Reformed Reflections on Spirituality

Alan P. F. Sell

The delightful village of Cavendish, Suffolk, straddles a Roman road. From the point of view of English Dissent it is in "martyr country," for John Copping and Elias Thacker (or Ffawker) were hanged at nearby Bury St. Edmunds on June 4 and 5, 1583, respectively. Daniel Sutton, a former rector of Cavendish, being unable to give his "unfeigned assent and consent" to the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England was, like nearly two thousand others, ejected from his living under the Act of Uniformity of 1662. It is just the kind of place to which Alexander James Grieve (1874-1952) might have been expected to remove when, after nearly forty years of training ministers in Bradford, Edinburgh, and Manchester, he sought a sphere where he could "try and practise a bit of it for myself." For Grieve was rooted in, and deeply knowledgeable about, the history and principles of Dissent, above all the principle concerning the supreme and only headship of Christ over his Church (with its negative implications concerning the rights of monarch or parliament over worship and church order). On a wall in Cavendish United Reformed (formerly Congregational) Church, a plaque bears the following inscription:

TO THE GLORY OF GOD
AND IN GRATEFUL MEMORY OF
ALEXANDER JAMES GRIEVE, M.A., D.D.
PRINCIPAL, LANCASHIRE INDEPENDENT COLLEGE, 1922-1943
MINISTER, CAVENDISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, 1943-1951
MISSIONARY, THEOLOGIAN, MINISTER

I set out from "Sandy" Grieve not simply by way of marking the fiftieth anniversary of his death, but because he epitomized an earthed spirituality that believes that if "a soft answer turneth away wrath," a witty one topples the presumptuous from their pedestals and the falsely pious from their perches. One example must suffice. Before the start of a united service, the participating ministers were sharing the parts of the service between them. When asked what part he would take, an Anglo-Catholic replied, "The blessing, of course, must be mine, as I am the only priest present." To which Grieve retorted, "I shall be happy to serve in the sacrament of the reading of the Word." It would be a great mistake to regard this as a flippant riposte: it is necessary not only to hear what Grieve was saying, but to see what he was doing. Grieve was opposing sacerdotalism and its attendant sectarianism; he was identifying himself with the priesthood of all believers; he was elevating the Word as that which, no less than the sacraments, by the Spirit brings the living Christ to the believing heart; and
he was doing this in the presence of one who, presumably, regarded Nonconformists as peddling “invalid” sacraments. It is also entirely conceivable that Grieve was also cutting a pompous or self-important Christian down to size.

When I entered Lancashire Independent College in the year following Grieve’s death, his successor, W. Gordon Robinson, was more than capable of maintaining the tradition of “speaking the truth with wit.” One schooled in such an environment cannot but be more than a little underwhelmed by some of the antics that pass for expressions of spirituality in our time. For anyone with a sense of history, some of the incongruities are delightful. What a gulf exists, for example, between the self-mortification of a Peter Damian ("Since in spite of my longing I have not the opportunity of martyrdom, by riddling myself with blows I at least show how fervently I desire it") and those present-day pilgrims whose principal preoccupation seems to be whether or not Iona or Taizé are furnished with *en suite* facilities. Again, how difficult it has sometimes been to strike the true note of holy joy, with some eighteenth-century Dutch pietists being convinced that gloominess is a sign of true piety and some present-day charismatics quick to rebuke those who seem to them to be insufficiently jolly. In this connection some words of Kierkegaard are worth pondering: “Christianity is certainly not melancholy; it is, on the contrary, glad tidings—for the melancholy; to the frivolous it is certainly not glad tidings, for it wishes first of all to make them serious.”

However it may have been in the past, it cannot be denied that with courses here, retreats there; with secular book chains devoting ever-increasing amounts of shelf space to “Body, Mind and Spirit” (with all that means in terms of self-help, yoga, the occult, astrology, witchcraft, earth goddesses, and numerous exotic spiritualities); and with Christian bookshops purveying everything from free grace to feel good, the impression cannot be resisted that spirituality is big business. Insofar as the circumstances thus described witness to a genuine quest on the part of many for inner peace or contact with the divine (however conceived)—and 27 percent of Britons describe themselves as “spiritual”—Christians would do well to read the signs of the times and to query their own “programmatic provision” (if I have the jargon correctly). But when the objective is self-improvement egotistically construed or the quest of ever more novel and exciting spiritual “highs,” one may be forgiven for raising a quizzical eyebrow.

It is against this background that I have been asked to sketch the history of Reformed spirituality with a view to specifying its *differentia*. This causes me two problems. The first concerns the definition of “spirituality.” In the sixteenth century a collective noun used of the clergy, the term came gradually to be used in contrast to things material and, later still, to designate the quest of those Christians who sought ever closer union with God by varying mixtures of prayer, participation in the means of grace, and the performance of spiritual exercises. As is well known, the term as such does not appear in the New Testament, though (to be brief) we do find there such prominent themes as life in the Spirit,
the command to be holy, Paul’s so-called Christ mysticism, the Johannine emphasis upon abiding in Christ, the heavenly Intercessor of the letter to the Hebrews, the call to conversion, regeneration by the Spirit, the doctrine of sanctification understood both as indicating the saints’ separateness from the “world” and their striving (against many downward pulls) after perfection, the challenge to bear the fruit of the Spirit—so one might go on. All of this suggests on the one hand that if we think of “spirituality” narrowly in terms of technical manuals, we shall have to admit that the Reformed have not been prolific contributors of these. On the other hand, the more we think in terms of the New Testament motifs just suggested the clearer it becomes that these are not ours in any exclusive sense. It will therefore be appropriate to think in terms of Christian spirituality as embracing the constituting and living of the Christian life and to illustrate this by reference largely, though not exclusively, to Reformed sources.

The second problem I face is that Tom Schwanda, who invited me to undertake this task on behalf of the editorial board of this journal, has already done much of the work himself. In particular he has properly argued that “from its beginning the Reformed heritage has sought to be intentional about integrating the head and heart,” and he has summoned Calvin and Jonathan Edwards to prove the point. He has also rightly emphasized the communal locus of Reformed spirituality and has suggested how we may appropriate the insights of our heritage from the Bible, at the Lord’s Supper, and in daily life. In fact, to add to the anatomical metaphors, we are here concerned with head, heart, and hands (and feet as well, if we are in a mood to recall the “godly walk” enjoined by our forebears—but some preachers like alliteration). The best I can do is to try to build a little upon what Mr. Schwanda has done, though with the proviso that the head-heart-hands scheme will be subject to modification as we proceed: this on the good Pauline principle that none of them may say to the others, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, we shall find that almost as soon as we begin to think about any one of the three, the others will come into view.

In setting out from the head, we may first note that there is an ineradicable intellectual element in Christian spirituality as generally understood by the Reformed, among others. It is not a subjectivist wallow, a vague “getting in touch with oneself”; still less is it a matter of attempting to bypass the mind in the interests of some sort of gnostic communion with an undifferentiated divine. There is a knowledge content here, as a long line of witnesses, some of them pre-Reformation, will testify. To Paul, for example, the saints’ peace with God and hope for the future are gifts consequent upon God’s gracious atoning work at the Cross, about which salvific event the believer has knowledge which is confirmed as genuine by the Holy Spirit who floods the heart with God’s love (Romans 5). For his part, Bonaventure held that that knowledge which is of Christ, and which issues in the love and service of God, is the supreme kind of knowledge. To Calvin, piety was “that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge
of God’s benefits induces.”

In Christian spirituality we are concerned with the objective: a knowing that certain things are the case—that God is love, for example. This knowing is grounded in, and entails a rejoicing in and a responding to, the fatherly God of sovereign grace known in Christ by the Spirit. This trinitarian mode of expression into which I have quite naturally fallen was much earlier employed by the Anglican Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667) who, his dislike of Presbyterians notwithstanding, is worth heeding on this matter:

God is especially present, in the hearts of his people, by his Holy Spirit. . . . For God reigns in the hearts of his servants: there is his kingdom. The power of grace hath subdued all his enemies: there is his power. They serve him night and day, and give him thanks and praise: that is his glory. This is the religion and worship of God in the temple. The temple itself is the heart of man; Christ is the High Priest, who from thence sends up the incense of prayers, and joins them to his own intercession, and presents all together to his Father; and the Holy Ghost, by his dwelling there, hath also consecrated it into a temple; and God dwells in our hearts by faith, and Christ by his Spirit, and the Spirit by his purities; so that we are also cabinets of the mysterious Trinity; and what is this short of heaven itself, but as infancy is short of manhood, and letters of words?

As far as they go, the communal implications of these words must be underscored if an exclusively individualistic reading of them is to be forestalled, and we shall turn to spirituality vis-à-vis the church in the next section. Not, indeed, that the communal should obliterate the personal, but the latter needs to be understood in the context of the former. Otherwise we may, for example, land in that exaggerated piety which seems to suppose that Christ died for me alone. The fact nevertheless remains that, as the Puritan Thomas Watson (c. 1620-1686) put it—also in trinitarian terms—

A Christian’s heart is to be the presence-chamber of the blessed Trinity; and shall not holiness to the Lord be written upon it? Believers are children of God the Father, members of God the Son, and temples of God the Holy Ghost; and shall they not be holy? Holiness is the badge and livery of God’s people.

Rejoicing in, and contemplation of, the grace of God in the gospel is fundamental to Christian spirituality. But doctrine rolls into doctrine, and there is not a single doctrine that fails to conduce to spiritual growth when pondered devotionally by believers. This is not to say that every consideration of Christian doctrine will, or should necessarily, lead to such growth. It is perfectly in order for scholars to debate the intricacies of the Chalcedonian Formula, for example, in an academic environment where spiritual growth is not their immediate concern: even non-Christian scholars may do this. But when believers
contemplate any aspect of Christian doctrine in a devotional spirit, their faith is strengthened. The head undergirds the heart.\(^\text{16}\) Let me offer some examples.

First, the Christian teaching concerning the Last Things (so frequently avoided in pulpits except at funerals, by which time it is rather late for the deceased) can have a profound effect upon the believer's daily demeanor. A. J. Grieve, clearly thinking that the Christians at Quinta Brook, Shropshire, had passed from the solemn to the morbid, was propelled into a piece of prophetic symbolism. The occasion was the funeral of a brilliant fourth-year student, Silvester Holland, who had died of meningitis:

> The pulpit desk had been draped in funeral black, and as he entered it the Doctor gathered up the drapings, put them behind him, and in a voice that trembled declared, "Death is swallowed up in victory!"\(^\text{17}\)

The related thought occurs that a half decent eschatology might persuade organists not to push in all the loud stops as a matter of course when they see the word "death" coming at them along the line of a hymn—especially in that grand verse of godly defiance which comes in the middle of the metrical version of Psalm 23:

> Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale
> Yet will I fear none ill
> For Thou art with me. . . .

Secondly, the doctrine of God the Holy Spirit is of special significance where spirituality is concerned. The Spirit both brings home the truth of the Word and also enables the Christian's response of faith (that is, fiducia—trust). It is precisely this necessary enabling which precludes any boasting on the believer's part—as if faith were a "work" humanly achieved (Eph. 2:9). The Puritan Thomas Goodwin was quick to distinguish between the knowledge possessed by the worldling and that granted to the saints:

> Now all the knowledge that carnal men have of the gospel, is but by images received from the hearsay of it; but the knowledge which holy men have, is by the impress and image received from the thing itself made known unto them by the Holy Ghost.\(^\text{18}\)

It must be emphasized that the knowledge of which I here speak is not simply matter for the intellect to feed upon. It is revivifying; it is granted in and with new life, one feature of which is that renewing of the mind of which Paul speaks. The source of this new life is that union with Christ of which Paul and Calvin make so much, and which was vigorously pressed in the nineteenth-century by the Mercersburg theologians. Of the believer, J. W. Nevin writes,
In his regeneration, he is inwardly united to Christ, by the power of the Holy Ghost, and thus brought within the sphere of that "law of the spirit of life," by which in the end the "law of sin and death" is overpowered and destroyed in all them that believe. A divine seed is implanted in him, the germ of a new existence, which is destined to gradually to grow and gather strength, till the whole man shall be at last fully transformed into its image. The new nature thus introduced is the nature of Christ. 19

Commenting on these words, Glenn Hewitt has said that "Nevin rejected the idea that Christ simply subsumes the human personality. The believer continues to have a separate existence, but this existence is grounded in the life of Christ." 20 That not everyone in Nevin's day thought that he had drawn the distinction clearly enough is evident from the writings of Nevin's opponent within the German Reformed Church, J. H. A. Bomberger. He detected pantheizing tendencies in the Romantic-organic-immanentist language of Mercersburg, and in an address to the World Presbyterian Alliance, he deemed it appropriate to point out that

Christ is not our life in any pantheistic sense. Nay, the mystical union established between the regenerated soul and him is not even a hypostatical union of their two natures. Man is not deified by regeneration. In it men become Christians, but are not made Christs. 21

A judicious referee would probably incline to the view that if the strongly Johannine Nevin, anxious to recover the heritage of catholic truth which he was convinced was obscured by both "new measures" revivalism and the New England Unitarianism which he abominated (and which he unfortunately branded "Puritanism"), was tempted to employ language incautiously. The enthusiastically Pauline Bomberger was sometimes too easily able to persuade himself that in Nevin's writings there was no smoke without fire. We seem to be in the realm of "testing the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1)—a task impossible of achievement by the headless.

Intellectual discrimination is further required when we come to the Spirit's sanctifying work, to which I alluded at the outset. Many changes have been rung on this doctrine through the centuries, some of them mutually contradictory. Thus, at the end of the seventeenth century Jacob Verschoor was found teaching that the elect are guilt-free and that their faults incur no punishment: which undermines the ideas of going on to perfection and blunts the edge of the challenge to fight the good fight of faith. 22 On the other hand, Isaac Watts found it necessary to repudiate and encourage those whose position was tantamount to a denial of the Spirit's sanctifying grace:
Suppose a Christian has most powerful Impressions made on the Passion of Fear by the tremendous Ideas of God’s Majesty and his punishing Justice, and thence he concludes that the great God will pardon no wilful Sins, that he will forgive no repeated Iniquities, no Sins after Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, or after Vows or solemn Ingagements, that he will have no Mercy upon Apostates, even tho’ they turn to him by Repentance; this is yielding up Truth to the Passion of Fear, and an abuse of our religious Dread of the Majesty of God; for such an Opinion runs counter to the great Design of the Gospel, which assures us that Christ came to save the chief of Sinners, to remove the Guilt of wilful and repeated Sins, and to provide Forgiveness for some of the most profligate Rebels, even for all that renounce their Rebellion.$^{23}$

But if some spoke as if sanctification were unnecessary and others implied that it was impossible, yet others seemed to think that it was all too easy, among them Sarah Taylor who, in the mid-eighteenth-century, “was the chief instrument of propagating the infatuation of perfection and uninterrupted happiness and lawless liberty and vain conceit” among the Inghamite societies of the North of England.$^{24}$

These historical illustrations lead us to the more general consideration that there is “head work” to be done when seeking to derive benefit from the heritage of spiritual writing—not least that of judiciously balancing the perfectly proper devotional recourse to tradition against the temptation to mere intellectualist antiquarianism. An Anglican writer rightly warned that “mere knowledge of spiritual states” can run “far ahead of our own spiritual accomplishment, so that the soul honors God with correct spiritual patter while the heart strays far from him in a morass of unholy introspection or censoriousness.”$^{25}$ Thus cautioned, there is no reason not to explore the heritage of Christian spirituality in a thoughtful and disciplined way. Many have devoted much time to this, utilizing all possible occasions. Of the Puritan John Preston (1587-1628) it was said that he used to lead Aquinas at the barber’s—one way of forestalling kindly enquiries about the state of his begonias, no doubt. But the context of the writings must ever be kept in view if our own spiritual experience is to have integrity. Precisely because of the way in which head and heart work together, we cannot simply take over everything we read and make it our own. The spirituality of Denys the Pseudo-Areopagite cannot easily be abstracted from his philosophical presuppositions and his angelology, both of which would cause most Reformed Christians a certain anxiety. Similarly with Marian devotions in the Roman Catholic Church: we do not share the undergirding theology. Moreover, the best spirituality is rooted in the living context, and in social terms our situation is far removed from that of some of our forebears. Thus we could not simply annex the prayers that the eighteenth-century Presbyterian divine Samuel Bourn (1689-1754) of Coseley and Birmingham prepared for his young people, because they
presuppose a strong belief in the orders of society and in the obligation of every person to remain within his or her station. In all such cases, if rejection is not indicated, a work of translation—even of anabaptism—will be necessary in order that our own spiritual growth will proceed with integrity.

But, to return more directly to doctrine: if we cannot always pray the prayers, or sing the hymns, of our forebears for the kinds of reasons described, we cannot build Christian experience on doctrines to which we cannot honestly assent. On this issue, and in face of a horde of theologians who at the present time seem to take every opportunity of indulging in anti-Enlightenment hysteric (whilst seeming in many cases to neglect both the careful reading of Enlightenment texts and the need to differentiate the several Enlightenments), we may record the stand for intellectual integrity which many eighteenth-century divines took. Thus, against “Popish” authoritarianisms, whether Roman or Reformed, the Presbyterian divine John Taylor of Norwich (1694-1761) entered his conscientious protest.

Sincerity in searching after, and in professing religious Truth, or Christian Honesty is, as to God, the only acceptable Orthodoxy; in any other Sense it is either precarious or impossible. In any other Sense, it signifies our Agreement to Human Schemes; which is only a topical and chronical Character, suited only to certain Places and Times; so that what is orthodox in one Church, or in one Age, is not so in another. But an upright Mind, a pure Conscience, a good and honest heart is the same in all Ages in all Places, in both Worlds.

For his part, the Presbyterian divine Henry Grove (1684-1738) of the Taunton Dissenting academy articulated the plea for Christian integrity with specific reference to the minister’s calling as preacher of the gospel in relation to the intellectual climate of the times:

Ought not some consideration to be had of the prevailing genius and taste of the Age for rational knowledge, and freer enquiries? So that, allowing there have been times when a dogmatic way of asserting things without proving them, and raising the passions of people in a mechanical, rather than a rational way, answered the great ends of preaching better than any other method would have done (which I am far from believing) yet now that the state of things is very much altered, and great numbers are no longer to be treated as children, nor will be contented to have their understandings amazed and dazzled, instead of being enlightened, Ministers ought in prudence to change their way, as far as they can do it with a good conscience.
Perhaps today more than ever we need integrity in matters spiritual and devotional. In this realm intellectual judgments are inevitable—or are we to be content with those who bundle Christian, Eastern, and pagan insights together in syncretistic fashion? We by no means have to deny that the Spirit blows where he will; we may not seek to imprison him within the church. But neither should we overlook the logical howlers we commit if we neglect the very different world views within which sometimes identical forms of words function or risk the reproach of those who find well-meaning attempts to annex them in the name of a genial and general religiosity patronizing in the extreme.

II

While intellectual considerations cannot be excluded from spirituality, the Independent minister and hymn writer, Joseph Hart (1712-1768), quite rightly declared that

True religion’s more than notion;
Something must be known and felt.

Undoubtedly, it is impossible believe the gospel without feeling something; to respond lovingly to God’s grace is something which engages the emotions. But the root of the experience is not in the human heart but in the grace of God. As P. T. Forsyth said, “Experience is the fruit of faith, or its medium, more than its ground.” This is because “the seat of revelation is in the cross, and not in the heart. The precious thing is something given, and not evolved.” This idea may be applied in a number of directions, but let us focus upon assurance.

If a hymn like “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine” prompts us to fasten introspectively upon the possessive pronoun rather than upon the objective grace of God in the gospel, we may find that when our feelings ebb, our sense of assurance ebbs too. Then, if we were to rely upon the strength of our feelings as the test of our faith, we should become needlessly alarmed, in the worst cases, neurotic. Against this peril Thomas Brooks (1608-1680) wisely cautioned:

To make sense and feeling the judges of our spiritual conditions, what is it but to make ourselves unhappy and miserable, righteous and unrighteous, saved and damned in one day, ay, in one hour, when sense and reason sit as judges upon the bench? Hath God made sense and feeling the judges of your condition? No. Why, then, will you?

As Forsyth insisted, “The real ground of our certitude... is the nature of the thing of which we are sure, rather than the nature of the experience in which we are sure.”

None of this is to deny that when William Cowper bids us sing, “Oh! For a closer walk with God,” he expresses a perfectly legitimate Christian aspiration. In the same hymn he describes a common Christian experience which in no way implies the inadequacy of the One of whom we are assured:
Where is the blessedness I knew
    When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
    Of Jesus, and his word?

The sense of bereftness is genuine, but it becomes the prompter of a quest, not a ground for denying God’s availability and grace. Still less does it warrant the “Stillness Doctrine,” which the Moravian Philip Henry Molther propagated in the Fetter Lane Society in 1739. According to this, those who felt that they lacked assurance of salvation were to do nothing—no prayer, no Bible reading, no attendance at the means of grace—but simply to wait in quietness until they experienced full assurance.

The problem arises, and it is by no means unknown in Reformed circles, when introspection, the constant taking of one’s spiritual temperature, becomes morbid, and when particular varieties of experience are sought as supposed guarantees of one’s salvation. It is a further, sectarian, step to deny that those who do not manifest one’s favored experiential criteria are genuine Christians. We thus find numerous hymns that dwell upon our stuck-fastness in “miry clay,” and, with grave disrespect to a most useful member of the created order, our likeness to worms. Nor were some slow to see the pedagogical value of worms. Consider the following opening verse of hymn 313 in William Wileman’s *Hymns for the Sunday School*, 11th ed. (London: W. Wileman, 1900):

Death, in a thousand dreadful forms,
Sweeps down our mortal, sinful race;
The grave, corruption, earth, and worms
Shortly must be our dwelling-place.

Admittedly, the hymn goes on to admit the possibility that grace may intervene, but even so it is strong meat for little ones.38

Few have gone so far in this direction as those Strict and Particular Baptists (to which tradition Wileman belonged) who followed the teaching of the independent preacher, William Huntingdon, and whose magazine, Gospel Standard (1835 onwards), also gave them their specific denominational name, the Gospel Standard Strict and Particular Baptists.39 They looked for the evidence of “spiritual exercises,” they paid great attention to the interpretation of dreams, they assiduously recorded death-bed utterances (often at considerable length), and they loved sermons which took their allegorical flight from the Song of Songs.40 Their tendency (in some cases more than a tendency) to make specific experiences normative for salvation is reminiscent of the position of that of Fridrich Adolph Lampe in eighteenth-century Holland.

As with assurance, so more generally: what rescues the Christian from undue introspection is a firm grasp of the objectivity of grace. This comes out, for example, in one of Kierkegaard’s prayers. He does not call himself a worm, but he knows the sinner’s need of mercy and forgiveness. But the focus upon
what God has first done at the Cross recontextualizes his feeling of worthlessness and gives him hope:

Father in heaven! Hold not our sins up against us but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of thee when it wakens in our soul, and each time it wakens, should not remind us of what we have committed but of what Thou didst forgive, not of how we went astray but of how Thou didst save us!^41

Or, as Forsyth memorably and crisply put it, "Look to the Gospel and it will see to the experiences."^42

In all of this we are at a considerable remove—indeed, at the opposite pole—from that type of catholic spirituality which regards ecstatic union with God entailing personal extinction as the goal of the spiritual life, a condition to be achieved by mastery of techniques of devotion. But lest we are tempted to thank God that we are not like others, we should do well to remember that Protestants too have had their ways of giving a "worksy" flavor to their spiritual lives, notwithstanding Luther's discovery that going through the disciplinary processes did not suffice. Consider William Batty's account of the Holy Club:

Mr. Charles Wesley and Mr. Morgan began to meet together in Christ Church College in 1729; soon, Mr. John Wesley joined them. These were the first beginnings of the Methodists. Mr. Ingham became acquainted with the Messrs. Wesley in 1733. Their principles were to be good and do good; they fasted twice a week, prayed and examined themselves every hour, received the Sacrament every Sunday, visited the sick and prisoners, taught poor children to read and write, gave alms, and frequently met together to read the Scriptures, and to pray and exhort one another. They were then really concerned for their salvation, but being ignorant of God's righteousness they were going about to establish their own.43

Time and again those in the Puritan and Reformed traditions have been tempted to revert to a new legalism—for all that they have proclaimed about free grace—and they have sometimes done this even when considering the development of the spiritual life: "It is a sin not to keep a diary of God's providences"; "Unless you can give the time and place of your conversion you are not a born again believer"; and even, "Unless you shun specific sins (tacit: which I myself abominate but am not particularly inclined to commit) you will come to a sticky end (or rather, a very hot one)." In face of such distortions which have been perpetrated in Protestant devotional literature down the years, we may feel inclined to adopt the attitude of Edmund Hoskyns who, for all his admirable Anglo-Catholic connections, nevertheless declared that he would gladly exchange manuals of devotion for *The Farmer and Stockbreeder*. 
Nothing more effectively counters individualism in spiritual matters than the realization that Christian life is life in community; that Christians are saints by calling; that to be engrafted by grace into the Vine is necessarily to be related to all the branches. The church is called to be a nursery where saints are nurtured. Lest these sentiments seem commonplace to us, let us reflect that it was not ever thus. The Reformation did not only return the Bible to the people of God, it restored spirituality to them, in the sense that no longer was the active-contemplative distinction, hardened in the wake of Gregory the Great’s position, maintained, with the monks having a head start in contemplation. Similarly, when, in chapter 72 of his Rule, Benedict emphasizes the fact that the context of sanctified living is the community, it is the monastic community that he has in mind. By contrast, Calvin was in no doubt that the sphere of sanctification is the church.

In keeping with the objective-subjective, head-heart balance with which we are here concerned, we should first remind ourselves that the church’s primary duty is that of the worship of God. As far as the Reformed tradition is concerned, it is perhaps necessary to recall that what we are concerned with is the worship of the church, among which laos the minister is to be found. In our history we have majored upon the prophetic role of the preacher—sometimes to the neglect of the Word enacted in the sacraments; rarely, as in Mercersburg’s attempt to redress the balance, has the pendulum swung in the direction of appearing to minimize the preaching of the Word. I have elsewhere reflected upon worship in general, but here I wish to make three points concerning ministers, because they are the spiritual guides of the flock, and then to introduce brief reflections upon church discipline. In both cases I am prompted by the conviction that the spiritual health of churches is adversely affected if we do not take a properly theological view of these matters.

The first point concerning ministers is to do with their training. They need to be formed as well as informed, if they are to fulfill their primary obligation of leading the people of God to the throne of Grace. In this the example of their mentors is of the greatest importance. The words of William Jay (1769-1853), who served for sixty-five years at Argyle Congregational Church, Bath, might well be pondered by all charged with the joyful yet solemn duty of educating future ministers. He looked back upon his own training in the small Dissenting seminary that Cornelius Winter (b. 1741) conducted at Marlborough, and wrote,

[T]he preservation of spirituality is of great importance where the office is sacred: of this Mr. Winter never lost sight. He was always feeding and cherishing the piety, as well as promoting the literary improvement of those who were under his care. He constantly reminded them of the absolute necessity of personal religion; and endeavoured to keep alive a sense of their dependence on God, for the preservation and increase of their powers, and the success of their applications and exertions . . .
it was impossible not to feel devoutly while near him: his presence was the very element of piety.\textsuperscript{49}

What Jay calls “the preservation of spirituality” is nowhere more important than in connection with the minister’s pulpit proclamation. As Samuel Bourn cautioned Job Orton:

\[ \text{[M]ake it appear to all Men, especially to Believers, who can see farther, and judge better than other Men, that the Gospel you preach to Others has rectified your own heart, and mended your own Life: This will convince them that you believe the Things which you seem so earnestly to recommend to them.}\textsuperscript{50} \\

Secondly, we may hope that ministers themselves are cognizant of their high vocation, their liturgical duties, and their obligation to nurture the flock (though, unless my ears have deceived me, I have heard some of them refer to the ministry as a “job”; I have heard talk of “ministerial career patterns,” and the like); but, especially perhaps in the West, it is well that church members themselves understand the minister’s function. It would be a great point gained, for example—and it would probably obviate some cases of ministerial burnout—if churches remembered that the minister is not a master of ceremonies, a managing director (a pitfall into which they may be tempted to fall if some persist in describing themselves by the theological and verbal abomination, “Senior Executive Pastor”), or one required to succumb to temptations analogous to those which Christ resisted in order to fill up the empty pews. They, and the ministers themselves, should understand with Thomas Watson that “the ministers of God are only the pipes and organs; it is the Spirit blowing in them, that effectually changes the heart.”\textsuperscript{51}

Perhaps an atrocity story that floats down the years from A. J. Grieve will suffice to make my point. He received a letter from the secretary of a vacant pastorate inviting him to send the names of three students who might be interested in the position. The secretary explained that he was also writing to three other college principals, and that when the church had heard all twelve candidates, a selection would be made. Grieve replied on a postcard, “The ministry is a calling, not a horse race. No students will be coming from this college.”\textsuperscript{52} An encouragement, surely, to all who are tempted to succumb uncritically to “the corporate model.”

Thirdly, ministers need to be alive to the fact that it is not only that the spirituality of the past, being contextual, will sometimes chafe us like an ill-fitting shoe, it is also that what one might call monochrome present-day spirituality can have undesirable results. What I have in mind is the need for ministers to ensure that, having regard to their context, the church receives a balanced diet. I do not deny that there is a place for comforting the saints, and it may be that such a hymn as “Safe in the Arms of Jesus” will serve this purpose well. But would it not verge upon the obscene if an affluent church were to be fed on an almost exclusive diet of such hymns? Ought not such a church be stimulated to serve God in unstinting generosity to the needy? Is there not a
difference between comforting and coddling the saints? Do the affluent not insult the genuinely oppressed if we think that we are oppressed when our golf club subscription is increased?

All of which leads us to church discipline. This, though frequently misunderstood, properly concerns the church as the sphere of corporate sanctification, of that growth of the saints to the end that they are equipped for mission. Traditionally, the Reformed have not flinched from the realization that from time to time this may entail what one might call “the policing of the saints”—and, no doubt, on occasion this was a sport too greatly enjoyed by the pious. But at their best they knew that it mattered whether the members were leading a godly walk, that Christ must not be dishonored, that the wayward must be admonished and, as a last resort, suspended—though always with the hope that they might repent and be restored. The end of church discipline, declared John Owen, is, “with respect to the church, its purging and vindication—with respect the person excommunicated, his repentance, reformation and salvation.”

Not the least important aspect of church discipline in those traditions whose ecclesiology turns upon the conviction that the church comprises saints or, to use that sadly hi-jacked term, “born again believers,” is the discipline surrounding the reception of members. In the Reformed tradition, children of the covenant are nurtured in the hope that they will one day make their profession of faith, and those who have not been baptized as infants are baptized on profession of faith, as in the Baptist traditions. The question is, On what terms are they received? It is of great importance that they are adequately prepared for this step; that their grasp of God’s grace in Christ is sincere (which is not the same as saying that they are competent to expound the full range of Christian doctrine: babes in Christ must not be made to choke on systems—even five-point ones); and that, to use the old language, their lives “adorn the Gospel.” As long ago as 1821, a Congregationalist ruefully wrote,

No person used to be admitted into the church without being examined as to knowledge and experience publicly, before a considerable congregation; and, yet, it was scarcely ever known, that any person was deterred from offering himself for communion, on account of the strict mode of admission.

By the time those words were written it had become commonplace for intending members simply to write (or to have a letter written for them) asking that their candidature be brought before the church. Down to our own time, the nomination of the minister and the deacons or elders has sufficed in many places.

That discipline in relation to the reception of church members has not been of concern in England alone is clear from the case of Isaac Chipman. He was a professor at what we now know as Acadia University, which was Baptist in origin. Following a meeting on 3 December 1836 he wrote in his diary:
I was unavoidably impressed with the belief that we as a Church are not sufficiently cautious in receiving persons to our communion. What was said at the meeting seemed to imply that a willingness to profess religion was sufficient evidence of a change of heart. Day of calamity to the church of God, when anything is substituted for real, vital godliness! May the members of this Church have the word of Christ dwell in them richly, in all wisdom, and may they never lose sight of the absolute necessity of the Spirit’s influence! 58

At a time of declining church rolls in the western mainline churches, it may sound like heresy even to pose the question, Have we made entry to the full privileges and responsibilities of the church too easy? But given the way in which so many western Christians are so thoroughly immersed in the culture around them, it is worth enquiring whether we sufficiently challenge those in our care and enquirers from without. To observers, do we seem more like passengers on a holiday cruise than pilgrims on the way of the cross?

Quite apart from specific cases and occasions of church discipline, however, I wish to suggest that ministers and churches as wholes stand under the discipline of the Word and of the fellowship. With regard to the Word, nowhere are the relevant points more concisely yet comprehensively made than in the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648. As to the ministers:

They that are called to labour in the ministry of the word, are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God and the souls of the people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

As to the hearers:

It is required of those that hear the word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the word of God; meditate, and confer of it, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives. 59

The discipline of fellowship arises largely from the fact that the church, God’s calling, is like no other organization. It is not based upon mutual interests of the ordinary sort (mercifully, we do not all have to like bee-keeping). Indeed, there are within the church people who have very little in common except that they have been called by grace. There are old and young, sick and well, clever
and not so clever, rich and poor, pleasant and downright cussed. Yet all are to be loved (even if they cannot all easily be liked) for the Lord’s sake. As Bernard Lord Manning told some Cambridge students:

You say you love Christ’s Church. Well, here it is: Tom, Dick, Harry, and the rest; a funny lot of lame ducks. . . . They are not very good. But they have, in their own odd ways, heard Christ’s call. They have trusted in Christ on His Cross. They have made a covenant with God, and so joined themselves in the saved society with Him. It is little use your feeling mystical sympathy with St. Francis who is dead, with St. Somebody Else who never existed, with men of good will all over the world whom you are quite safe from meeting. If you do not love your brothers whom you have seen—Tom, Dick, Harry—you cannot, in fact, love those brothers (whom you call the Church) whom you have not seen.60

None knew better than that professional historian that he was there updating John Owen. Indeed, he proceeds immediately to quote his forebear in the faith: “Let none, then, pretend that they love the brethren in general, and love the people of God, and love the saints, while their love is not fervently exercised towards those who are in the same church society with them.”61

As the saints together walk the road of sanctification and embark upon their mission, they will from time to time be disciplined by circumstances. The writer to the Hebrews spelled out the nature of the Lord’s loving discipline in the context of possible persecution (Heb. 12:1-13). He goes so far as to say that those who are not under the Father’s discipline are bastards. On such occasions the church recalls that God’s pilgrim people are led through the valley of the shadow of death, not around it. And, by grace, their confidence is that

By Thine unerring Spirit led,
We shall not in the desert stray;
We shall not full direction need,
Nor miss our providential way;
As far from danger as from fear,
While love, almighty love, is near.62

But there is one thing more: the discipline of success. A “successful” ministry can be dangerous (consider the bookkeeping kind of evangelical preacher: “I [sic] saved six more souls this week than during the corresponding week last year”); a “successful” church can be at risk. The lukewarm church at Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-18) thought they had it made. They were rich; they had everything they needed (sizeable endowments, a minister for every conceivable sphere of work, and every one a D.Min., three robed choirs, half a dozen handbell groups, their own page on the internet. . . ?). To the risen Christ they were “poor, blind, and naked.”
Those who have by grace given their hearts to the Lord, those who praise him in the sanctuary, who delight in the Word proclaimed and sacramentally enacted, and whose faith is nurtured in the fellowship of saints, they are a people equipped to serve. In Thomas Watson’s pungent phrase, “Grace, while it cures the heart, does not make the hand lame.” So, thirdly and briefly, to “hands.”

III

The spheres of Christian service, which begin in the household of faith, are as extensive as the world itself. It would be as impossible as it is unnecessary to exemplify them all, though prominent among them at the present time are crusades for justice, peace, and the right use of the earth’s precious resources. Christians whose minds are being renewed are, it may be hoped, prominent in such movements and characterized by gracious yet unwavering integrity where commercial, political, or legal “principalities and powers” need to be called to account. But in every sphere Christians are called to walk the path of sanctification which, since the enabling grace we receive is holy love, is inseparable from righteousness. In all of this service, as Richard Baxter, the seventeenth century’s Reformed pastor par excellence saw, the pre-eminent motive is gratitude for God’s free and sovereign grace: “Let Thankfulness to God thy Creator, Redeemer and Regenerator, be the very temperament of thy soul, and faithfully expressed by thy tongue and life.”

It cannot be denied that from time to time, not least in Reformed circles, unbalanced Christian living has resulted from the ambiguity of “world.” In one sense of the term, Christians are not to be conformed to the “world.” This is when “world” signifies apartness from, and hostility to, God. Thus Calvin exhorts us to “separate ourselves from idolaters, and keep ourselves pure and uncontaminated from all the pollution which corrupts and vitiate the holy service of God.” But in another sense of the term, we are to go into all the “world” (now construed geographically) with the gospel. The ideas coalesce when we are exhorted to be in the world, but not of it; we are a colony, an outpost, of heaven: our true citizenship is there, but we are here pro tem. The opposite pitfalls clearly are that Christians will either withdraw from the world around into a pietistic, nonmissionary huddle or that they will so identify with the “world” qua culture around them, and become so consumed by activism, that their Good News cannot be heard even if it is articulated at all. The former type would do well to remember that from the fact that “to pray is to work” we should not infer that we do not have to do anything in the world; the latter should appreciate how much is being asked of our often genial pagan neighbors if we expect them to guess the connection between what we do and what we believe; they should also consider how vulnerable Christians make themselves if they are too busy to nurture their devotional lives. And both should understand that good works are not the means to the sanctified life, but the evidence of it.
Conclusion

The degree to which our division of material into “head, heart, and hands” was little more than a methodological ploy will by now be patently obvious. They are inseparable. Few understood this more clearly than the nineteenth-century professor of Hebrew at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, John “Rabbi” Duncan:

Some persons preach only doctrine; that makes people all head, which is a monster. Some preach only experience; that makes people all heart, which is a monster too. Others preach only practice; that makes people all hands and feet, which is likewise a monster. But if you preach doctrine and experience and practice, by the blessing of God, you will have head, heart and hands, and feet—a perfect man in Christ Jesus.68

Where you have a church fellowship in which such people are growing together, you have a true nursery of saints, a beachhead for mission, and a light to the world around.

ENDNOTES

5 Recounted in Charles E. Surman, Alexander James Grieve, 45.
7 For whom see New Dictionary of National Biography, forthcoming.
10 According to a poll carried out by Opinion Research Business in December 1999.

12 Ibid., 110.


16 I may be pardoned for mentioning that it was primarily because of this conviction that I tried my hand at a trilogy under the general title, *Doctrine and Devotion*. The volumes are *God Our Father, Christ Our Saviour, The Spirit Our Life* (Shippensburg, Penn.: Ragged Edge Press, 2000). The series was written for ministers and church members, in the hope of injecting content into devotions and warmth into doctrine. My subsidiary motive was the feeling that since much of what appears from the “popular” religious press (self-help/charismatic excitements/fifty years up the Amazon with Joe Bloggs) is not apt to feed and frequently patronizes the saints, some of us ought to attempt to redress the balance.


22 I have no qualms about using biblical language from which more squeamish hymnal editors flinch because they tremble before pacifists of the more pugilistic sort. The adjective “good” sufficiently qualifies the noun “fight,” and I am persuaded that we do well to retain the language and show the “world” that it has not understood it yet. If we surrender the language, we lose our opportunity of showing how Christianity turns values upside-down. And there is a war on against the “principalities and powers.” The blessing of battleships is something else.

24 So William Batty, *Church History. Collected from the Memoirs and Journals of Mr. Ingham and the Labourers in Connection with Him* (John Rylands University Library of Manchester), MS MAM P11B, 90.


26 For this most entertaining divine and some of his contemporaries see Alan P. F. Sell, *Dissenting Thought and the Life of the Churches: Studies in an English Tradition* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), ch. 7.

27 Lest this appear too cryptic: I have in mind that the English and Scottish Enlightenments were interestingly different at certain points, and neither was as anticlerical as the French. See further, Alan P. F. Sell, *John Locke and the Eighteenth-Century Divines* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press), 1997.


29 S. Bourn, *A Charge delivered at the Ordination of the Reverend Mr. Job Orton; at Shrewsbury, September 18, 1745* (Birmingham: T. Warren, 1745), 41.

30 H. Grove, *Queries Proposed to the Consideration of all such as think it an Injury to Religion to shew the Reasonableness of it*, 1732, in *Henry Grove: Ethical and Theological Writings* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2000), IV, 247. For Grove see my introduction to the foregoing; *Dissenting Thought*, ch. 6; *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century British Philosophers*.

31 No doubt, all of the characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan would have agreed that we must love our neighbor, but they differed significantly as to the definition of "neighbor."

32 The first line of this hymn of 1759 is the not very elegant, "Let us ask th' important question . . . ." See David Denham's collection of hymns, *The Saint's Melody*, 1837, no. 502.


37 *Oney Hymns* (London: W. Oliver, 1779), no. 3.

38 Cf. also some of the early Congregational church covenants. That of Cockeremouth (1651), for example, begins, "We poor worms, lost in Adam . . . do agree together to walk as a people whom the Lord hath chosen . . . ." See Sell, *Dissenting Thought*, 6.

39 Their leaders were William Gadsby (1773-1844) and the erstwhile Anglican clergyman, J. C. (1802-1869). Their opponents took their names from their journals: *The Earthen Vessel* (1845) and *The Christian's Pathway* (1896) (by their magazines ye shall know them). See further, Kenneth Dix, *Strict and Particular: English Strict and Particular Baptists in the Nineteenth-Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical

40 For an attempt to get under the skin of a pastor of this type see Alan P. F. Sell, Alfred Dye, Minister of the Gospel (London: Fauconberg Press, 1974).


43 W. Batty, Church History, collected from the Memoirs and Journals of Mr. Benjamin Ingham and the Labourers in Connection with Him (John Rylands University Library of Manchester, Mass.: MAM P11B), 1.

44 For Gregory’s position see J. Leclerq, et al., A History of Christian Spirituality, II, 10. Gregory regarded the contemplative life as open to all, not to monks only, albeit few of the laity attained to it. See ibid., 11 (cf. Gregory, Mor. XXXII.4).

45 See his Commentaries on John 13: 18; 1 Cor. 12: 13.

46 Thus, J. W. Nevin reiterates his passionately held belief that the believer’s union with Christ is a fact “emphatically concentrated in the mystery of the Lord’s Supper.” See The Mystical Presence (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1956), 27. Cf. the remark of Howard Hageman, Pulpit and Table (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), 97: “Though [the Mercersburg theologians] were battling to restore the Table to a church which had come under the complete dominance of the pulpit, their failure to consider the Word indicates that they were still laboring under the scholastic idea of preaching as biblical exposition and theological instruction. They had not recovered the Reformation idea of the Word itself mediating the presence of Christ, which was such an important element of early Reformed liturgics.” It must be confessed that one has on occasion sorely been tempted towards the rueful reflection that much would be gained if sermons today were at least biblically rooted and theologically informative.

47 See Alan P. F. Sell, Reminiscence, Reflection, Reassurance (Caernarfon: Gwasg Pantycelyn), 2002.


50 S. Bourn, A Charge, 39.

51 T. Watson, A Divine Cordial, 78.

52 Grieve was famous for his postcards. When Sir John Stopford, FRS, was appointed vice-chancellor of the University of Manchester in 1934, he received a postcard thus: “You’ll do, A.J.G.”

53 The thought occurs that such a church ought not feel comfortable singing “Hear the Pennies Dropping” during the offertory, because it ought to be impossible to hear
their offertory! They should be giving what the television wide boy, Arthur Daley, calls “folding money.”

54 See, for example, Calvin, Institutes, IV.xii.5.
55 J. Owen, The True Nature of a Gospel Church, in his Works, ed. W. H. Goold (1850-1853) (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), XVI, 171. See further, Alan P. F. Sell, Church Discipline (London: The United Reformed Church, 1983). This pamphlet was published just before I left England for Geneva. Having written on this thorny subject, probably the only thing left to do was to leave the country!
57 See further, Sell, Commemorations, ch. 14.
59 Westminster Larger Catechism, answers to Qs. 159, 160.
62 From Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Captain of Israel’s host. . .”
63 T. Watson, A Divine Cordial, 87.
64 To discuss the question how far local churches, or whole denominations, or entire Christian world communions, should seek a common mind on particular sociopolitical and economic issues would take us too far afield. On the one hand, such affirmations may have a beneficial impact—as many would say that the 1982 “Resolution on Racism and South Africa” of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches did. On the other hand, when highly politicized pressure groups within the church press specific causes there is always the danger that an appropriately packed assembly may determine “the common mind of the church,” which, in the aftermath of the vote, turns out on closer inspection to be repudiated by a large number—even a majority—of members in the total constituency. Again, attempts to preserve the church’s purity over against the allegedly godless world around by prohibiting formal churchly association with good causes may conduce to world-denying pietism. On this last point see further James Henley Thornwell’s statement, “New York City Temperance Society Organized on Christian Principles,” in his Collected Writings, ed. John B. Adger, vol. 4 (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871). Among the underlying questions are, Do specific denominations need to have a common mind on all issues, and if not on all, then on which ones? How far ought possible ecclesial rupture to be risked in seeking such a mind? By what criteria may it be determined that certain issues, for example, pacifism versus nonpacifism, need not, and should not, be church dividing? See more generally, Sell, Aspects of Christian Integrity, 68-71; idem, A Reformed, Evangelical, Catholic Theology, 233-35.
66 Calvin, Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 577. The question how far support may be derived from Calvin for the
view that “Reformed spirituality has been characterized by its activism, both in family and church-centered religious life and in the world” (Charles Hambrick-Stowe, “Piety,” in Donald K. McKim, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992], 278) has been queried by Richard C. Gamble, “Calvin and Sixteenth-century Spirituality: Comparison with the Anabaptists,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, XXXI, November 1996, 335-58. However that matter may finally be decided, in Calvin (following Paul) we have one root of the ecclesiology of Separatism and Anabaptism. For the same motive as referred to the monastic community, see Peter Damian, *Apologeticum de contemptu saeculi*, ch. 27, Migne, PL, 145, 280.

67 Hence Isaac Watts’s prayer: “Never let my Devotions break in upon any part of other necessary Duties which I owe to God or Man: The great God does not permit Sacrifice to stand in the Room of Works of Mercy, nor will he allow of Robbery for a Burnt-offering. Remember this, O my soul!” See his *Discourses of the Love of God and the Use and Abuse of the Passions in Religion*, (1729), (rep. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999), 248.