



I. Another Possible Church for a New Day

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Theological Bases

The most demanding challenge of our time is how to be the church of Jesus Christ with a clear message for the people we serve. The Bible challenges us to see and respond to the “signs of the times.”¹ In our efforts to address this challenge, we sometimes miss the point and confuse the target. An example is when we confuse church with structure and try to fix the structure to save the church. The actual world crisis complicates this challenge. Humankind is living in a global crisis. The issues of war and peace, ecology, gender, race and culture, and global economy dominate the world scenario. These “signs” of our time are challenging the church in a dramatic way. Systems and structures are usually connected to these issues. This is when we step upon very dangerous ground where we may miss the point and confuse the target. The question that may help us to redirect our conversation is very simple: Are we to save a system (structure) or humankind?

If our goal is to save the system, then we need to use the tools of sociology, economy, and political sciences. But the Word of God challenges us to proclaim God’s salvation of humankind; therefore, we need to use hermeneutics, theology, and church history. Systems and structures in the church are always subordinated to the salvation of humankind and if we miss this point we may be repeating the same mistakes of the secular society. One of the main responsibilities of the church is to be the conscience of the nation: announcing the gospel of salvation for every individual and denouncing injustice and all kinds of evils that diminish the image of God present in every human being. We need to perform our role with a

humble and profound sense of service, not as masters but as servants for the edification of the Body of Christ.

One of the most important developments in Christian thought during recent years is the understanding of mission as God's mission (*Missio Dei*). The old interpretation connected mission with evangelization, the planting of new churches, the creating of schools and community agencies connected with churches, and the sending of individuals as messengers of these projects. *Missio Dei* is a holistic approach in which the sender is God and the church is sent to heal, liberate, and plant the seeds of the Kingdom in each community, town, city, and country. What kind of functional structure do we need to be faithful to these goals? Paul Hooker in his essay

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“What Is Missional Ecclesiology?”² states that the commitments of a missional polity include providing “flexibility for mission in a changing and variable context” and encouraging “accountability on the parts of its covenanted partners to one another.” These two commitments point out the weakest part of our actual structure: flexibility is minimal and accountability is based more on individuals than on governing bodies.

The new Form of Government our denomination is discussing is a basic effort to rebuild our system in a better direction. It is not the last word, but at least eliminates the rigid structure of the actual establishment for a more biblical interpretation based on a conciliar mentality that encourages participation and diversity. The Council of Jerusalem³ was a deliberative body where churches were equally represented and authority was discerned by the assembly (*ecclesia*). The failure of councils in the church's history came when they were transformed from a deliberative body to an authoritative body. With Constantine councils became part of the Roman establishment, exchanging flexibility and representation for authority and ecclesiastic hierarchy. As John Calvin said in the sixteenth century, let's go “to the sources” to revitalize the image of councils with the spirit and purpose we find in the Bible.⁴ We need to look at the *Book of Order* with a new vision: this means less book and more order. To reduce the size of the book is not to destroy the Presbyterian system but to allow the practice of

the imagination we promise in our ordination vows and to give space to the renewed action of the Holy Spirit that we claim in our most known motto, “*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda.*”⁵

Leadership Mentality

In our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we have a deep problem of leadership. During these last years we have seen the strengthening of a “corporative”⁶ mentality at every level of our church. Some of the job descriptions for pastors or positions in governing bodies describe the job more as a chief executive officer than as a minister of the Word and Sacrament or a church’s leader.

This “corporative” mentality may work for a corporation but certainly not for the church. Some of the main characteristics of this mentality are the concentration of power in a few hands—the opposite of our shared and representative form of government; the concentration of the activities of the corporation on the headquarters—the opposite of the concept that recognizes the local church as “*Missio Dei*”; the change of deliberative processes for executive decisions or board directions—that is, the diminishing of the power and impact of presbyteries and synods in favor of a central power and hierarchy; and the use of finances as normative for activities and services that gradually replaces stewardship with fundraising campaigns.

These things affect our capacity to be a church. For instance, standard corporate practice is to have security personnel escort employees whose position has been terminated from the employer’s premises. This practice may make sense for a corporation that handles technological secrets, formulas of production, and secret investments. Even in these cases, Christians cannot accept a practice that humiliates a human being. But in the church we don’t have any kind of secrets to justify that policy and if we have something that we think may be in danger when we fire or “downsize” individuals, we need to behave in a different manner.

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The “corporative” mentality also creates problem for the church because of the way corporations handle relations with unions. We don’t have unions

in the church but we have caucuses, advocacy groups, and Committees on Representation who play similar roles. For a “corporative” mentality these church groups may be perceived as a potential danger to the functioning of the establishment, and this generates suspicion and creates divisions in the body of Christ. In the Bible the poor, women, children, outcasts, and gentiles were recognized by Jesus and his followers not as a problem but as part of the solution to the problems. In the Bible advocacy was a practice

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with strong roots in the Old Testament, but it was also part of the history of salvation, with God as the main advocate for humankind. John’s writings translate the Greek word *parakleton* as advocate or comforter. He uses the same word to name the Holy Spirit. The main responsibility of the advocate is to intercede on behalf of other people: it is the voice of the voiceless. Our governing bodies within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

should look at these groups as part of the solution to our national crisis. We need to increase their participation instead of diminishing their funding or eliminating their organized presence among us.⁷

Multiculturalism Under Review

We need to review our whole idea of multiculturalism. In a general sense, this concept has been understood as the recognition and celebration of other cultures, but it also can be used as a new type of “apartheid.”⁸ When our idea of multiculturalism does not go beyond the level of a gathering every year and/or an occasional joint worship services, when we accept multiculturalism but reject the permanent interaction with another culture, we are in the ground of apartheid. In practice this is what Herbert Marcuse, the famous German American philosopher, called “repressive tolerance” that allows racism, discrimination, and xenophobia to flourish in the name of diversity, tolerance, and freedom.⁹

We are not only in need of cultural celebration and recognition but also of cultural interaction and tension. This is cross-culturalism. We need to expose others to our culture and we also need to be exposed to the culture of others, and to be open to deal with tensions and conflicts this openness creates. The result will be something different but better if it keeps the best of

each culture. The gospel was revealed to humankind wrapped in a particular culture, but the Holy Spirit exposed the gospel to the action and reaction of different cultures. During this process we accumulated good and not so good experiences. The result is a Christian faith that has roots in many places and has assimilated the teachings that God has been providing along the centuries and through different cultures. This is what Emil Brunner, the famous Swiss Reformed theologian, called “God’s revelation to humans.”¹⁰ It is the adventure to find signs of God’s accompaniment along the centuries and to learn from that experience. A missional church is culturally vulnerable, biblically grounded, and spiritually sensitive to the permanent revelation of God.

Undercover Racism

Now that we have the first African American president some think it is time to dismantle the system that made his election possible. We hear voices in our society claiming the disappearance of Affirmative Action and other programs. We have similar voices within the church.

John L. Jackson Jr. in his book *Racial Paranoia* defines what he called “Cardio Racism” as “what the law can’t touch, what won’t be easily proved or disproved, what can’t be simply criminalized and deemed unconstitutional.”¹¹ It’s not easy to discover Cardio Racism within the church because the fear of being perceived as racist makes us act “politically correct,” even when we don’t understand the whole meaning of what we are doing. There is also a great amount of naïveté and sometimes people are not aware of the racist implications of what they are saying. The first time I attended the Association of Executive Presbyters (AEPs), I discovered how few racial ethnic senior executives we had: 1 Hispanic, 4 African Americans, 3 Koreans, and 1 Japanese American. We were 9 out of 173, 5 percent. The percentage of women was a little better but still far lower than that of the white males. During the Assembly I called it to the attention of my colleagues by saying, “Friends, I hear a lot of information about the multicultural church and about diversity and inclusiveness, but it looks to me as if this movie hasn’t arrived at this theater.” This is an example of what I call undercover racism present in our denomination. We don’t have any rule prohibiting racial ethnic persons from being elected to these positions but these numbers were real and are still in similar proportion. This analysis may be applied to other areas like senior pastors of large congregations, synod executives, etc.

There are some places where we are more careful with inclusivity like the General Assembly Mission Council and our General Assemblies. This is possible because our Constitution has a mandatory Committee on Representation that oversees and promotes fair representation at every level of the church. What would happen if we eliminated this committee? Discrimination and racism would probably be more evident, and we would see less racial ethnic, youth, and women in our structure. General Colin Powell said recently in an interview on CNN, “Racism is not over in the United States.” This is also true in our church.

We may apply similar approaches to the immigrant debate. John L. Jackson says in his book, “The immigration debate in the United States today is rhetorically distinct from traditionally more blatant forms of xenophobia. For one thing, there is little mention of race as a biological excuse for discrimination at our borders. Everything is about culture, not biology—cultures at war, cultures clashing, cultures under siege. Literary critic Walter Benn Michaels is just the loudest voice warning us against such weaponized versions of culture, versions that serve as little more than euphemism for the entrenched racism of old.”¹²

Missional Structure

A missional structure organizes the work of the church in a way that facilitates flexibility to respond to God’s mission (*Missio Dei*). If we start from the assumption that local churches are organized to be instruments of *Missio Dei*, the offices that provide resources, training, and support to local congregations should be as close as possible to them.

The programmatic area located in Louisville is far away from local congregations and because of the geographical diversity of the areas where churches are located, they have to produce neutral or general resources that do not always fill the expectations of congregations, creating rejection and critiques. Programmatic areas should be located at the synod level. Synods may produce materials more adjustable to the situations and conditions of the geographical areas where they are located. At the synod level it is easier to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, resources and training activities. Officers may receive direct and immediate feedback from the congregations because they will be accountable to congregations. In recent years, some

synods have eliminated programmatic areas for financial reasons to the point that some of them have practically disappeared. The relocation of these areas to synods will increase synods' participation in the life of the church, reconnecting our programs with local congregations and saving money by the redistribution of our financial resources in a better manner. With this model the General Assembly in Louisville would only need a coordinator to facilitate and share information on what is happening around the country and to coordinate national or regional gatherings according to the needs of the synods.

Another area that should be directly in the hands of their constituency is the racial ethnic division. With the disappearance of the National Presbyterian Cross Caucus the work and influence of racial ethnic caucuses began to decrease. Because of financial reasons the denomination has been reducing the budget for caucuses every year but at the same time has kept functioning offices to work with those groups. These offices are accountable to personnel in Louisville who cannot be directly involved with the work of every racial ethnic group. This disconnection makes it impossible to evaluate the performance of the officers properly. A different model of structure is needed. First we need to empower the work of caucuses, encouraging cultural interaction. Certainly we cannot jump immediately on this because a process of preparation is necessary for each constituency to understand other cultures and to begin to interact with them. The methodology of cultural proficiency is the tool that we need to use in this period of preparation.

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We need to fund our caucuses so they may hire a full-time officer who will work for them and will be accountable to each group. Each caucus would be responsible for the types of activities and their annual program. This structure would allow us to combine the racial ethnic offices into one office that would periodically contact moderators and full-time officers of each caucus to keep our denomination informed about cross-cultural activities and facilitate gatherings and events of cultural interaction with the caucuses according to their needs.

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The rest of the organizational structure of the General Assembly is still unclear and dysfunctional. Ordinary members of our churches do not understand who is doing what and where the levels of accountability are. The internal division between GAMC and OGA is not perceived by our common people. For an outsider, General Assembly is everybody who works in the building, and this division does not make sense. I am sure we would be more efficient if these two areas were transformed into one.

A missional structure in Louisville might be focused on constitutional works, publications, ministry and vocations, ecumenical and interfaith relations, international relations, a legal area, a connectional area to facilitate the interaction of programs at the synod level, and those programs that have special funding. This more manageable structure would help us to decentralize the work of the church, empowering our synods, presbyteries, and local churches.

It has been said that there is a crisis of trust in our church. This deficit of trust is deeper and more dangerous than the financial deficit. To improve trust and confidence we need to share power, reduce expenses, invest in congregations, and develop a missional perspective.

Participatory and Deliberative Assemblies

To complete the analysis of our structure we need to talk about our biennial meeting, the General Assembly. The first problem we need to address is the volume of business we intend to cover in a week. The commissioners are overwhelmed by hundreds of different types of documents. Resolutions, overtures, reports, authoritative interpretations, and recommendations are addressed in a “Chamber of Commerce Fair” scenario where numerous groups try to “sell” their ideas, usually connected with the documents the commissioners have to discuss and vote on. This environment reduces the time available for deliberation, discernment, and dialogue and forces commissioners to make quick decisions. Another consequence of this

overload of business is the ambiguity and inconsistency of different decisions. Sometimes it looks as if two different groups were in session at the same time and place but producing different results. We need to find a way to reduce the amount of business for discussion in each Assembly. Maybe we need to reshape the process of overtures to GA or maybe we need to establish some order according the type of documents submitted to the Assembly.

One of the most important achievements of our Assemblies is what we call “advisory delegates.” Through this principle we have empowered different groups to have an advisory voice in the Assembly for the benefit of the commissioners. The presence of the youth has been tremendously valuable and significant and we need to keep them as part of our structure. It is folly to believe we can lose our youth and still build a meaningful

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and relevant church structure. The main idea is to give voice to the voiceless and to grant presence to groups which have been pushed to the background. Not every group needs to be represented, but those who have been silenced for a long time do. We have a problem of inconsistency because there is no other place where we repeat this model. The solution is not to eliminate the advisory system but to extend the system to our synods and presbyteries. It would be good also to open this advisory system for racial ethnic groups or to create some regulations that may guarantee more inclusive representation among commissioners.

Fundraising and Stewardship

One of our pathological problems is the reluctance to speak about stewardship. Pastors and elders avoid preaching on this, and the pledge system in our churches sometimes is addressed as a financial system. The word tithes is not used in many churches, and the annual budget of the congregation depends on our capacity to raise funds instead of our acceptance of the biblical challenge. Fundraising has replaced stewardship, and this is another example of our “corporative” mentality. Fundraising may be a tool for particular things in some institutions, but the solution for the church budget is the biblical mandate of tithing and the collection of offerings.

The influence of fundraising in the church is so strong that we try to solve the financial problems by targeting “major givers” or “donors.” This influence also creates competition among different governing bodies trying to solve their problems by targeting individuals directly. We need to solve the financial problems of the church by sharing what we have instead of competing for donations. We need to recover the biblical image of the “widow’s offering” and the importance of the tithe.¹³

When we research the idea of offerings and tithing in the Bible, we discover that these practices were adopted by the people of God as a system to keep a fair distribution of the wealth and also as a system to avoid accumulation of capital. It was a system to redistribute God’s blessings among his children.¹⁴

Gospel and Technology

The major revolution of the second half of the twentieth century was the microchip revolution. The technological advances of the last fifty years create a barrier that sometime isolates older generations. Generational attitudes are creating real differences in dealing with theological problems, biblical interpretation, and the missional calling of the church. This technological future will happen with or without our permission and participation, so the real problem for the church is not how to be relevant for this technological generation, but how to continue being relevant to older generations in a technological era.

The impact of technology presents an ethical challenge to the church. We need to begin to analyze the meaning of preaching in the era of “texting,” or the impact of Google in Bible study and hermeneutics. A major success of our General Assemblies is the incorporation of technology. We need to continue improving our technological capacity. Blogs, Facebook, social networking, and chat areas are the future of interaction between human beings. The main problem we need to address is how to stop the race toward individual

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isolation that is implicit in technology. Face-to-face interaction has been and still is the foundation of the church. *Koinonia*¹⁵ cannot happen in isolation; virtual reality, where you live something that is not real, cannot substitute for real behavior, where your actions have ethical implications. But maybe it is time to investigate the possibilities of an “electronic

koinonia.” Is it a challenge? Yes, and we will never know the answer if we do not try.

While we discuss these issues, we need to continue using the technological tools that will allow us to spread the gospel, announcing the old message with a new format.

Hermeneutical Accountability

We cannot address the renewal of the Presbyterian Church if we ignore what many people have called “the elephant in the room.” The discussion around human sexuality is one of the most profound and transformative theological challenges facing our churches today. This discussion has dominated our Presbyterian debate during the last thirty years. The center of discussion has been ordination standards. Both parties claim that they are tired of discussions that take away our energy and ignore the most important mandate for the church, but both parties continue reviving the debate every year. The heart of the problem is hermeneutical—how do we interpret Scriptures? It is no secret that we had and we still have in our congregations gay and lesbian persons. Some of them are now openly known but others are still living a double life. Some churches have practiced the unwritten policy “don’t ask, don’t tell,” and other churches have decided to challenge the system and open the door to these persons.

Through the years, the church has been discussing many different arguments: medical research, theological explanations, and biblical interpretations. We have been using a confrontational and argumentative hermeneutic. Years ago, debate was more passionate, subjective, and emotional; now it is more civil, objective, and respectful but still confrontational and argumentative.

Another circumstance that confuses and complicates the debate within the church is the way our society addresses and discusses this issue and the ramifications for inclusiveness, civil rights, laws, etc. The experience of cultural and religious diversity has led many persons to conclude that religious beliefs and moral values are a matter of personal preference, and this is not correct. The discussion around moral standards complicates the scenario, and for the first time the church is not dictating the agenda. Seeking to restore the influence and leadership of the church on the social and political arena is not the answer but a way to rebuild or repatch the

establishment. The Constantinian Era has passed away, and we are living in new times where the church has to be only the church with a clear message of redemption, justice, and peace. We are *Missio Dei*, and we are called to challenge the social, political, and cultural structure of our world and country.

Several years ago we created an experiment called the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force. We put together people of different and antagonistic positions with the mandate to work together and to produce a report about ordination standards. This group discovered how to work together in spite of their differences, realizing that this discovery was the real treasure they had to share. Their experience confirmed that the only way to be connectional is to be relational. They followed a process to discover the will of God called “discernment.”

After this important experiment maybe the logical step would be a period of time to allow the church to enter in a relational process. This is what I call “hermeneutical accountability.” Our church needs to be engaged in hermeneutical conversations, not by trying to convince anyone or to confront different positions but to care for each other. “God is Lord of our conscience,” but God is also the loving presence who cares for our personal growth. This is the foundation of hermeneutical accountability. The way to practice this is when we are mutually invited to share our biblical interpretations for the mutual edification of the believers, the Body of Christ.¹⁶ John Calvin, speaking about the Sacrament of Communion, said, “In order fully to comply with our Lord’s injunction, there is another disposition which we must bring. It is to confess with the mouth and testify how much we are indebted to our Savior, and return him thanks, not only that his name may be glorified in us, but also to *edify others* (emphasis added).”¹⁷

Unfortunately, because of our confrontational and argumentative mindset we paid more attention to the PUP report and recommendations than to the relational process they discovered. For that reason we are here again

voting one more time on the ordination standards. Apart from the final outcome of the vote I believe we are missing the most important part of the valuable experiment we created, the relational process. Many brothers and sisters have been claiming that the delay of justice becomes injustice, but also justice at any cost becomes injustice. We believe in the “costly grace” announced by the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer,¹⁸ but grace is a process of death and resurrection, a process that is always relational and demands our sacrifice. That is the cost: to build up the body of Christ. This process is wrapped in the most challenging and mysterious concept of the Bible, the *kairos*, the time of God. The process to discover the will of God through the action of the Holy Spirit is a costly relationship. The main problem we need to discuss is not only if we are ready to listen to the voice of God, or if we are ready to move under the leading of God, or if we are ready to follow God’s word, or if we are ready to wait for the *kairos* of God, but if we are ready to love each other, working in the edification of the body of Christ.

Conclusion

The “possible” Church for a new day is not a utopia; it is a reality we may and we have to be ready to assume. Recently, a friend told me that if the church of the future would return to the 1950s, then the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) would be ready for the future. We need to renew, reinvent, and reimagine the church, and we don’t have to be afraid of this process, because renewal is “an earnest of eternal life and joy.”¹⁹ Are we willing to take the challenge of a new church? It is our turn to respond.

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Notes



1. Matthew 16:3.
2. Paul Hooker, "What Is Missional Ecclesiology?" Paper presented at the meeting of the Synod of the Sun, February 11–12, 2009. Available online at <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/pdfs/missional-ecclesiology09.pdf>.
3. For a complete study of the Council of Jerusalem, consult A. Wikenhauser, *Los Hechos de los Apóstoles*, Colección Biblioteca Herder, 96 (Barcelona: Herder, 1967), 232–267, esp. 250–265.
4. For more information about the role of councils and political structures in the Bible, consult Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of Religion of Liberated Israel 1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 257–316.
5. *Book of Order*, G-2.0200. "The church affirms 'Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda,' that is, 'The church reformed, always reforming,' according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit." A footnote adds that this Latin phrase could be translated "The church reformed, always to be reformed" according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.
6. "Corporative" is not an actual English word. I prefer to use it here in this essay since using the word "corporate," which would be proper, is liable to be misunderstood by Presbyterians as referring to the collective nature of the church or business.
7. For more information on this issue consult "Hearing and Singing New Songs of God: Shunning Old Discords and Sharing New Harmonies," Report of the Women of Color Consultation Task Force to the 218th General Assembly (2008): Recommendations. Available at <http://www.pcusa.org/acwc/wocctaskforcereport02-22-08.pdf>; Recommendations will be found on 10.
8. Derived from the Afrikaans word for "apartness," apartheid is a term that came into usage in the 1930s and signified the political policy under which the races in South Africa were subject to "separate development" (Dictionary.com).
9. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," available online at <http://www.marcuse.org/herbert/pubs/60spubs/65repressivetolerance.htm>. This essay examines the idea of tolerance in our advanced industrial society. The conclusion reached is that the realization of the objective of tolerance would call for intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, and opinions, and the extension of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions which are outlawed or suppressed.
10. "God's kingdom is thus a matter of the dramatic in-breaking of God's spirit, rather than of evolution. It is not a movement of man's gradual progress toward God, but of God's revelation to humans." Emil Brunner, *The Divine Human Encounter*, trans. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1934).
11. John L. Jackson Jr., *Racial Paranoia* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2008), 87.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 197. Jackson is citing Walter Benn Michaels, "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (summer 1992): 655–85.
13. Luke 21:1–4; Exodus 25:2; 29:39; Amos 4:5; Matthew 5:23; Genesis 14:20; Deuteronomy 12:14.

14. For more information about the economical implications of the biblical images of tithes and offerings consult Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 133–137.
15. *Koinonia* is a Greek word that means communion, communication, fellowship.
16. 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 10:23; 1 Peter 2:5; Jude 1:20.
17. John Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Supper of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. Accessed online: <http://www.ondoctrines.com/2cal0505.htm>; the quoted passage is from paragraph 25.
18. "Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'" Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, revised and unabridged edition, translated by R. H. Fuller, translation revised by Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 48.
19. Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. III, analysis of Psalm 103. Available at www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc3.Ps.civ.html.