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URCNA to OPC Fraternal Greetings

[Ed. *The speaker delivered the following remarks at the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church at Eastern University on June 11, 2022.*]

Mr. Moderator, I would like to open my comments with a word of scripture, from Psalm 84.5:

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.

WE HAVE BEEN REMINDED AT THIS assembly by Greg Reynolds that a third of scripture is poetry. And what a powerful poetic image we find here: “in whose heart are the highways to Zion.” Our hearts are full of affection and longing for the heavenly city. That’s what we have in common as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

INSIDE

Presbyterian Culture	4
Week-ness of Reformed	
Worship	6
Hamilton Diarist	7
39 Alexander Hall.	8
Second Hand Smoke	8

I bring greetings from the United Reformed Churches in North America, as well as greetings from my congregation, Christ Reformed DC. Our church meets in rented space on Capitol Hill, less than a mile from the magnificent pile that is our nation’s Capitol. My name is Brian Lee, though I tried, unsuccessfully, to get my URC handle displayed up on the screen, Brian Vander Lee.

This is my first time as a fraternal delegate to this assembly, or any other, so I don’t have a lot of experience in this role. I am something of a last minute and accidental appointment to this office, and I feel somewhat inadequate and ill prepared. I’m not very witty. All I have are a plethora of bargains. [*This is a little humor riffing on a previous address to the Assembly.*]

BEFORE I BEGIN IN EARNEST, I’D like to set aside a nasty rumor that I have heard over the last few days. It simply isn’t true. I didn’t just come to this Assembly for the Van Dixhoorn party this evening.

Brothers, in all seriousness, the URCNA’s affection for the OPC is wide, deep, and growing.

Allow me to unburden myself of a personal debt of gratitude I owe your church. I was raised as a Roman Catholic, and catechized in Mega-church evangelicalism. My proof for the sovereignty of God is that I became a Calvinist as a student in the Religious Studies department at Stanford University, mostly by reading Calvin and Luther.

I may have become a Calvinist at Stanford, but I became Reformed — I became a confessionally Reformed churchman — largely as a result of the people and the proud history of the OPC.

THE FIRST LIVING, BREATHING Reformed Christian I ever met was a son of Emmanuel OPC in Wilmington, Delaware. This was about thirty years ago, and this dear brother remains one of my closest friends. He put into my hands Darryl Hart’s book, *Defending the Faith*, about J. Gresham Machen and the crisis of conservative Protestantism. It seems that we are still in crisis, are we not?

With Calvin in one hand, and Machen in the other, it was love at first sight with the Reformed faith, and more importantly, the Reformed church.

Ours is a much younger federation of churches, and as I gaze across the narrow divide that separates us, I do regret that we do not have an Office of the Historian. I found it moving to learn just the other evening at this assembly that one of the great theological minds, one of the great servants of the church over the last century, Dr. Gaffin, was the first covenant child baptized in the OPC.

That’s really remarkable. It’s remarkable how you cherish and preserve your history, and mark God’s kindnesses to you through all these generations. We are a much younger federation, twenty-seven years old this November, and I have been inspired perhaps to bring a motion to our Synod this fall to try to determine who the first covenant child baptized in the URC is. This should be a good bit easier, as

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most of the relevant parties are still alive.

Indeed, since we share a commitment to life, and a culture of life, I'm thinking that perhaps the URC can raise the bar a little bit. It might be a little bit difficult, but I think it would be remarkable if we could identify the first covenant child *conceived* in the URC.

Allow me to provide a brief update on the URCNA, and request your prayers for us as a federation. Statistically, it appears that we have weathered the events of the last two years pretty well. We currently number 25,997 souls in 136 churches, which is an increase from 2019 of approximately five percent in souls and eight percent in churches. So our trajectory of slow and steady growth is similar to yours.

However, I do report those statistics with something of a caveat. We are not as adept at tracking statistics as the OPC, and we do not, for instance, track attendance. It is very possible that there may yet be a lagging impact of membership losses due to COVID lockdowns.

ONE MAJOR IMPACT OF TRAVEL restrictions has been the inability for our churches to meet in Synod. Given that a third of our congregations are in Canada, and our synod was scheduled to meet in Canada, the challenge of crossing the border has impeded our assembling. In fact, our last Synod was in 2018, when we met concurrently with the OPC in Wheaton. I commend you for meeting so diligently during these difficult times.

Allow me to add, speaking personally, and also on behalf of many in our federation, we would be delighted to meet again concurrently with your General Assembly. I encourage our ecumenical committees to work together to that end, perhaps as soon as 2024. I realize you adjusted your schedule to align with us — for which we remain grateful. Perhaps even a partially concurrent assembly could be arranged with greater ease.

This delay in our Synod has been impactful. Sometimes, absence can make the heart fonder, and sometimes you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.

In 2018, a major missions proposal was defeated by our Synod, and the committee was asked to come back with more robust historical background and a new proposal. They were asked to look explicitly to the OPC, as we appreciate your faithfulness in missions, and to our prior experience in the CRCNA, as well as to our recent efforts in the URC.

That committee reported out two draft proposals in 2020, a majority and a minority position, charting two different courses for faithfulness in missions. These two proposals have been floating out in the procedural ether for the last two years, on a highly atypical deliberative schedule. This has led to a certain sense of uncertainty, perhaps confusion, about what the future holds for us in the area of missions.

I humbly ask you to pray for us with regard to this issue in particular. All URC churches care deeply about our mission work, and we are seeking greater unity and agreement in our federation as we move forward.

I'D LIKE TO EXPRESS PARTICULAR gratitude for two specific areas of our work together.

First, we are delighted with the *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* as tangible proof of the fellowship we share. I recently read that the sixth printing is under way, and more than 73,000 copies have been sold. Not only have these songbooks found great acceptance in our own congregations, but they are being used by churches outside the OPC and URC. Praise God.

Personally, I am a shameless proponent of adoption. I know there are many practical considerations informing the decision whether any church should purchase this book. However, I openly urge all URCNA and OPC churches to adopt this songbook if they are at all able to do so. I believe it has great practical benefit for the mission — the common mission — of our two churches.

One benefit I think about a lot lately, as my daughter, Claire, has just turned fifteen years old. When she goes off to college, or gets married, or moves to a new city to take her first job, if there is no URC nearby I pray that she would seek next a faithful OPC congregation, and stay within the Reformed family of our churches. Should she do so, I think

that singing out of the songbook she grew up with will help keep her in this fold of confessionally Reformed Christianity. So do it for Claire. Do it for all our children.

Second, we give thanks for the close relationship that has been developing with OPC domestic and foreign missions over the last number of years. Personally, as a church planter, and a prior chairman of our Classical Church Planting committee, I made it a regular practice to visit with the regional home missionary in the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic, Steve Doe. Just this week I have spoken with the new RHM, Charles Biggs, and we plan to meet soon to continue this practice.

We rejoice that we have been able to send families, the Van Essendelfts and the Folkerts, to labor alongside you on your OPC Uganda team. We look forward to providing more manpower in the future for your mission efforts.

Finally, our Missions Coordinator, Rich Bout, is grateful for the trip to eastern Europe that he made with this Assembly's Moderator, David Nakhla, this past May. To work together with you and marshal our resources in helping to show our love for the churches and people of war-torn Europe.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF OUR relationship? I don't know. The secret things belong to the Lord. But I do know that it is far more difficult to undo cultural and historical differences than it is to work around them where we may. So let's keep working together and see what the Lord does. He works in mysterious ways.

I celebrate what we share, especially the Gospel, which alone is the power of God to save. That is undoubtedly the most important thing, and the very heart of what we have in common.

But I also celebrate our differences, which I have had the good pleasure to discuss with brothers over the course of this meeting. I celebrate these differences

as I celebrate diverse parts of a four-part harmony, which in their diversity add richness to a common tune.

These differences include the use of liturgical forms in our worship, found in our book of *Forms and Prayers*, as well as the priority of psalms in our congregational singing.

WHILE WE ARE NOT EXCLUSIVE psalm singers, we do believe in the priority of psalms in our sung worship. If you are unclear on what the "priority of psalms" means, welcome to the club. Our church order's requirement is debated within our own circles, but one very useful definition that I have heard is that the worship leader looks first to the psalter for an edifying song that contributes to the theme and message of the service. I encourage you to give this a try. It's remarkable how often one finds confirmation for one's message in the psalter, with the added bonus that while you are singing you are learning and remembering the words of inspired Scripture.

We differ on some of the details of Presbyterian government. We differ as well on the celebration of evangelical feast days with called worship services, confessional church membership, and our theology of the Lord's Day. Note that while our practice of observing the Lord's Day is practically identical, the teaching of our confessions is markedly different. These are real, practical, and theological differences. And I think we should celebrate them. We should not paper over them, or pretend they don't exist.

Why celebrate differences? As I have been reminded over the course of many conversations this week, if brothers I respect and admire as much as you all can disagree with us on these matters, well, this should keep us both humble.

AS PILGRIMS ON THE WAY — IN whose hearts are the highways to Zion — our theology, our confessions, are not perfect. Only the word of God is perfect, and only God himself has perfect theology. Even in glory, our theology, though blessed, will be finite and creaturely.

Praise God that it is not the purity of our Reformed doctrine that saves us. We would be doomed. Praise God, it is not the perfection of our creeds and confessions that defeats the world, the flesh, and the devil. It is the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.

And yet, dear fellow pilgrims, on that day, in that coming glory, on that not so distant shore, we will be perfectly united as one spotless bride. May the Lord hasten that day.

So I celebrate these differences. And I celebrate that they don't keep us from walking together, from working together, from engaging in mission together, or from singing together from the same psalter hymnal together.

Thank you. And thank God for our unity in Christ.

Brian Lee

SC88

The Dilemma of Presbyterian Culture

Scene 1: A Congregation's Ethos

If you as a Presbyterian thought transforming THE culture was part of what God wanted you to do — as part of your self-awareness as a Neo-Calvinist — what sort of culture would you choose for your model? Since you are a Presbyterian, you might want American culture (or Canadian, or

Scottish, or Irish, or English – we are Anglophones here) to look like Presbyterian culture. And then \$64,000 question – what the *hades* is Presbyterian culture?

At one level, perhaps the highest, Presbyterian culture is one of debate, procedure, ordered deliberation, committee reports, and committee meetings. These items are basic attributes of a General Assembly or presbytery meeting. Session meetings are a pale imitation. Yes, these gatherings of officers sing, pray, read Scripture, here reflection on God's word, and break for meals.

BUT IF ANTHROPOLOGISTS FROM MARS (not the seminary) attended an assembly or presbytery meeting and tried to discern the character of Presbyterian culture among church officers at their most Presbyterian – as in we put the *polis* in church polity – said anthropologists might conclude that Presbyterian culture is highly verbal, structured around specific times, sometimes argumentative, and incredibly sedentary (“these people sit for mostly twelve hours each day and still need sustenance?”).

If a nation or group of nations adopted this kind of Presbyterian culture for its way of life, people in the chair and desk business might do well. And food services of various kinds would be essential, the body being what it is with its needs. Computing and printing services, along with office supplies would also do well in a society geared to the assembly of deliberative bodies.

AT THE SAME TIME, RECREATION and entertainment industries would need to compete with distilleries and tobacco companies, judging by the way many Presbyterian officers spend time between meetings. In the realm of politics, a Presbyterian society would likely leave in place the republican forms of federal, state, county, and municipal government, as they exist in the United States. But in the arena of the fine arts, lots of luck. Perhaps the spaces in which deliberative

bodies meet need decorative touches on the walls, in the windows, and the occasional banner. But if members of a Presbyterian society esteemed the functions of assemblies and sought vocations that involved participation in the highest levels of Presbyterian culture, they likely would not aspire to paint paintings, write poetry or plays, or compose music (beyond the tunes necessary for hymn and Psalm-singing at the assembly).

At the other end of Presbyterian culture, the local congregation, we see endless variety. What sort of decorations does a local body decide upon for the nursery? Color scheme? Toys? Chairs? Changing tables? Does a church have wooden pews or portable seats? What is the fabric on the seating and what color is it? Does the color match the building's carpet and curtains? What is the font of the bulletin? What logo or art is on the cover? (Do liberal and conservative Presbyterians use different designs based on attachments to the Confession of Faith or do regions and the professional make up of church members matter more than doctrine?)

HOW DO CHURCH MEMBERS DRESS for worship? Chances are the attire is western, not distinctly Presbyterian, though fashions will likely vary according to age and location (suburban, urban, or rural). What about the pastor? Does he (for conservatives) wear a business suit, a robe, or a polo shirt? The second of those options may come closest to a distinctly “Presbyterian” style, though it is one shared by most European Protestants on the Continent and British churches well before the twentieth century.

The assumption here is that most Presbyterian churches will have indoor plumbing, which is not something that cultural transformers ever talk about redeeming even if they also take it for granted.

When it comes to fellowship meals or potluck suppers, do Presbyterians have any menu items that are distinctly theirs? And if they do, is the food something that Presbyterians alone eat or is it more the cuisine of a particular region that Presbyterians share with other inhabitants of that locale? Think haggis. I for one never consider contributions for the church pot-luck according to the regulative principle or the spirituality of the church. More likely, the dish I make and bring depends on the most recent issue of *Cook's Country* to arrive at home (a magazine without any confessional or denominational affiliation).

SUCH REFLECTIONS COULD GO ON BUT they are long enough to make the point. Presbyterians do not have a culture. That's not a bad thing. Though it could be a blessing for the rest of the United States' population with strong preferences for fewer carbs at dinner time and put off by people singing out of thick books.

Scene 2 A Learned Ministry

The Benediction Option versus Redeemer Presbyterian Church (NYC) is a wrestling match this writer would pay to see. Which side has the greater strength either of argument or piety than the other? To leave the mainstream culture because it is hostile to Christians passing on their faith or not to stay merely but take the mainstream culture captive for Christ is a binary that in 2022 looks like a closer match-up than it might have say before Mike Brown's death in Ferguson, Mo. and co-eds at Yale University worried about Halloween costumes.

However the managers and agents come out on where to stage this slugfest, Presbyterians may have trouble identifying where their rooting interest lies precisely. The problem is a commitment to a “learned ministry.” Presbyterians, ever since their origins in

the sixteenth century, have picked up right where the classical, medieval, and Renaissance worlds left them.

Knowledge of the liberal arts, biblical languages, systematic theology and its adjacent field of philosophy, church history, and more – these were all subjects that presbyteries and assemblies expected pastors to have studied before they could assume the responsibilities of word and sacrament.

The OPC in its form of government continues to codify this early modern understanding of a learned ministry. The FOG includes in outline a ideal curriculum for pastors. It is hardly a program for a fringe people, like the Amish or polygamist Mormons. It assumes academic training that requires the sort of study that accompanies tuition bills and forces parents of would-be ministers to apply for a second-mortgages.

UNDER BIBLICAL STUDY, THE OPC expects, for instance, that prospective ministers study Greek and Hebrew with these additional refinements: “Grammatical forms,” “Syntactical principles,” “Exegetical procedures,” and a thorough understanding of hermeneutics and biblical criticism. In the realm of apologetics, any man needs to be prepared in “the history of humanistic thought and its contemporary manifestation in various worldviews and spheres of intellectual and aesthetic activity—philosophy, literature, drama, popular arts, scientific methodology.” Pastors should also be versed in historical theology, including contemporary developments such as “the old liberalism, neoorthodoxy, liberation theology.”

People reading between the lines will understand that these academic fields involve building on primary, secondary, and college curriculums that only the better sorts of schools, colleges, and universities offer. Someone might need to be a member of American society’s elite to master these subjects. At the same time, someone who has taken flight from mainstream society

is going to be hard pressed to be the “learned” minister that Presbyterians expect.

In which case, if Presbyterians take the Benedict path instead of Redeemer’s, are they willing to revise their assumptions about a pastor’s professional standing? Low church Protestants might complain that Presbyterians, for all of their talk of being biblical, actually require far more learning that Christ expected from the fishermen he groomed for apostles.

That logic was the one behind the rise of Bible institutes and colleges. Forget a liberal education before enrolling at seminary. Just go for three or four years to a school that emphasizes the Bible and practical ministry skills, and then go out and evangelize your behind off. Of course, the appeal of soul-winning and foreign missions that Bible colleges once inspired no longer sustains an institution. Bible colleges across the country, perhaps one of the first versions of the Benedict Option, have added Honors Colleges and turned into universities. The faithful who send their children and contributions to these schools do not want a degree that is too marginal. They even prefer that the graduates of what used to be Bible colleges receive degrees that set them up for successful careers.

THE QUESTION OF A LEARNED ministry is not one that Carl Trueman seemed to entertain when he played the role of John the Baptist to Rod Dreher’s Benedict Option gospel. Three years before Dreher’s 2017 book appeared, Trueman wrote for *First Things* (August 2014) that Reformed Protestantism was the best “church for exiles.” The situation he described – five years before the #1619Project and six before the George Floyd killing – was bleak. “The Western public square is no longer a place where Christians feel

they belong with any degree of comfort.” What had happened to Europe – Christianity “pushed to the margins over a couple centuries” – was occurring rapidly in the United States. Trueman actually dates the decline of Presbyterian influence on mainstream culture to the early decades of the twentieth century – the Machen era.

“A marginal, minority interest in America for well over a century,” Trueman writes, Reformed Protestants do “not face the loss of social influence and political aspirations that now confront Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism.” Presbyterians do “not expect to be at the center of worldly affairs” or to be “running indispensable institutions.”

WHEN TRUEMAN WROTE THOSE words, he was a professor, with a Ph.D. from a major British university, teaching at a seminary that had substantial academic requirements for admission.

The lesson (or at least one of them), then, could be that Reformed Protestantism may not be capable of controlling an institution with significant clout in the realms of politics, economics, and culture, but their churches do depend on an educational system (adjacent to “systemic”) that is cheek-by-jowl in the American mainstream. (Or Scottish, or English, or Dutch, etc., etc.)

To be sure, Trueman’s piece was a defense and recommendation of the simple piety of Reformed Protestantism.

But the catechisms that parents use to rear covenant children in the faith, the institution of the Lord’s Supper that Reformed pastors employ before the sacrament, the careful study that goes into the proclamation of the word – these place holders of Reformed piety are all bound up with the educational expectations and institutions that sustained elite society in the West for the better part of a millennium.

IF PRESBYTERIANS NOW CHOOSE EXILE over assimilation, the very tools on which they depend to sustain Reformed Protestantism – in church and home – may begin to look too respectable, too mainstream, in other words, alien to their adopted Benedictine dislocation. If that happens, they may look back and lament a decision to leave polite society.

Townsend P. Levitt

SC88

The Week-ness of Reformed Worship

An Anglican friend and I like to spar from time to time over liturgy and worship. Our good-natured debates are perhaps most acute in seasons of the year given to the pomp and ceremony that is integral to the Anglican tradition but alien to Westminster.

He, a former Presbyterian elder, wonders why I'm so opposed to seasonal rhythms of church liturgical in addition to or overlaid on the regular weekly order of Presbyterianism. After all, the scriptures are read and preached faithfully in these contexts too. What's the harm of ordering liturgy in such a way as to have distinct annual seasons patterned after aspects of the life nad ministry of Christ.

Plus, the Mosaic Law gave the children of Israel various festivals in addition to the weekly Sabbath. Surely good and necessary consequence from the testimony of the Scripture would permit, at least, a likewise robust modern church calendar, right?

Of course the simplest response is that Christ never commanded nor do we have any New Testament scriptural evidence of

a worship calendar beyond Lord's Day worship. And suffice as that perhaps should, I think it's helpful to look at a broader scriptural logic to argue against even the "optional" use of a broader liturgical calendar in the visible church today.

SIMPLY PUT, THE ELABORATE liturgical calendar of the Old Testament served a unique pedagogical purpose that accommodated the church in her infancy, as she waited the first advent of her Messiah, seeing in type and shadow what we see more clearly. Now that maturity has come, mimicking the annual feasts and fasts is ultimately insensible.

The church of the Old Testament, theocratic Israel, had everything about its cultural, civil, and ceremonial life laid down painstakingly in the Law, including and especially its sacrificial system and the stipulations for sacrifices on annual festivals beyond daily and Sabbath sacrifices. All these, of course, pointed to and were fulfilled in Christ.

Christ, as the Lamb of God, fulfilled the Passover. Christ, as the firstborn from among the dead, fulfilled the Feast of Firstfruits. Christ, as the Word made flesh who dwelt among us, fulfilled the Feast of Tabernacles. And, yes, Christ, the great High Priest, once and for all made atonement for His people.

The sacrifices ended once and for all the Lord Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, and it's there to His throne of grace we approach every Lord's Day, not the the blazing Sinai mount that may not be touched, but into the Mount Zion of the heavenly Jerusalem.

The message of the epistle to the Hebrews is clear: Christ is far superior to the types and shadows he fulfilled. Do not go back to them.

Stop playacting with them. We have graduated from the church's infancy to maturity. We now have the substance. God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but now he's spoken to us by is Son, who's far superior to Moses much as the son of a house is to its servant.

While the writer of Hebrews was concerned with his readers falling back to the Temple and its sacrificial system, the application of his wisdom to the matter of the post-apostolic church's unfortunate accretion of a complex liturgical year holds value.

The ethos of liturgical seasons and their attendant dramatic worship peculiarities — imposition of ashes, the stripping of the altar after Communion on Maunday Thursday, etc. — is centered more on a theater of the nostalgic than the sublimely ordinary drama of regular Lord's Day worship.

NATURALLY WE ARE GIVEN TO sensuality and to theatricality. This is true in our penchant for amusements and its easily imported into our preference for worship. We are not content to receive and rest upon Christ as he is offered in the gospel. No, naturally, we long to contribute if even just a little bit to it ourselves, through the drama of special seasonal preparations — fasts — and the subsequent celebratory feasts.

It's exactly the sort of thing that got Paul worked up over the Galatians.

In his letter to the Galatians, a perplexed Apostle Paul took the churches in that city to task for having begun with the Spirit only to return to works of the flesh. He said he was astonished that they would affirm circumcision and as such return to the types and shadows of the Mosaic administration, to the guardian and tutor that was the Law when they had graduated on to majority.

Paul was bewildered that they would pre-submit themselves to “the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world,” wanting “once more” to be “slaves” to the flesh.

“You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain,” Paul says.

How much more should this rebuke ring in our ears with regard to the the Christian worship calendar.

Rather than being content with the ordinary weekly cycles of six days for labor and recreation and one for holy rest and corporate worship, a complex liturgical year nurtures our thirst for the extraordinary and leaves us less than satisfied with God’s quotidian provision on our pilgrimage to the heavenly Zion.

BY CONTRAST, THE DAYS AND SEASONS and months and years of the Old Testament liturgy served a unique purpose for a specific time. They were schoolmarm to the church in her infancy, that is, prior to Jesus’ ministry. They were dramas that pointed to the sheer and maddening insufficiency of it all. The blood of bulls and goats could never do to cleanse the guilty conscience.

Now that maturity has come, now that Christ lived, died, was raised, and is reigning at God’s right hand, ours is a simple, elegant worship — lesser in outward glory and appeal, yes, but more sublime and, well, more urgent. Living in “the last days” as we do, our New Testament church calendar reflects this. Christ has fulfilled the Old Testament with the exception of the final consummation of His kingdom, which is yet to come.

It’s here, but not yet. It’s arriving any time now, we know not the day or hour. We live in the literal “last days.” Let us be content with worship that reflects the accomplished work of Christ.

Ken Shepherd

SC88

Hamilton Diarist: Easy Worship

The worship wars are over. Contemporary is not the only flavor in churches. Some are liturgical—especially mainline congregations. Some conservatives are still featuring a style of worship that relies on older forms—Psalms, older hymns, Scripture reading and expository sermon, prayers of invocation, confession, praise, congregational needs. But in most churches the music holders, drum kit, and mic stands are standard fare in the meeting space.

Aside from music, the atmosphere in services where contemporary music and praise bands (oddly devoid of brass instruments) prevail is casual and consoling. To be sure, it is also earnest in ways that worshipers look, while in song, like they may be in pain. Still, the tenor of most services fit for contemporary music welcoming and intentionally inoffensive.

SEEKER SENSITIVE USED TO BE THE phrase to describe this. What that word combo misses is that such worship is also designed to affirm believers where they are in their spiritual and temporal affairs. Think of the reasons for opposing conversion therapy for trans persons. It does not affirm sufficiently someone who wants to go from man to woman.

Contemporary worship is similarly designed to affirm. It does not challenge or make believers feel uncomfortable. Instead it reassures that you are okay just as you are. Sometimes the sermon will introduce a challenge or call to overcome personal deficiencies. But overall,

the contemporary service’s chief purpose seems to be to be agreeable. Those hymns about the angry passions of 1861 that Machen complained about in the last pages of *Christianity & Liberalism*? They are entirely absent.

Still, one of the odder aspects of this form of Christian devotion is its time boundedness. The songs especially have nothing to do with the history of congregational singing. Psalms, hymns, and chants all have their own place in the traditions of Christian worship. So how can you then use the Apostles’ Creed after singing songs from the 1990s? “*Quick?*” “*Holy Ghost?*” What’s a contemporary person supposed to think? *Ghost* could trigger generational fragility.

FOR MIDDLE CLASS CHURCHES TO rely on these forms is even stranger. Most parents in these gatherings likely want their college bound children to go to the best university and receive a quality education. Sure, some children may only be able to go to a community college or afford a state university. But ideally, an elite institution is best because it exposes students to training that will lead to success as adults. Yet, when it comes to excellence or quality in worship music, standards run for cover. The ordinary worshiper sings as if a Hillsong chorus is just as good as a Charles Wesley hymn.

Contemporary music does have one thing going for it. Aesthetic standards for worship are not merely in the eye of the beholder. They also invariably come from non-biblical sources or powers of human deduction. “Find a passage in the Bible that says you should use the best forms of worship in the assembly of the saints,” the P&W advocate bluffs, “and then we can talk about standards in public worship.” It is in fact difficult to find a proof text for beauty, good taste, quality melodies, or poetic excellence in Scripture.

Aside from trying to figure out what worshipping God “in the beauty of holiness” might mean (and it’s not obvious), the Bible does use words that seldom seem to dawn on those who plan contemporary worship services. “Honor,” “sobriety,” “fitting” – these are words that suggest some forms of expression go better with certain kinds of truths. Many of these images even Jesus uses even though they are terms or standards that the Bible does not define (or explain how to be carried out. Even when Jesus talks about the impropriety of putting new wine in old wine skins, he makes a point about the forms that are best adapted to specific content. These points are not obvious. But neither are they hard to fathom. People have some sense that marriage ceremonies and funerals require attendees to cover themselves with the proper forms.

So if you need to consider the proper vessel for wine, perhaps “Sesame Street” is an inappropriate vehicle for the reverence and awe that marks worship.

Henry M. Lewis

SC88

39 Alexander Hall

Chronology Dysphoria

An academic fashion, made plausible if not necessary by the 2016 presidential election, has left historians and others who comment on the past to express indignation that people who went before us do not have the same moral sensitivities that now prevail. Toxic masculinity, for instance, was rife in the church before 2016 but older scholars and the subjects they studied were seemingly too mired in toxicity to see it. The same goes for race, climate, even Russia. Have historians noticed that mainline Protestants conducted a lot of questionable foreign policy initiatives under the banner of the Christian West? Not really. No one worries about actual Protestants that had real power.

A recent instance of this academic tic comes from Jemar Tisby who has created a reputation and platform that relies on exposing the racism of white Christian Americans. The author of *The Color of Compromise* and founder of “The Witness” (thewitnessbcc.com), Tisby recently shined the glaring light of righteousness on the history of Reformed Theological Seminary by John R. Muether (*The First Forty Years*). Tisby is SHOCKED!, that Muether glossed RTS’s racist past.

As white Christians in the United States often do, their historical examinations often focus on intricate matters of doctrinal difference. There is relatively little analysis of relevant historical figures acted in light of Christian ethics regarding love of neighbor and honoring the image of God.

Reading the histories of many Christian institutions is like reading a systematic theology textbook. There is a heavy emphasis on doctrinal beliefs without corresponding attention given to how the institution and its leaders actually lived out the faith.

This lack of attention to the ethical choices of white Christians is how you get an institutional history that lauds its southern roots without mentioning its support of slavery, racism, and white supremacy.

The odd (and dishonest) aspect of this argument is that Tisby himself went happily to RTS even though he as a Black man grew up in an America that was systemically racist going all the way back to 1619. Yet as a prospective student, studying there starting in 2011, and then a graduate trying to cultivate Reformed doctrine among African-Americans, Tisby himself turned a blind eye to RTS’s racism.

If he knew that RTS and Southern Presbyterians were as white

supremacist and he now knows they were, why did he go to RTS and work in PCA networks? If the answer involves being born around 1980 and not encountering America’s racist cops until in the headlines, then Tisby may have to explain how he has hid his own past.

THE ACADEMIC FASHION OF condemning those who went before us for not sharing our moral sensitivities must qualify as some kind of dysphoria – when the person who you used to be does not share the moral sensitivities of the person you now are.

SC88

Second Hand Smoke

Jonathan Franzen’s Crossroads (2021), set in a 1970s mainline Protestant congregation’s youth group, captures well both the era and the nature of youth ministry, mainline or evangelical except for tobacco.

The parsonage was dark, but the snow on the driveway was furrowed with new tracks. As Clem followed them toward the back door, he caught a whiff of tobacco smoke. He stopped and sniffed the air. He was out of cigarettes, having emptied his pack after his fight with his father. He’d intended to quit smoking in New Prospect, but that was before Becky told him to go to hell.

The smoke was coming from the parsonage itself. Sitting on the front porch, on the firewood box, in a bulky coat, was – his mother? He was tempted to continue up the driveway, slip inside, go straight to bed. But he was that his father had been right: he hadn’t considered his mother’s feelings when he wrote to the draft board. Worse yet, he saw that he needed to tell her, right now, what he’d done. Better that she hear it from him than from the old man.

SC88