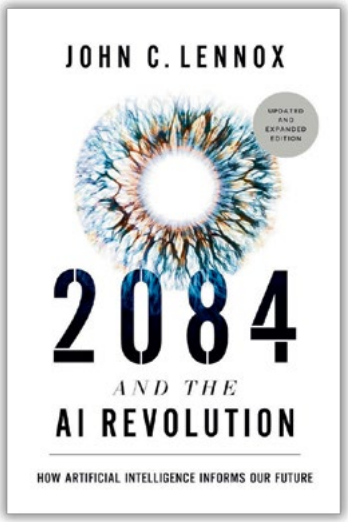

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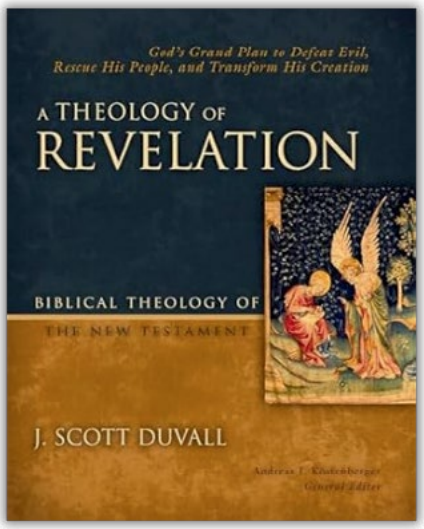

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