

Recovering Experimental Religion

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EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION, which once was a vital part of the Reformed tradition of preaching and spirituality, has in a large measure been lost sight of in our day. Even use of the term *experimental* in connection with religion is no longer customary, it being more commonly associated with the natural sciences, where a method of probing and investigation leads to an understanding of reality. The older Reformed writers used the word to indicate that we not only read and confess what Scripture teaches, but also are enabled by the Holy Spirit in our own experience to prove and enter into those truths. The propositions of Scripture are true regardless of our experience of them. But in those who belong to Christ, there is a work of the Holy Spirit to persuade them of those truths, so that they taste and feel the power of them in their own souls. To tremble when we discern our guilt before God, and to be driven to seek covering in the blood of Christ, is to gain an experimental knowledge of realities revealed in Scripture. Such experiences are not like the groping of the heathen, who reflect on the mystery of their own hearts, trying to understand themselves, and pondering what God might be like and how he might relate to the world. Experimental religion in the Reformed tradition entails an experience which arises from being confronted with the testimony of Scripture, and in which the prime mover is God the Holy Spirit, driving home to heart and conscience the truths of the Word of God.

John Elias, preaching in Wales in the early nineteenth century, describes such experiences of biblical truth: “To have an experimental knowledge of something means to try it, to possess it, and to enjoy it ourselves. You must not merely read or hear about it. . . . You may read many a sweet chapter about Christ, and no doubt you have heard many a faithful sermon about Him, and yet, you may be without a saving knowledge of Christ. But an experimental knowledge of Him is to prove, see, and feel what you have read and heard about Him.”¹

Anthony Burgess, a member of the Westminster Assembly, speaks of the knowledge that a man may acquire about foreign countries by looking

at a map. But map knowledge cannot compare with actually going to the country, climbing its mountains, swimming in its rivers, and walking the streets of its towns. “Or as the Queen of Sheba, who had heard rumors of Solomon’s wisdom, when she came to have an experimental knowledge of it, then she was astonished, and said, All that she had heard was nothing to that which she saw. . . . But how is it to be feared, that many have seen godliness but in the map only, they never had experience of the thing itself. How many are there that talk of conversion or repentance, as men do of bringing forth a child, who never had the experience of the throbs and pains that then are endured. Paul, what a long time did he live in a road of religious duties, but when he came to have an experimental work upon him, he died, whereas he was alive before, that is, he became sensible of the damnable and dangerous estate he was in, whereas he had great confidence of his good life and salvation before. And thus it is with every man that hath gotten experimental knowledge; alas (saith he) I was alive once, I thought myself somebody, when I could pray, write sermons, dispute so understandingly, but now I see I did not know what that faith was, or godliness was, that I did argue so much about, I never knew anything of God, or of his gracious works till now, will that soul say.”²

There is a memorable passage in which J.C. Ryle presses on his readers the distance between belief that there is forgiveness and the believing reception of that forgiveness. “You believe perhaps, there is forgiveness of sins. You believe that Christ died for sinners, and that he offers a pardon to the most ungodly. But are you forgiven *yourself*? . . . What does it avail the sick man that the doctor offers him a medicine, if he only looks at it, and does not swallow it down? Except you lay hold for your own soul, you will be as surely lost as if there was no forgiveness at all. . . . There must be actual business between you and Christ.”³

Therefore we preach not only what Christ once did in his death and resurrection to accomplish our redemption, namely what he did outside of us, but also how Christ now works within our hearts by his Holy Spirit to apply that redemption. The Spirit brings us to appreciate Christ as the pearl of great price. He puts down the opposition of our hearts and carries us forward in repentance. In the resulting conflict, struggle and upheaval in our experience, the Spirit progressively conforms us to Christ. All of this touches the realm of our conscience, our desires and choices, our affections, joys and sorrows, and things felt and experientially known.

Thus I take a close look at myself, observing whether the truths revealed in Scripture concerning God's holiness and his just displeasure against sin have elicited a response from me. I consider the overwhelming generosity and mercy of God in the gospel provision for the ungodly, and I ask myself, What constraint do I feel from such kindness, by which God is wooing me in the gospel? Is there discernible in my life and thought that spirituality, repentance and love which Scripture indicates will be found in a true child of God?

A prominent aspect of Christ's ministry was that he aroused his hearers to go beyond a shallow consideration of his kingdom, challenging would-be disciples as to their readiness to accept what was entailed in following him, and probing whether their hearts were truly alienated from the world (Matthew 7:21-23, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 9:57-62 and 14:25-33). To examine ourselves as to whether we actually belong to Christ may be painful, and it may lead us to the discovery that we do not manifest the characteristics present in one who is savingly united to Christ, but ultimately it can also produce the deep comfort of a well-grounded assurance of our salvation. Under the thrust and shove of the probing questions and confrontational rebukes found in Scripture, we are brought to a place where we feel compelled to resolve the question, Are my faith and life true to what Scripture says will be found in a child of God? Scripture pointedly calls us to practice such self-examination, and provides us with the criteria for carrying it out. The people of God should welcome preaching that sets forth the biblical marks of grace in the life of a believer, indicating traits of character which are found only in the regenerate and which therefore are sound evidence of conversion, and distinguishing these from traits which may appear in the regenerate and unregenerate alike, and therefore provide no basis for assessing whether one has come to Christ. One objective in such preaching is to undeceive persons who are indulging a misguided hope.

Such preaching and self-examination were prominent aspects of the pastoral ministries for which the commissioners to the Westminster Assembly were renown. But appreciation for experimental religion has become increasingly rare in Presbyterian churches that honor the theological statements and the directories of worship and preaching produced by the Assembly. There are undoubtedly a number of influences that have brought this about, but one notable cause has been a

movement candidly known among its advocates as Neo-Calvinism, that is, Calvinism in a somewhat altered form, with new answers to some significant questions. One point at issue touches upon the definition of conversion. To understand accurately what it is to be converted is a very consequential matter. Indeed, the modification introduced in this area has altered the kind of preaching heard in the churches, the spiritual meditation practiced by church members, and how Christian parents conceive of the religious guidance they are to give to their children.

Neo-Calvinism has presented a more externalized definition of conversion, viewing it more in terms of what we confess, our adherence to Christian doctrine and world view, and our having a place in the church and in a Christian family. The older Calvinism warned that many, despite maintaining a public attachment to doctrinal affirmations of the faith, may never have been delivered from spiritual death, that youth growing up in a Christian setting are often still alienated in heart from God, and that a saving faith will be accompanied by experience of one's need for Christ and of the power of the gospel.

The Neo-Calvinistic movement was a response to the increasing secularization of modern society, which has dismissed the concept of an authoritative and inerrant revelation from God given in human language. Secular man has set out to identify a new mission for human society, without reference to traditional Christian doctrine. The power of this secularizing flood is intimidating. We may well appreciate the sense of crisis which prompted the retort given by Neo-Calvinism when secularization was making rapid progress in Europe a century and a half ago.

The mentor of Neo-Calvinism was a Dutch historian and politician, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, who was born in 1801. He authored an influential book analyzing the political revolutions spreading across Europe, and sought to demonstrate that this agitation was grounded in a spiritually infidel philosophy. His assessment gave rise in the Netherlands to a new political party, which offered resistance to many of the fruits of secularization. The best-known of his disciples was the theologian and politician, Abraham Kuyper, who led this political party, and was prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905.

From a classical Reformed perspective, it is certainly appropriate to oppose secularism. But the strategy adopted by Neo-Calvinism in this conflict entailed a major shift in thinking about conversion, which came

to be confused with taking the side of Christian doctrine in the culture wars, as if this were a sufficient indication of whether one has a new heart. In failing to maintain the distinction drawn by Calvin and the Puritans between the mere espousal of biblical doctrine and an experimental knowledge of those realities, Neo-Calvinism diluted the spirituality of the churches. Endeavoring to confront external foes, Neo-Calvinists employed a method which led to the inward weakening of the Lord's house.

We would begin by noting a point of agreement between Neo-Calvinism and the older Calvinism. The two concur in observing that no one is without a spiritual allegiance. One either has a heart renewed by grace, or one is still dead in trespasses and sins. Moreover, between these two kinds of people, regenerate and unregenerate, there exists a spiritual opposition, antipathy or antithesis in reference to the things of God. Thus far we have sound Reformed doctrine.

Where the Neo-Calvinist model became problematic is in its assumption that this antipathy or antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate will be visible in whether or not one adheres to a Christian world view. In the older Calvinism, it was a commonplace that there are multitudes who profess the doctrines of the Bible and traditional Christian values, but who still have not been brought from death to life, and that large numbers in the churches do not have a heart antithesis to the world.⁴ It is one thing to profess that we are on the Lord's side with respect to the world view we espouse, but it is something else altogether to experience a crucifixion to the world and to its lusts when God renews the heart.

The older perspective held that a nation should be organized on the basis of a collective acknowledgement of the truth of the Christian religion. The entire population would espouse the world view taught in Scripture. Civil laws would be framed in conformity to biblical standards of morality. Society would be unified and homogeneous, and the political constitution would embrace a Christian foundation for the social order. Thus the Reformers spoke of both the first and second uses of the law of God. The first use of the law is in the preaching of the law from the pulpit, which serves to expose our sin and show us our need of Christ as the Savior. The second use of the law is in the civil order embodying biblical standards of morality in public codes of conduct, so that the citizenry are directed into at least an outward conformity

to the moral law, thus restraining the worst displays of depravity, and reminding the population that they will answer both to human and divine authority for their conduct.

But though the older Calvinism understood that the moral law is to have a formative role for society, there was no illusion about the spiritually-mixed character of the population in an avowedly Christian society. It was recognized that despite the virtually universal acceptance of a biblical world view in such settings, there would still be at work a radical antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate. This was the social order within which the Reformers and Puritans carried out their ministries. They knew full well that masses of people in these outwardly homogeneous societies had not experienced the new birth, or come to personal contrition for sin or fled to the Savior for deliverance. The Reformers neither identified the kingdom of God with the social structures of this present age, nor did they regard a man's adherence to the Christian world view as implying that he has a regenerate heart.

Neo-Calvinism's approach to resisting the fruits of secularization was coupled with a large adjustment in thinking about how a Christian relates to the social order. It arose in the environment of modern pluralism, which looks for a strenuous competition of ideologies in the public marketplace of ideas. Neo-Calvinism adapted to this new playing field by advocating that Christians form their own social institutions in order to counter those which promote a secularist outlook. Christians were to develop political parties, labor unions, and schools, each of these being self-consciously based on the principles of a biblical world view. At a moment in history when western societies are professedly framed to tolerate a multiplicity of world views, one might conclude that Neo-Calvinism had little alternative regarding how a biblical world view might be asserted in such a setting. However, the response of Neo-Calvinism was not altogether innocent, in part because Neo-Calvinism introduced the assumption that participation in these distinctively Christian institutions was a manifestation of the antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate. This is to confuse a participant's adherence to the Christian world view with his having a regenerate heart.

This error has even more serious implications when it is brought to bear on the life and practice of the church. Kuyper regarded those in the congregation, including the children, as being in a state of grace

from their birth. The church, therefore, is not a place where people are being brought to salvation. The congregation need not be warned to flee from the wrath to come. This removes a primary reason for preaching the gospel of justification in the congregation. The call of the gospel is to be directed rather to those who are not in the church. According to this model, what the church should seek among those in its care is not their conversion to new life in Christ, but their nurture in the eternal life which they are presumed to possess already. Unless and until children of the church give clear indication of repudiating the covenant, their parents and the church were to proceed on the supposition that the children are regenerate.

However, the biblical method of bringing sinners to Christ is to confront them with the law and the gospel, and with the call to faith and repentance. In this respect, children are no different from adults. Evidence of a work of saving grace will be given in a child's response to law and gospel. Inasmuch as the sign of the covenant in baptism functions as an offer of mercy extended with particular reference to each child of a believer, and without regard to the status of the child as either elect or reprobate, the basis for concluding that such a child has passed from death to life is found in his answer to this call. Though the child might manifest doctrinal orthodoxy and a moral demeanor, he is to be taught the discipline of self-examination, so that he may discern in himself the marks indicative of a heart renewed by grace.

Archibald Alexander cautions that, "Although the grace of God may be communicated to a human soul at any period of its existence in this world, yet the fact manifestly is, that very few are renewed before the exercise of reason commences; and not many in early childhood. Most persons with whom we have been acquainted grew up without giving any decisive evidence of a change of heart. Though religiously educated, yet they have evinced a want of love to God, and an aversion to spiritual things."⁵ The call to faith and repentance should be addressed to children in the church, in recognition that, though we do not know whether a young child is regenerate, we dare not withhold from him those means which God ordinarily employs for bringing sinners to himself. "The education of children should proceed on the principle that they are in an unregenerate state, until evidences of piety clearly appear, in which case they should be sedulously cherished and nurtured. These are Christ's

lambs—‘little ones, who believe in him’—whom none should offend or mislead upon the peril of a terrible punishment. But though the religious education of children should proceed on the ground that they are destitute of grace, it ought ever to be used as a means of grace. Every lesson, therefore, should be accompanied with the lifting up of the heart of the instructor to God for a blessing on the means.”⁶

At whatever age an individual is regenerated, his experience of conscious trust in Christ will not be without conviction of his guilt and wickedness, which drives him to forsake self-reliance and to rest in Christ alone for salvation. His faith will be a faith which appreciates the need for justification.

A century ago, the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck had opportunity to observe the effect of Neo-Calvinism on the religious life of his country. Bavinck came from churches in which experimental religion had been cherished, but which had come under a new influence when they merged with churches guided by the perspective of Kuyper. Bavinck commented on what followed, in his introduction to a reprint of the highly experimental sermons by the Scottish Presbyterians Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine: “Here we have an important element which is largely lacking among us. We miss this spiritual soul-knowledge. It seems we no longer know what sin and grace, guilt and forgiveness, regeneration and conversion are. We know these things in theory, but we no longer know them in the awful reality of life.”⁷ What Bavinck had witnessed was the widespread absence in his generation of anything like the experience which led Luther to cry out to God for mercy, in concern about sin and guilt. One still found justification, faith and repentance confessed as valid doctrine, but it was no longer expected that they would be reflected in the experiences of the soul in seeking God. The theoretical knowledge of Reformed doctrine had come to be separated from a sense of personal need for salvation.

There was a second error of similar magnitude. The aggressive pursuit of a social and cultural agenda in the service of God came to be seen as a basic objective of man’s life, with the Christian called to redeem society and culture from the influence of unbelieving principles. Neo-Calvinists were intent upon advancing a cultural program which would stand in contrast to that of opposing world views, and which would increasingly bring to light the underlying antipathy or antithesis

between the regenerate and the unregenerate. It came to be suggested that the foundational character of man's involvement with culture may be seen in a mandate given to him at creation.

This development has a background in the personal history of Kuyper, the principal figure in the emergence of Neo-Calvinism. A mark had been left on him by the university training he received at the hands of a sophisticated exponent of modern philosophy. Kuyper then entered the ministry, and it was only after he was settled as a pastor that he came to saving faith, in part through the influence of parishioners who had discerned that their minister was not converted. These humble folk avoided many of the interests of the culturally sophisticated, but Kuyper was of the view that there was no need for believers to hold aloof from cultural pursuits. He was convinced that their perspective would be enhanced if they came to appreciate how a Christian could make application of biblical principles in the realm of culture.

But such was the impetus which Neo-Calvinism gave to cultural activity, that there has been a striking alteration in the message heard from the pulpit. Preaching about the necessity of the new birth, about the call to faith and repentance, about the justification of the ungodly, and about the pursuit of personal sanctification, was in a measure displaced by preaching which assumes that the congregation is already regenerate, and that the need of the congregation is to be nurtured in the Christian's mission to transform society and culture.

What criticism should be made of the Neo-Calvinist claim that the development of culture is a primary task in the service of God? There is something appealing in Kuyper's proclamation that there is not a thumb's breath in all of life but Christ will have it as his. There should be no disagreement that in every aspect of life we should think and act from the perspective of God's revealed truth. Our intellectual, social and cultural life must be in conformity with and obedient to Scripture. Moreover, our faithfulness to the Word of God in these matters will have a powerful effect on others. A society shaped by a biblical perspective on social and cultural issues is a mighty instrument for restraining sin, for guiding the young into wise patterns of conduct, and for commending biblical faith to those who are blessed to live under such outward influences.

The first point of criticism of the cultural mandate regards the displacement of religion's primacy in man's life. Here is a significant

departure from the classical Reformed tradition, which regarded all matters of this present life as subservient to the interests of religion, so that all institutions are to join together in furthering religion as that which is of ultimate significance for man's life. For this reason, promotion of the true religion was the goal not only of the church, but also of the civil order. The Reformers understood man's highest service, greatest access to God, and chief means of furthering the glory of God, to be through religion and worship. The direction of Kuyper's thought is indicated by his rejection of the concept of an established religion.

It should be evident that to view the goal of man's life largely in terms of a social and cultural agenda is not in accord with the Bible. Culture and society do not hold any such preeminence in the narrative and doctrine of Scripture. Of course much is said in Scripture about family life, public justice, and other forms of social involvement, but they are in no way primary in the message of Scripture. This disproportion between social concern and religious concern has contributed significantly to the decline of experimental religion, and directed the thoughts of Christians away from what the original Reformed tradition considered to be most vital for the life of the church, for spiritual stability, and for living to the glory of God.

What then is the origin of Neo-Calvinism's dominant interest in cultural progress? The answer, we believe, is that it took over this interest from an aggressive secularism. Though Neo-Calvinism sets out zealously to resist secularism, there is a foundational matter regarding which it has retreated in the face of Enlightenment philosophy, because Neo-Calvinism has effectively abandoned the primacy of religion as the goal of man's life. In doing this, Neo-Calvinism has capitulated to secularism's choice of the field on which the contest between Christianity and secularism will be fought. As the parties contended over which world view should guide the development of culture, they concurred that the goal of man's life should not be viewed in terms of religion. This removal of religion as primary in man's life and in society is an abandonment of what is theologically indispensable to Christianity's strategic position.

Inasmuch as man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever, his proper orientation to God is not so indirect that man may give himself fundamentally to the affairs of this life, albeit with the plea that it is done in the name of God. The goal of his life is found in God,

and not in this creation. Only religious worship and the communion of the soul with God can give the access and intimacy of relationship to God which answers to what is ultimate for man.

A second point of criticism against Neo-Calvinism's concept of a cultural mandate respects its exegesis of Genesis 1:28. It is claimed that language about man's dominion implies a mandate for developing the hidden potential of creation. Though the reference to multiplying may be taken as indicating the increase of families, the reference to filling the earth and subduing it as the extension of human habitation across the earth and the tilling of the soil, and the reference to exercising dominion over the animals as implying herding and shepherding, Kuyper appealed to the text as inclusive of every dimension of man's social and cultural life. The verse has been made one of the most important in the Bible, a foundation for identifying man's calling throughout history, and perhaps beyond. One suspects that some texts are asked to support more weight than they were ever intended to carry, and when that happens one feels that presuppositions are being brought from elsewhere and forced onto a text rather than arising from it. Indeed, Calvin seems to be quite unaware that the passage would be viewed as a key to man's mission in life. Instead, the Reformer reads the text as a simple blessing from God, in which attention is drawn to the riches of God's provision for mankind, to whom he gives abundance of food, and allows geographical space into which the race could expand as its numbers increased.

A third criticism of the cultural mandate is that Neo-Calvinism's strong orientation to this present world misses the pilgrim character of the believer. Calvin and the Puritans were deeply interested in what the Bible teaches about family life, civil government, and godly relationships throughout society. But their understanding of what these relationships implied for the Christian's relationship to this world was quite different from that of Neo-Calvinism. The older view was given classic expression in Augustine's *The City of God*, which is an extended reflection on the decline of the Roman world, and the place of the kingdom of God in this present age.

Augustine discerned two societies to which men belong, which he called *cities*. The city of God, composed of the holy angels and God's redeemed, is in heaven. Some, who by grace have become its citizens, are pilgrims on this earth while still on their way to the heavenly city.

These pilgrims are like the Jews exiled in Babylon, longing to be united with their home elsewhere. This is the outlook adopted by Calvin: “For, if heaven is our homeland, what else is the earth but our place of exile?”⁸ Augustine understood that the city of God was not the same as the Christian church, because only some members of the church are pilgrims traveling to the heavenly city. The other city, which Augustine calls the earthly city, is composed of those men and angels who in heart are the enemies of God. The men of this city are dominated by the angels who turned away from God and became devils. Whereas the citizens of the city of God are characterized by love to God, the earthly city is driven by selfish love. The earthly city is the city into which we all are born, though by grace we can become citizens of the heavenly.

And yet, though the pilgrim is sighing for a distant country, he does not flee from the life around him, being aware that his present life is inextricably bound up with the lives of others around him in this place away from his home. He currently has business in this world. He can value virtues such as patriotism, friendship, marital fidelity, responsible parenthood, and a degree of justice administered by civil rulers, all of which are common to citizens of the two cities. But the pilgrim recognizes that these virtues are not good in an absolute sense, because they are defiled by an unbelief and human pride which turn away from the Creator and use created things without gratitude to God as our benefactor. And so the division between the two cities remains, despite the necessity and advantage of sharing the present life.

Here is a model which expresses the ambivalence found in Scripture about the believer’s place in the world. There are those within the church who are not citizens of the heavenly city, so that espousing a set of doctrines does not indicate where the ultimate division is to be found. Further, citizens of both cities are involved in the discharge of responsibilities which pertain to this present life. Social institutions are useful for restraining evil and giving outward enforcement of biblical morality, but their administration of justice will often miscarry, and they fall far short of the righteousness of God’s heavenly kingdom. The social structures of the present life, though they are under obligation to promote the true religion, never represent the coming of the kingdom of God. Accordingly, Augustine does not have a high expectation for them, and finds their value relativized in the perspective of eternity.

Neo-Calvinists have a number of names for this point of view. They call it dualism, Manichaeism, pietism, and world flight. Rarely do they call it Augustinian or Calvinistic, though it is certainly the view with the longest pedigree in the Reformed tradition. The larger question remains, Is it biblical? In such passages of Scripture as Hebrews 11:8–16 and 13:10–14, and 1 Corinthians 7:29–31, the believer's situation is certainly regarded as that of a detached pilgrim journeying to his true home, though having responsibilities here for the present. The goal of his life is found in what transcends this creation.

Neo-Calvinism and the classical Reformed tradition represent two discrete concepts of the Christian's relationship to this world, and historically one of them has not been congenial to experimental religion. Though there sometimes have been and will be attempts to form a hybrid of the two traditions, the leaven of the new perspective will eventually militate against experimental spirituality.

Notes

¹ John Elias, *The Experimental Knowledge of Christ and additional sermons of John Elias (1774–1841)* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 27.

² Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining: or a Treatise of Grace and Assurance* (London: A. Miller for Thomas Underhill, 1652), 5.

³ John Charles Ryle, *Old Paths, being plain statements on some of the weightier matters of Christianity* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1977), 204–205.

⁴ Joel R. Beeke, *Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism* (Orlando: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2008), 279.

⁵ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 13–14.

⁶ Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, 13.

⁷ C. Pronk, *Neo-Calvinism* (Millgrove: Free Reformed Student Society, 1994), 15.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), III.viii.4, 716.