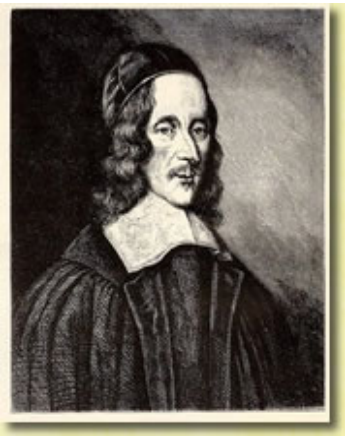


# George Herbert's Approach to God: The Faith and Spirituality of a Country Priest

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The spirituality of George Herbert, the seventeenth-century poet and priest, has been extolled as combining many of the factors that have become especially associated with classical Anglicanism: the pursuit of the *via media* (which is supposed to be both Catholic *and* Evangelical); a this-worldly theology that celebrates creation viewed in continuity with redemption; a corresponding focus on the incarnation of Christ as the prime example of the positive value of creation; an approach articulated not so much by speculative theologians as experienced in Word and Sacrament (in the public worship of the Daily Office and the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer).

Such a summary of Herbert's spirituality is not mistaken, but it encourages us too easily to imagine Herbert as a happy anticipation of the current sacramental and liturgical

“experientialism” that passes for spirituality in much of contemporary Anglicanism. This “experientialist” Anglicanism is able to sanction Herbert’s poetry as a forerunner of a primacy of religious “experience” only to the extent that it ignores the actual content of Herbert’s writings. At the same time, there is nothing particularly Anglican about the appeal to the primacy of “experience.” Designated “experiential-expressivism” in George Lindbeck’s contemporary classic, *The Nature of Doctrine*,<sup>(1)</sup> variations are pervasive in contemporary Protestant and Catholic spirituality. The primary characteristic of “experiential-expressivism” is the separation of and priority of “religious experience” over linguistic interpretation. “Religious experience” is viewed as pre-thematic, pre-linguistic, and (generally speaking) culturally universal. Religious symbols, practices, narratives, and doctrines are viewed as consequent attempts to express this prior experience linguistically. Hermeneutically, the goal of the contemporary is to peel away the layers of interpretive enculturation to retrieve and reappropriate the original experience.

Despite its pervasive influence, I find the experientialist model unhelpful because it provides a misleading and inaccurate account of the relationship between theology and spirituality; it is inconsistent with the self-understanding and actual practices of what most Christians historically have thought they were doing when they were praying and worshiping; it imposes a paradigm on Christian spirituality that does not fit well with the actual historical texts and studies of Christian spiritual writers.

In place of the “experientialist” paradigm, I find a “culturally-linguistic” (Lindbeck) or “religious contextual” (McGinn)<sup>(2)</sup> approach to spirituality to be more faithful to the actual relationship between theology, religious beliefs, and practices, and “spirituality” (which term I prefer to the expression, “religious experience”). Rather than religious

practices and beliefs being the expressions of prior unthematic religious experiences, the opposite is the case. There simply are no experiences that are not made possible by languages, narratives and tradition. All experiences (not just religious experience) are epistemologically mediated in complex ways. Particular religious traditions with their accompanying narratives, rituals, and practices, form religious experience and make it possible; Religious experiences are (accordingly) specific to particular cultural contexts. Buddhists have Buddhist religious experiences; Jews have Jewish religious experiences; Christians have Christian religious experiences.

I think the spirituality of George Herbert to be better understood in light of such a contextualist paradigm. Herbert does indeed have much to teach us about a thoughtful and self-critical spirituality that does (after all) value creation, incarnation, sacraments, liturgy, and the Catholic and Evangelical tradition of the Church, but at the same time, Herbert's spirituality provides a corrective to the dominant paradigm of contemporary spirituality.

In this discussion, I would like to examine George Herbert's approach to God as he expressed it in his short work *The Country Parson* and his collection of religious poetry, *The Temple*.<sup>(3)</sup> In what follows, I hope to trace the relationship between Herbert's religious practices, his theology, and his spirituality as that is found both in his prose work and his poetry, leaving the criticism of his poetry—as poetry—to others.

## **Practices: 1. The Virtues**



George Herbert's life as a "country parson" for the less than three years (April 26, 1630-March 1, 1633) he lived at Bemerton, a village near Salisbury, has caused him to be considered the "exemplar" of the Anglican pastor. As a priest, Herbert seems to have transferred his disillusioned idealistic hopes of reforming England through political service to reforming it through the Body of Christ, the Church. (Herbert spent a period serving in Parliament and for several years sought unsuccessfully to serve with the crown. His brief service as a parish priest was cut short by his death of tuberculosis.)

The themes of Herbert's small treatise, *The Country Parson*, and his collection of poems, *The Temple*, seem to reflect the experiences of a rural priest in the Church of England; nonetheless it has been speculated that he had mostly written them before his ordination, and, at most, edited, and added some poems, afterwards. Herbert's method in both of these works is catechetical and didactic.

The purpose of *The Country Parson* is to instruct the pastor in his example and duties toward his congregation. According to Herbert, "A Pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God." (*Country Parson*, 1). The pastor is to be "holy, just, prudent, temperate, bold, grave, in all his ways." (*Country Parson*, 3). In this way, he avoids scandals and can encourage his parishioners to emulate his practice. Herbert instructs the pastor in preaching, administering the sacraments, visiting the homes of his parishioners, even in the use of medicine and the resolving of

legal disputes. The pastor's life is to touch that of the people of his church in every area. (*Country Parson*, 7).

Herbert's poem, "The Church Porch," which is the introduction to *The Temple*, is an admonishment to virtue. It begins,

*Harken unto a Verser, who may chance  
Rhyme thee to good, and make a bait of pleasure.  
A verse may find him, who a sermon flies  
And turn delight into a sacrifice. ("The Church Porch")*

The poem is not merely the first poem in *The Temple*, but also provides an entryway to the collection itself. Its subtitle "Perrihanterium" refers to an aspergil, an instrument for sprinkling with holy water. The following poem, "Superliminare," begins:

*Thou, whom the former precepts have  
Sprinkled and taught, how to behave  
Thyself in church; approach, and taste  
The church's mystical repast. ("Superliminare")*

The "Superliminare" is the lintel over the church threshold. Followed by a poem entitled "The Altar," all three poems illustrate Herbert's use of metaphorical allegories to pursue didactic ends. Herbert's poetry is full of such double meanings that point beyond themselves to encourage moral effort or illustrate spiritual or theological themes. The very structure of the arrangement of the poems in *The Temple* is didactic: beginning with the virtues, it draws us in to participate in the life of the Church, encourages us to view ourselves as ongoing players in the biblical drama, provides models for prayer and devotion, and ends with eschatology. As the collection begins with "The Church Porch" and "The Superliminare," it is followed by a final poem, "The Church Militant," a narrative recounting of the progress and relapses of the Church in history.

"The Church Porch" is a series of moral exhortations, promoting various virtues and warning against corresponding vices. (Herbert's enthusiasm for this genre is evident also in a collection of "Outlandish Proverbs.") Herbert warns against lust, drunkenness, lying, idleness, swearing, ostentation, and encourages the corresponding virtues: fidelity, sobriety, truthfulness, diligence, plain speaking, etc. Herbert's exhortations and didacticism are not mere moralism, however, but are rooted in theological verities. Lust "doth pollute and foul/Whom God in Baptism washt with his own blood." "Lie not; but let thy heart be true to God,/Thy mouth to it, thy actions to them both." ("The Church Porch"). The point of this focus on virtue is to lead us to the Source of true virtue. In a poem entitled "Love II," Herbert reminds his reader (by encouraging the reader to enter into the author's prayer) that the problem of sin as well as its cure lies in the wrong and right ordering of desires: "Immortal Heat, O let thy greater flame/Attract the lesser to it . . . . And kindle in our hearts such true desires/As may consume our lusts, and make thee way [i.e., make way for God]." ("Love II")

If Herbert's discussion of the virtues hearkens back to Medieval precedents—one suspects that the standard Lutheran critique of his views would be that he confused law and gospel—his account of Christian practices echoes Reformation themes. Although he emphasizes the importance of study and prayer for a Christian pastor (and his own poetry is nothing if not a series of meditative prayers), there is no hint anywhere in Herbert's writings that he thought the contemplative to be superior to the active life. Rather, Herbert's ideal for Christian living corresponds to what the Medievals would have called the active life—or at least a "mixed" life, combining action and contemplation. He echoes Lutheran notions that all Christians have religious vocations, not only the ordained: ("All are either to have a calling, or prepare for it . . . .") One of the parson's duties is to encourage and help his parishioners find suitable employment.

(*Country Parson*, 32). Another area where Herbert echoes Reformation concerns is his understanding of the role the clergy play in "charity," i.e., alms-giving. According to Herbert, riches are God's blessing and a great instrument to do good. This does not conflict with the Saviour's command to sell all that we have because when we have sold it and given it to the poor, we should labor to earn more, and give away more. (*Country Parson*, 12). Herbert's ideal practitioner of the "religious" life is one who gives charity, not one who receives it. (Contrast this with Medieval treatises that argued the virtues of mendicancy.).

Another echo of Reformation change is found in Herbert's embrace of domesticity. Although Herbert suggests that, ideally, the pastor should be unmarried, his entire discussion in *The Country Parson* presumes that the pastor will be married. The parson's home and domestic life become a small school of virtue. The pastor instructs and encourages his wife, children, and servants(!) in religious practices, expecting the entire family to join in common prayer as well as having their own private prayers. He wears simple clothes and has simple furniture. He grows his own food, and eats simple fare. If he entertains, it is under his own roof, with vegetables grown in his garden, and meat from pigs and cattle that he has himself raised. (*Country Parson*, 10). The pastor's active duties to his parish extend beyond those of preaching, celebrating the sacraments, and catechizing, to include amateur medicine and the settling of law suits. (*Country Parson*, 23). One of his central duties is to visit each person in his parish during weekdays, finding his parishioners about their normal business, and using the opportunity for counseling, encouragement, and exhortation to virtue. The pastor modifies his methods depending on the condition of his parishioners. Some are sensitive, and need gentle encouragement. Some are obtuse, and need straightforward correction. Some enjoy good fortune, and need to be warned against presumption. Some lie close to despair and need

encouragement. (*Country Parson*, 14).

Further echoes of Reformation influence occur in Herbert's discussion of fasting and Christian liberty. Herbert thinks the pastor should follow the Medieval practice of fasting on Friday, not only in diet, but also from "company," "recreation," and "outward contentments." Nonetheless, the virtue of fasting does not lie in what we give up: "If a piece of dry flesh at my table is more unpleasant to me than some fish there, certainly to eat the flesh, and not the fish, is to keep the fasting day naturally." (*The Country Parson*, 10). Against overly-scrupulous interpretations of religious rule-keeping, Herbert insists that the Country Parson stands fast in Christ's liberty. For example, Herbert's advice to those who occasionally slip from a strict rule of prayer is that God is a "gracious Father who more accepts a common course of devotion than dislikes an occasional interruption." (*Country Parson*, 31.) Far from rejecting any notion of rule, however, Herbert's exemptions presume that some Rule of Life will be followed:

*Slight those who say amidst their sickly health  
Thou liv'st by rule. What doth not so, but man?  
Houses are built by rule, and common-wealth.  
Entice the trusty sun, if that thou can,  
From his Ecliptic line: beckon the sky.  
Who lives by rule then, keeps good company. ("The Church  
Porch")*

## 2. Worship

For Herbert, the chief means of moving people toward obeying the divine will is the corporate worship of the Church itself. The very structure of *The Temple* indicates this. As mentioned already, *The Temple* consists of three major sections: "The Church Porch," a didactic prolegomena; "The Church," the main collection of poems; and "The Church Militant," an account of



the history of salvation. The Church's liturgical year runs throughout the structure of "The Church" (poems such as "Good Friday," "Easter" I & II, "Whitsunday," "Trinity Sunday," "Christmas," etc.), as do the sacraments ("Holy Baptism," "Holy Communion"), and even the architecture of the Church building ("The Altar," "Church Lock and Key," "The Church Floor," "The Windows").

Although private devotion has its value, according to Herbert it is the corporate worship of the Church that must be at the center of one's relationship with God.

*Though private prayer be a brave design,  
Yet public hath more promises, more love: ("The Church  
Porch")*

Herbert was remarkably successful in developing a corporate spirituality at Bemerton that was grounded in the Daily Office found in *The Book of Common Prayer*. According to Isaac Walton, Herbert daily read the offices of Morning and Evening Prayer "at the canonical hours of ten and four" with his wife and three nieces. Herbert's practice "brought most of his parishioners, and many gentlemen in the neighborhood, constantly to make a part of his congregation twice a day." Even some who worked in the fields "would let their plough rest when Mr. Herbert's saints' bell rung to prayers, that they might also offer their devotions to God with him, and would then return back to their plough."<sup>(4)</sup>

Herbert's views on daily prayer (by which he almost certainly means the Office) can be found in *The Country Parson*. He says, "It is necessary that all Christians should pray twice a day every day of the week, and four times on Sunday if they be well." (*Country Parson*, 31). In "The Church Porch," Herbert says, "Twice on the day his due is understood, . . ." Herbert meets God in the morning:

*I cannot open mine eyes  
But thou art ready there to catch  
My morning-soul and sacrifice: ("Mattins")*

and in the evening:

*Blest be the God of love  
Who gave me eyes, and light, and power this day,  
Both to be busy, and to play. ("Even-song,")*

In this continual rhythm of daily and weekly prayer the poet comes to know the love of God.

*My God, though art all love,  
Not one poor minute scapes thy breast,  
But brings a favor from above;  
And in this love, more than in bed, I rest. ("Even-song")*

The Daily Office supplies the sustenance of a Christian life; Sundays, however, are the pillars "On which heav'n's palace arched lies;" ("Sunday"). On Sunday, the pastor "falls to work" and is like a shopkeeper on market day. ("Country Parson," 8).

*The Sundays of man's life,  
Threaded together on time's string  
Make bracelets to adorn the wife  
Of the eternal glorious king. ("Sunday")*

"The week were dark," says Herbert, "but for thy light," that is, the light of Sunday worship ("Sunday").

Of course, the above should not imply that Herbert had no use for "private" or spontaneous prayer. After all, the *Temple* itself is just such a collection of prayers. Herbert notes, for example, that the parson requires everyone in his family to pray by themselves before they sleep at night, and when

they wake up in the morning, and that they should carry these prayers with them throughout the day (*Country Parson*, 10). He also suggests that the preacher should season his remarks with spontaneous “apostrophes” during his sermons: “Oh Lord, bless my people and teach them this point.” (*Country Parson*, 7) As a form of greeting, parsons should make a regular point of blessing those they meet as an alternative to more “worldly” salutations (*Country Parson*, 36). Prayer is the meeting place between heaven and earth: “Prayer the Church’s banquet . . . Heaven in ordinary, man well drest.” (“Prayer I”). It is worth noting, however, that when Herbert talks about prayer, he is talking about ordinary verbal prayer, whether the written prayers of the Daily Office, or one’s private prayers in one’s home, or during one’s day. There is no evidence whatsoever that Herbert was a “mystic,” nor are there any references in his writings to contemplative or non-verbal prayer.

### 3. The Word

Herbert maintained an Evangelical and Catholic emphasis on *both* Word and Sacrament in worship. For Herbert (as for most Anglicans), the Word meant primarily the Word of Scripture, and, secondarily, the preached Word. Herbert says that the chief source of the pastor’s knowledge is the “book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort, the Holy Scriptures. There he sucks and lives.” (*The Country Parson*, 4). The lights of Scripture shine not only individually, but form constellations of the one Christian story:

*Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,  
And the configurations of their glory!  
Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,  
But all their constellations of the story.*

Each passage of Scripture illuminates some other.

*This verse marks that, and both do make a motion*

*Unto a third, that ten leaves off doth life: ("The Holy Scriptures II")*

Herbert's prayers are modeled on the Psalter and his poetry is steeped in biblical imagery. In the typological imagery of "The Bunch of Grapes," for example, the poet utilizes the imagery of Canaan, the Red Sea, and Noah's Vine to cast light on his own situation.

*Blessed be God, who prosper'd Noah's vine,  
And made it bring forth grapes' good store.*

*But much more him I must adore,  
Who of the law's sour juice sweet wine did make,  
Ev'n God himself being pressed for my sake. ("The Bunch of Grapes")*

If there is an area where Herbert's affinity with the Reformation stands out most clearly, it is here, in his respect for, and insistence on the sufficiency and primacy of the Scriptures. Herbert's respect for the Scripture lies in its proven experience to change lives. So, in a series of comments about the writings of the Spanish Catholic spiritual writer and Reformer Juan Valdes, he complains to his friend Nicholas Ferrar: "[I]t slights the Scripture too much. Holy Scriptures have not only an elementary use, but a use of perfection and are able to make the man of God perfect."<sup>(5)</sup> Herbert's poetry is saturated with the language of and echoes of imagery from Scripture. Slater, his most recent editor, notes that the sources of his imagery are almost all scriptural. Unlike his Renaissance predecessors, it is impossible to find a single reference to pagan myth or divinity in his works.<sup>(6)</sup> (Herbert's work is so permeated with biblical imagery that his editor simply cites each biblical passage at length in the notes to the volume, assuming that modern readers will not know their Bibles as well as Herbert

did.) John Wall, Herbert's other recent editor, points out that Herbert's suffusion of his poetry with biblical imagery reflects Herbert's belief "that the Bible is not a closed narrative, but an account of a story that is still going on."<sup>(7)</sup> The Bible becomes the source of a living language through which the contemporary reader is able to encounter God; its language describes not only experiences in the past, but also experiences in the reader's own life. The Bible provides a story into which the reader is invited to participate, and models behavior that the reader should emulate. Herbert's poetry, with its use of metaphorical and allegorical imagery, drawn from Scripture, is intended to draw the reader into that biblical world, to help her to see herself in the language of the biblical narrative, and thus to be transformed: "Ladies, look here; this is the thankfull glass,/That mends the looker's eye: this is the well/That washes what it shows." ("The H. Scriptures I"). If a contemporary Episcopal bishop has stated: "The Church wrote the Bible, and the Church can re-write it," Herbert's own view would be (to the contrary) that "The Bible wrote the Church, and the Bible can re-write it."

Yet Herbert also thought that preaching was important. He says that "The Country Parson preacheth constantly: the pulpit is his joy and his throne." Sermons, says Herbert, are dangerous things. None goes out of the Church as he came in. Herbert says that the character of the sermon is that of holiness. The preacher should not be witty, or learned, or eloquent, but holy. In his preaching, the pastor should tell his people "stories and sayings of others," because these are heeded and remembered better than exhortations. The parson never exceeds an hour in preaching. Whoever cannot profit in that amount of time will profit less if the sermon is longer. (*Country Parson*, 4, 7) (So much for today's ten-minute homilies.) In "The Church-Porch," Herbert extols the virtues of even bad preaching: "God calleth preaching folly. Do not grudge/ To pick out treasures from an earthen pot." At the least, bad

preaching is good for our characters: "He that gets patience, and the blessing which/ Preachers conclude with, hath not lost his pains."

## 4. Sacraments

Herbert's emphasis on Scripture is balanced by a strong emphasis on the sacraments. He says: "The Country Parson being to administer the Sacraments, is at a stand with himself, how or what behavior to assume for so holy things." Baptism is a blessing "that the world hath not the like." (*Country Parson*, 22). Herbert calls for all Christians to remember often their baptisms and their baptismal vows. In doing so, they are reminded of God's prevenient grace:

*. . . on my infancy  
Thou didst lay hold, and antedate  
My faith in Me.*

*Oh let me still  
Write thee great God, and me a child; ("Holy Baptism II")*

Herbert's understanding of the eucharist is typically Anglican in affirming the reality of the presence of the risen Christ, while avoiding speculative theories about the mode of real presence. It is especially at the celebration of Holy Communion that the parson "is in a great confusion, as being not only to receive God, but to break, and administer him." (*Country Parson*, 22). Herbert says in his poem, "The Agony":

*Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine. ("The Agony")*

At the same time, in Herbert's poem, "Holy Communion" (not in *The Temple*), he refuses to speculate as to how his gracious Lord is present in the sacrament.

*First I am sure, whether bread stay*

*Or whether Bread do fly away  
Concerneth bread, not me.  
But that both thou, and all thy train,  
Be there, to thy truth and my gain  
Concerneth me and Thee. ("The Holy Communion")*

What is important for Herbert is that, in the eucharist, the risen Christ is truly present, and accomplishes his purposes. As he says in another poem (also entitled "Holy Communion"):

*Only thy grace, which with these elements comes,  
Knoweth the ready way,  
And hath the privy key  
Op'ning the soul's most subtle rooms; ("The Holy Communion,"  
The Temple)*

The metaphysical explanation of what happens to the elements and the question of just "how" Christ becomes present is of secondary importance. What is of primary importance is that it is through daily and weekly participation in the worship of the Church that one encounters the present Christ. If you want to meet Jesus, Herbert would say, worship with the Church on Sundays, take the sacraments, pray the office, read the Scriptures. That is where Jesus is.

## **Doctrine: 1. The Mediation of Language**



Now that we have considered Herbert's practices, the path along which he approaches the knowledge of God, we shall try to discover something of the God whom Herbert approaches. What

sort of understanding of God, of the created world, of humanity, of Christology and redemption, and of grace, is held by someone whose spirituality grows out of the liturgical worship of the *Book of Common Prayer*?

First, we should note that Herbert would have been completely baffled by the “experientialist” disjunction between “experience” and “interpretation.” While he recognized that there could be an intellectual belief without lived-out implications, he would have found incomprehensible the notion that “experience” was in some way logically or conceptually prior to “doctrine” or “practices.” Rather, the crucial assumption of his poetry and his prose is that doctrine and practices combine together inextricably to change lives. “Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one/When they combine and mingle, bring/A strong regard and awe . . .” (“The Windows”). The words by which we approach God in Scripture, the liturgy, prayer, and preaching, point beyond themselves to allow us to participate in the drama of salvation. The words themselves are not the reality, but we have no access to the reality apart from the words. So Herbert compares the inadequate words of the preacher to stained-glass windows.

*Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?  
He is a brittle crazy glass  
Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place  
To be a window, through thy grace. (“The Windows”)*

Words have a sacramental quality for Herbert. They cannot capture the reality to which they point, yet they are channels through which God communicates to us his grace. With this in mind, let us see how Herbert’s spirituality is formed by his theology.



## 2. Creation

Herbert is consistent with Anglican tradition in placing a high value on creation. His view has Medieval antecedents. According to Herbert, all reality participates in the “great chain of being” that leads from inanimate matter, through plants, animals, human beings and angels, and finally culminates in the God on whom all creatures depend for their existence and preservation.

*Each creature hath a wisdom for his good.  
The pigeons feed their tender off-spring, . . .*

*Bees work for man; and yet they never bruise  
Their master's flower, . . .*

*Sheep eat the grass, and dung the ground for more:  
Trees after bearing drop their leaves for soil:  
Springs vent their streams, and by expense get store:  
Clouds cool by heat, and baths by cooling boil.  
("Providence")*

And God exercises providence over all. The parson has to keep in mind the tendency of country people to forget providence and to think that all things have a merely natural course. Country people simply assume that if they properly work their land that they will have crops. The pastor “labours to reduce them to see God’s hand in all things, and to believe, that things are not set in such an inevitable order, but that God often changeth it according as he sees fit, either for reward or punishment.” It is easy to take the natural order of the world for granted, to become complacent, and to forget that creation depends on its maker for sustenance. “Man would sit down at this world. God bids him sell it, and purchase a better.” (*Country Parson*, 30).

At the same time, Herbert’s understanding of creation is ambivalent. On the one hand, creation points to God as its

Creator. On the other, the creation is not God. Humanity is part of creation, yet the human being is different from the rest of creation, in that human beings are able to make a choice as to whether or not they will fulfill their created role. As Herbert sees it, beasts and plants fulfill God's purpose simply by existing, but human beings are different. They have a special relationship to their Creator. Only human beings can consciously acknowledge their Creator.

*Of all the creatures both in sea and land  
Only to Man thou hast made known thy ways,  
And put the pen alone into his hand,  
And made him Secretary of thy praise. ("Providence")*

In some manner, the human being stands as the mediator before God for the rest of creation.

*Man is the world's high Priest; he doth present  
The sacrifice for all; while they below  
Unto the service mutter an assent,  
such as springs use that fall, and winds that blow.  
("Providence")*

Indeed, humanity's unique place in the chain of being can lead to our grief. Herbert sometimes regrets that it is not as easy for a human being to fulfill the divine will as it is for an irrational animal to do so.

*All things are busy; only I  
Neither bring honey with the bees,  
Nor flowers to make that, not the husbandry  
To water these.*

*I am no link of thy great chain,  
But all my company is a weed. ("Employment I")*

### 3. God

The poems comprising *The Temple* are somewhat unusual in that most of them are prayers addressed to God. (One thinks of Augustine's *Confessions* or Anselm's *Proslogion*.) The God addressed by Herbert is the personal God of Love with whom Herbert converses in an intimacy that parallels that of the psalmists. Love is the characteristic name used for God throughout *The Temple*. God is "Immortal Love" ("Love I"), "the God of Love" ("Evensong"), the "God of love and light" ("Whitsunday"). The poem probably most familiar to readers of Herbert begins, "Love bade me welcome" ("Love III"). Herbert notes that if the pastor sees a church-goer who seems to be nearing despair, he gently brings him back to hope and faith by the display of God's love: "[The parson] dives unto the boundless ocean of God's love, and the unspeakable riches of his loving kindness." If God hates his creatures, says Herbert, it must be either as they are creatures or as they are sinners. The first would be impossible, for no artist has ever hated his own work. However, as we are sinners, God loves us even more, for although God hates sin, "his love overcame that hate; and with an exceeding great victory . . . gave them love for love, even the son of his love out of the bosom of his love." All then may conclude that God loves them up to the point at which they either despise his love or despair of his mercy: "[B]ut the despising of Love must needs be without it. The thrusting away of his arm makes us only not embraced." (*Country Parson*, 34).

### 4. Sin

Sin is a major theme in Herbert's work, but given his emphasis on the love of God and the goodness of creation, he seems more perplexed and grieved by sin, rather than outraged by the pervasiveness of evil. Herbert is struck by the utter incongruity of sin. He considers all the devices that should keep people from sin: the instruction of parents and of

teachers, Sunday services and sermons, the unpleasant consequences following sin, the unexpected surprises of grace—Bibles left lying open, promises of blessings and glory.

*Yet all these fences and the whole array  
One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away. ("Sin I")*

Herbert believes, along with St. Augustine and the Medieval tradition, that evil has no positive substance, that it is a privation—a corruption of good.

*Oh that I could a sin once see!  
We paint the devil foul, yet he  
Hath some good in him, all agree.  
Sin is flat opposite to th' Almighty, seeing  
It wants the good of virtue, and of being. ("Sin II")*

In addition, Herbert is conscious that the essence of sin and evil is ultimately interior to humanity, that evil actions have their final source in corrupt hearts and minds; the poet is most aware of his own shortcomings.

*The spirit and good extract of my heart  
Comes to about the many hundredth part.  
Yet Lord restore thine image, hear my call:  
And though my hard heart scarce to thee can groan,  
Remember that thou once didst write in stone. ("The Sinner")*

A central theme of Herbert's poetry is his awareness of his own sinfulness, and of the recurring cycle in which sin places us. In "Sin's round," Herbert begins and ends the poem with a repetitive rhyme scheme that emphasizes the human plight. At the beginning, he pleads his regret:

*Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am  
That my offences course it in a ring.*

Yet at the ending finds himself back where he began:

*Yet ill deeds loiter not: for they supply  
New thoughts of sinning; wherefore, to my shame,  
Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am.*

Yet despite Herbert's awareness of his own sinfulness, his confidence in God's goodness overrides any temptation to self-condemnation. At the heart of his theology is a God who redeems and forgives.

## 5. Christ

Herbert's theology brings together creation and redemption by centering in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He asserts that the two great mysteries of the Christian faith are the Trinity and the Incarnation.

*Thou hast but two rare cabinets full of treasure,  
The Trinity, and Incarnation: ("Ungratefulness")*

The statelier of these two cabinets is the Trinity itself, but its sparkling light is too bright to be seen by us. It is in the incarnation that God communicates himself concretely; The incarnation has the advantage that, in becoming human in Jesus Christ, God has appeared as a human being like ourselves.

*But all thy sweets are packt up in the other;  
Thy mercies thither flock and flow:  
That as the first affrights,  
This may allure us with delights;  
Because this box we know;  
For we have all of us just such another. ("Ungratefulness")*

Herbert takes the incarnation with absolute literalness, often simply identifying the incarnate Christ with God. The incarnation is crucial for Herbert, but not as an illustration

of a general “incarnational” principle. Rather, for Herbert, the incarnation is central because it is the heart of the biblical drama where God encounters human sinfulness by fully taking it upon himself. Herbert is particularly fascinated with Christ’s passion, for it is here that the redemptive love of God encounters the great mystery of sin and evil. “The Sacrifice” is a passion narrative that compares and contrasts the irony of sinners, who have unknowingly killed the God of love, with the crucified one’s own gift of life and existence to those who have killed him, without which life, the incarnate God’s murderers could not take the life of their life-giver. The speaker is Jesus, and the poem is strikingly effective because Herbert repeatedly emphasizes the contrast between the deity of Christ and his apparent weakness.

*Hark how they cry aloud still, Crucify:  
It is not fit he live a day, they cry,  
Who cannot live less than eternally:  
Was ever grief like mine?*

*In healing not myself, there doth consist  
All that salvation, which ye now resist;  
Your safety in my sickness doth subsist.  
Was ever grief like mine? (“The Sacrifice”)*

There is every reason to believe that Herbert’s abandoning of a university and political career grew out of disillusionment with the “politics,” pettiness, and ineffectiveness of political life as a means to change humanity for the better. Yet we would look in vain in Herbert’s writings for the cynicism or disillusionment with humanity, or the recounting of perceived wrongs that we might expect to result from such a disappointment. Herbert’s views on sin find their focus at the heart of the biblical drama. The depths of sin and evil as well as the heights of the love of God can both be seen only in the agony of the crucifixion at Golgotha. It is because human sinfulness is offset by divine love that Herbert can

recognize the full extent of human depravity without giving up on humanity.

*Who would know Sin, let him repair  
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see  
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,  
His skin, his garments bloody be.  
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain  
To hunt his cruel food through ev'ry vein.*

*Who knows not Love, let him assay  
And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike  
Did set again abroach; then let him say  
If ever he did taste the like.  
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine. ("The Agony")*

Herbert strikes precisely the right note here in addressing a question that has become somewhat vogueish in contemporary theology, whether God suffers. God does indeed suffer, but God suffers in the incarnate humanity of Christ. The point has to do with the tragic consequences of sin, and with Christ's having taken on and overcome the full consequences of sin on the cross.

The tale does not end there, of course. Jesus has risen from the dead and we have risen with him. If the Deity of Christ is central to Herbert's understanding of the incarnation, the Catholicity of Herbert's theology is shown further in that Christ's crucified and risen humanity is just as central to Herbert's understanding of the atonement. Herbert understands salvation to be a participation of our fallen humanity in Christ's crucified and risen humanity. (We have seen this expressed earlier in his realist doctrine of the eucharist.) In his poem (almost a hymn) "Easter," Herbert proclaims that we are risen with Christ.

*Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise*

*Without delays,  
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise  
With him mayest rise: ("Easter I")*

In Christ's resurrection, Herbert says, God has given us the means to cure sorrow.

*Arise sad heart; if thou dost not withstand,  
Christ's resurrection thine may be;  
Do not by hanging down break from the hand,  
Which as it riseth, raiseth thee:*

*Arise, arise;  
And with his burial linen dry thine eyes:  
Christ left his graveclothes, that we might, when grief  
Draws tears, or blood, not want an handkerchief. ("The Dawning")*

But Herbert's theology is also able to embrace forensic language to describe the atonement. In a poem entitled, "The Redemption," Herbert tells the story of a tenant who is dissatisfied with his lease, and seeks out his landlord to get new terms. The landlord is identified as divine ("In heaven at his manor I him sought"), but he is missing, having gone to earth to take possession of some land. The tenant follows, seeking the landlord in cities, theaters, gardens, and courts, only to find him amidst a group of thieves and murderers. "At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth/Of thieves and murderers: there I him espied who/Who straight, *Your suit is granted*, said, and died." In using the images of metaphor, Herbert enables the forensic language to strike the imagination in ways that earnest imputation theories cannot.

## **6. Grace**

The benefits of Christ's passion and resurrection are appropriated through grace, *sola gratia*, and Herbert is most



evangelical in his discussion of grace. Not only do we find that we must trust in God alone to be our light, but we come to realize that even our trusting him is also his gift. We cannot even confess that we have nothing to confess concerning ourselves.

*But to have nought is ours, not to confess  
That we have nought. I stood amaz'd at this,  
Much troubled, till I heard a friend express,  
That all things were more ours by being his.  
What Adam had, and forfeited for all,  
Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall. ("The Holdfast"  
)*

Herbert makes a similar point in a poem entitled, "Clasping of Hands." Human freedom is not in antithesis to divine grace. Rather, the more that we depend on grace, the more freedom we have.

*Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine.  
If mine I am, and thine much more.  
Than I or ought, or can be mine  
Yet to be thine, doth me restore. ("Clasping of Hands")*

## **7. Affliction**

Herbert's confidence and trust in the God of grace and love led him to share in the same sort of intimacy that was characteristic of the relationship between Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah or psalmists like David and their God. Or perhaps it would be better to say that Herbert had entered into the sort of dependence on God that is based on, and is only possible through sharing in the filial relation between Jesus and his own Father, an intimacy that allows the Christian also to call upon God as "Father."

It is impossible, however, to explore the nature of divine and

human intimacy in Herbert's spirituality without coming up against the problem of "Affliction," the *leitmotif* of the entire collection (according to Slater, 455). There are moments of ecstasy and joy in Herbert's poetry, but Herbert also remonstrates, pleads, and complains to God. He struggles with God, much as the patriarch Jacob wrestled with the angel. Herbert is sometimes put out with his God, and he lets God know it. In one of a series of poems entitled "Affliction," Herbert remembers an earlier experience with his Lord:

*When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,  
I thought the service brave.*

As time has passed, however, the poet has come to know the inexplicable harshness that God sometimes seems to show toward his most faithful saints.

*But with my years sorrow did twist and grow,  
And made a party unawares for woe.*

There is finally even a Job-like tirade of almost sarcastic and bitter reproach.

*Yet lest perchance I should too happy be  
In my unhappiness,  
Turning my purge to food, thou throwest me  
Into more sicknesses. ("Affliction I")*

Herbert's complaints can reach to the utmost depths of desolation. After all, if God is against us, who can be for us? God can be more cruel than any human being.

*No screw, no piercer can  
Into a piece of timber work and wind,  
As God's afflictions into man,  
When he a torture hath design'd. ("Confession")*

For some, Herbert's remonstrations might seem irreverent, yet they are rooted in the paradox of the relation between our beliefs in God, and the doctrine of grace. As Luther realized, the problem of grace is that of how I can find a God who is gracious to me. Yet there is that within God's very nature that causes us to fear whether he is truly gracious—God's omnipotence. What happens when God's omnipotent freedom becomes a thing in itself, cut loose from the restraints of the history of redemption? In the late Medieval period, voluntarist theologians (such as William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel) made a kind of radical distinction between God's absolute freedom and his covenant relations. They began to speculate about the possibilities of a God who could command acts of murder or adultery. Luther realized that such a God could not be preached, yet he also wanted to maintain the omnipotence and absolute freedom of God. His solution was to forbid us to speculate about God's omnipotence, and to trust instead to the God revealed in Christ.<sup>(8)</sup> Yet such a solution is a halfway measure, for unless we believe that the God revealed in Christ is gracious in himself, in his very omnipotence, we can never be certain that there might not be after all a dark side to God's omnipotence, in which, after all, God is not gracious. And such a dark side appeared in the double predestination that dominated Reformed theology, and was prevalent among the Puritans who were opposed to the compromises of the Elizabethan settlement. William Perkins, a Puritan theologian and near contemporary of Herbert's, stated that God created evil as well as good, that from all eternity God had hated the reprobate, as from all eternity he had loved the elect, and that God had created the reprobate in order to damn them, as the elect in order to save them.<sup>(9)</sup>

Luther was correct that we have to trust to God's covenant promises, but in order to do so, we must be assured that God is gracious in himself, even in his absolute power. While we need to distinguish between God's freedom and God's covenant

relations, it is a mistake from the beginning to place them in opposition. Thomas Aquinas saw the right solution when he stated that God's omnipotence is demonstrated not in the possibility of creating numerous possible worlds, but in showing grace and forgiveness.<sup>(10)</sup> We can trust in God's covenant relations only if we believe that God's almighty power is always a gracious power.

It is clear that, for Herbert, there is no theological dichotomy between God's omnipotence and his graciousness, yet there is often a psychological or experiential dichotomy. Unlike Luther, Herbert does not seem to have experienced God's threatening omnipotence as a result of guilt. Although conscious of his own sinfulness, Herbert does not seem guilt-obsessed. Yet for Herbert, affliction appears in God's perceived absence. The God whom one has come to know in an intimate friendship inexplicably withdraws himself, and refuses to show his favor. And so Herbert also struggles with the need for assurance that God's omnipotence is a gracious omnipotence. We need to be able to find a God who is omnipotent "for us": "Be not Almighty, let me say,/Against, but for me." ("The Search.").

What role does "Affliction," the suffering constrained by God's palpable absence, play in Herbert's poetry? Affliction seems to play three roles in divine providence. First, Affliction sometimes seems to be a direct consequence of our own sinfulness. We cannot hear God's voice if we are so angry or self-absorbed that we refuse to listen.

*Poor heart, lament  
For since thy God refuseth still,  
There is some rub, some discontent  
Which cools his will.*

*And should God's ear,  
Which needs not man, be ti'd to those  
Who hear not him, but quickly hear*

*His utter foes? ("The Method")*

Second, Affliction is a way of making us realize our dependence on God. In Herbert's poem, "The Pulley," Herbert tells a parable of how when God created man, he poured out on him the blessings of beauty, wisdom, honor, pleasure, but withheld only one blessing—rest. For if we had this blessing, we would adore the gifts instead of the Giver, and "rest in Nature, not the God of Nature." So then, the human being is rich with God's blessings, but weary, so that, at least, "If goodness lead him not, yet weariness/May toss him to my breast." ("The Pulley"). (Note that "rest" is hidden in God's "breast.")

Third, Affliction leads to transformation of character—but in Herbert, this is not a once for all thing, not a momentary "conversion," but an ongoing struggle. As we struggle with God's absence, we are forced to recognize more and more our own insufficiency. Presence alternates with absence, then absence with presence.

*These are thy wonders, Lord of power,  
Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell  
And up to heaven in an hour;*

*These are thy wonders, Lord of love,  
To make us see we are but flowers that glide;  
Which when we once can find and prove  
Thou has a garden for us, where to bide. ("The Flower")*

Herbert postulates two "solutions" to the problem of Affliction. First, he realizes that emotions are ephemeral things. We cannot expect either happiness or sadness to be permanent. So, in *The Country Parson*, Herbert notes that repentance is an act of the mind. The chief thing God requires of us is a heart and spirit to worship him in truth and spirit. "Wherefore, in case a Christian endeavor to weep, and

cannot, since we are not masters of our bodies, this sufficeth." (*Country Parson*, 33). The same principle holds true for other kinds of emotions. Herbert realizes that there is a "narrative" quality to religious experience. In "The Glance," he thinks back on the joy of his youth when he first felt the presence of God's "sweet and gracious eye," and "felt a sugred strange delight." Since that time he has experienced many a storm, but also occasional returns of past joy. Herbert sees these momentary glimpses as promises of an eternal and unimaginable joy to come: "What wonders shall we feel, when we shall see/Thy full-ey'd love!" ("The Glance").

Second, as does Luther, Herbert looks to the God of the covenant. He realizes that the solution to feelings of dejection is to look not toward our own fleeting emotions, but toward the stability of the God who has shown his graciousness to us in his acts. During periods of dejection, Herbert looks beyond his own misery to the objectivity of the events of the biblical story.

*Lord Jesu, thou didst bow  
Thy dying head upon the tree  
O be not now  
More dead to me!*

*Lord, didst thou leave thy throne,  
Not to relieve? how can it be,  
That thou art grown  
Thus hard to me? ("Longing")*

In "The Bag," Herbert chides his own feelings of discouragement: "Away despair, my gracious Lord doth hear. . . . Well may he close his eyes, but not his heart." Herbert appeals to the imagery of the divine kenosis. The God who has emptied himself in Christ will not hold himself aloof from our prayers: "Hast thou not heard, that my Lord Jesus di'd? . . . The God of power, as he did ride/In his majestic robes of

glory . . . He did descend." The risen Christ who died for us will not refuse to hear our prayers. "If ye have any thing to send or write . . . /Unto my father's hands and sight/. . . it shall safely come . . ./. . . Sighs will convey/Any thing to me. Hark despair, away." (The Bag") So, far from doctrine being an articulated expression of a prior religious experience, doctrine becomes the corrective of a religious experience gone awry.

Yet it would be mistaken to conclude that Affliction in Herbert's poetry always leads to resolution. Sometimes God's presence simply seems inexplicable. At these times, we can no more than struggle with God, and yet refuse to let go.

*Ah my dear angry Lord  
Since thou dost love, yet strike;  
Cast down, yet help afford;  
Sure I will do the like.  
I will complain, yet praise;  
I will bewail, approve:  
And all my sour-sweet day  
I will lament, and love. ("Bitter-sweet")*

Nevertheless, although Herbert becomes desolate, he never despairs. Perhaps this is because he does believe so much in divine providence, and God's redemption in Christ, and he refuses to believe that God is capricious. At bottom, Herbert throws himself on God's graciousness, confident in the end that God is Love. As did Simon Peter, when all others desert, Herbert asks, "To whom shall we go?"

*Will thou meet arms with man, that thou dost stretch  
A crumb of dust from heav'n to hell?  
  
Yet take thy way: for sure thy way is best:  
Stretch or contract me thy poor debtor:  
To make the music better.*

*Whether I fly with angels, fall with dust,  
Thy hands made both, and I am there:  
Thy power and love, my love and trust  
Make one place ev'ry where. ("The Temper")*

It is possible that doubt may set in. Thoughts arise that torture the mind and cause it to vacillate in its faith.

*Thou said'st but even now,  
That all was not so fair, as I conceiv'd,  
Betwixt my God and me; . . . ("Assurance")*

But finally, Herbert believes that we can rest safely in the arms of God, who cannot fail, even if we do.

*What for itself love once began  
Now love and truth will end in man. ("Assurance")*

At the last, then, God can be trusted, and the love that has been shown to us in Jesus Christ can sometimes be experienced ecstatically even now:

*Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
Such a Joy, as none can move:  
Such a Love, as none can part:  
Such a Heart, as joys in love. ("The Call")*

## Conclusion





Having traveled with George Herbert along his spiritual journey, we can look back at where he has brought us. What, in short, can we say about Herbert's approach to God?

First, Herbert's spirituality is rooted in the "practices" of virtue and religious disciplines. In some sense, he could be called an exemplar of Anglican spirituality. His approach to God grew out of the ordinary day to day life of the English church, which emphasized the Daily Office of Morning and Evening Prayer and Sunday worship as found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. In this sense, Herbert's path was not extraordinary. Though there are moments of spiritual ecstasy in Herbert's poetry, his is not the path of the neo-Platonic mystic striving to ascend with the alone into the alone, but a path that could be taken by ordinary people. Herbert's way is public rather than private, grounded in the practices of everyday devotion. It is the path of the so-called *Via Media*, Catholic in the sense that it is grounded in the traditional creeds, the Office and the sacraments, Evangelical in its emphasis on Scripture, grace, and personal faith.

Second, Herbert's spirituality grows out of his theology. Doctrine creates and transforms experience, and when experience fails, doctrine provides stability. Herbert's understanding of God, creation and redemption, also balanced Catholic and Evangelical concerns. He valued creation and believed that humankind plays a special role in it. Creation is good because God is good, and God made the world. God is love and this love finds its focus in the redemptive death and resurrection of the incarnate God-man Jesus Christ. In Christ's passion, the human being confronts the paradox of his own sinfulness and the divine forgiveness and love. The Christian is taken into the resurrection life of Christ through faith, the sacraments, and participation in the daily life of the Church. Christians live, as did and does the crucified and risen Jesus, in dependence on, and in intimate communion with, the God of love. In this communion, there is a

dialectic between God and the believer that sometimes leads to quarrels. God exercises providence over his creation, and sometimes Love will try the believer in ways that seem harsh and inexplicable. God's intention in such trials, however, is to teach the pilgrim to depend on his Father alone and, because God is Love, he can be trusted.

Herbert was a sensitive and intelligent thinker, and his struggles with discouragement indicate that he did not have a simplistic faith. He was disappointed in the first great task of his life—political service. As he undertook his final task as a country parson, he suffered from the ill health that eventually took his life. Nevertheless, he did not despair. A note of joy pervades Herbert's work. Why did he not project the evil, whose existence he acknowledged, into the created world or into the being of God itself?

In addition to his grounding in the faith of the Church—the central doctrines of the Christian faith assure us that God is good even if our experience sometimes indicates otherwise—a central difference between George Herbert's own optimism and the pessimism characteristic of so many (post-) moderns can also be found in practices—in the disciplines of Christian virtue and common and private prayer, as well as the public and corporate worship of the Church, with the corresponding Christian companionship of fellow travelers. The doctrines, disciplines, and rituals of the Church give depth and meaning to life, and are rest stops along the way—even a bit of a foretaste of the final goal. Companions on the way of the journey are necessary, if only to jolt one back to reality on occasion, and to keep up one's sense of humor. Other pilgrims can encourage us, even if they are only simple country people. George Herbert knew this.

1. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

2. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (NY: Crossroad, 1999), 322 ff.
3. Recent editions of Herbert's writings: *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, ed. and intro. Ann Pasternak Slater (New York & Toronto: Everyman's Library, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple*, ed. John N. Wall, Jr., (New York: Ramsay, Toronto: Paulist Press, The Classics of Western Spirituality 1981); *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems*, John Tobin, ed. (London & NY: Penguin Books, 1991); *George Herbert: The Temple, A Diplomatic Edition of the Bodleian Manuscript (Tanner 307)*, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (State University of New York at Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1995). Citations are from Slater.
4. Isaac Walton, *The Life of George Herbert*, (1670); Appendix 3, *Complete English Works*, 371.
5. "Brief Notes on Valdesso's Considerations," *The Complete English Works*, 318.
6. Slater, "Introduction," xxxv.
7. Wall, "Introduction," 40.
8. See Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*, trans. *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).
9. William Perkins, *A Golden Chaine concerning the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation, according to God's Word* (Cambridge, 1600).
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.25.3 ad3.