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An Apologetic of Praise



By C. Robert Wetzel

I praise you because I am fearfully
and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

—Psalm 139:14

I once heard an interview on BBC Radio with a Christian who worked with abused children. He himself had been an abused child, but having come to know God's love, he wanted to convey that love to these hapless children. At one point the interviewer asked him, "How did you come to know the love of God?" He responded, "With great difficulty. My father would tell me that he loved me, and then he would beat me and sexually abuse me. My mother would tell me that she loved me, and she would do the same. So when Christians said, 'God loves you,' I ran." The interviewer asked in amazement, "Then how did you ever come to understand the love of God?" The man responded, "Through my dog." "You will have to explain that," the surprised interviewer said. The man then told how, as a boy, he had had a little dog. He admitted that when he himself experienced abuse, he would sometimes take out his frustration on the dog. And yet the dog always came back to him, wagging his tale and showing affection. The man said, "I thought, 'Surely somewhere in this universe there must be the kind of love my little dog shows me.' And this started me on a search that led to God."

There was no indication that this man had ever read Francis Thompson's poem *The Hound of Heaven*:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind. . . .¹

This sense of being known and pursued by God can be seen in Psalm 139.

O LORD, you have searched me
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying
down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
(vv. 1–3)²

And being so thoroughly known, the psalmist asks:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
(v. 7)

The difference between Francis Thompson and the psalmist is that the psalmist is not running away from God. He is standing in amazement before God:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain. (v. 6)

And his amazement inspires praise:

I praise you because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well. (v. 14)

By the end of *The Hound of Heaven*, Thompson himself has stopped running and is standing in submission. In being found by God, he has found himself.

James Luther Mays, in his commentary on the psalms, says of these prayers:

Down through the ages many have said they found themselves and their feelings and circumstances *in* these prayers. The closer truth is that one finds oneself *through* these prayers. One comes to know liturgically and theologically who we are and what we need and one finds language to say it all to God.³

Mays' contrast between *in* and *through* is telling. The idea of finding oneself *in* the psalmist's prayer gives us the picture of a reader who, when coming across a certain passage in a psalm, says to himself, "That certainly describes the way I feel." That is to say that the reader readily *identifies* with what the psalmist is saying. But the reader is still the objective observer standing outside the psalm. At this point only insight has been gained. Neither praise nor transformation has taken place. Mays wants us to see that something more can happen. Not only can we see ourselves *in* the psalm, we can enter *into* the psalm. Or, to use a favorite expression of Lesslie Newbigin, we can come *indwell* it. The psalm becomes our voice, because we have come to know who we are and what we need in a way that leads us to submission to God. Hence we have found ourselves in God's reality through our participation in the liturgical expression of the psalm, and once there we find ourselves with a theological understanding of God and his purposes for us.

A psalm would ordinarily seem to invite two kinds of consideration. We could focus on its liturgical character as a psalm of praise. Or we could search it for its theological perspective, that is, what it is saying about the nature of God and our relationship to him. Were either of these dimensions uppermost in our consideration, we would do well not to divorce one from the other.

Considered as a piece of poetic liturgy, a psalm gets its meaning from a certain theological perspective. Seen as a piece of theology, it must be understood in the speech form of poetic liturgy.

In his book *The LORD Reigns*, James Mays recognizes several functions of psalmic praise, but he sees three of these functions as foremost: praise as doxology, praise as confession, and praise as evangel.⁴ In looking at Psalm 139, I would like to consider how it might be seen to function as an evangel. I would like to suggest that as an expression of praise, Psalm 139 might have an apologetic function for both unbeliever and believer. Apologetics, as it is commonly understood, is an attempt to give reasons for believing. First Peter 3:15 is ordinarily seen as the starting point for the task of apologetics: "Always be prepared to give an answer (*apologia*) to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." Our *apologia* is our answer, or, as the word is often translated, our "defense." The scriptures themselves give many reasons for believing the Christian message. But early on in the history of the church, apologists developed reasons for believing that went far beyond anything found in scripture. Justin Martyr justified appropriating arguments from pagan philosophers by saying, "Whatever things are rightly said among all men are the property of Christians. For next to God, we worship the Word."⁵ Consequently, the history of apologetics tends to follow whatever philosophy or worldview happens to be current. This can be seen from Greek and Roman thought through the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment. And today, we are beginning to see apologetic approaches based on postmodern epistemologies.

Those of us who are descendents of the Stone-Campbell movement will know that no one employed the tools of the Enlightenment to better apologetic advantage than did Alexander Campbell. It must be recognized that when Campbell marshaled the "evidences of Christianity" for his debate with Robert Owen, he was doing so on an epistemological ground that was quite different from that of the New Testament writers. Dean Walker once described Campbell's use of Enlightenment epistemology as being willing to play the game on the enemy's field. Whether Campbell realized that he was doing this is another question. In any event, given the extreme experientialism associated with conversion in Campbell's day, he gave us a wholesome return to

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reason. But in reaction to a notion of conversion based on feeling, our people tended toward another extreme. Conversion was seen as an intellectual choice that one made after looking at the available evidences. At least, that was the way it sounded when a doctrine of conversion was articulated. I doubt that it was so much the case in actual practice or in considered theological perspective.⁶ Evangelists readily appealed to both head and heart. And, just as we see today, the simple witness of the Christian life led many to Christ. If those people ever asked the kind of questions the apologists of the day were prepared to answer, they probably asked them later on in their Christian experience as doubts began to arise.

Today, there is a growing number of those who argue that unbelievers may be drawn to Christ through participation in a service of praise. There is considerable attention being given to books like Sally Morgenthaler's *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God*.⁷ Morgenthaler takes issue with both traditionalists and contemporaries who argue that the worship service is for the committed believer who has come to understand something of the purpose and form of worship. Whereas traditionalists might have in mind some form of catechism to bring the catechumens to this understanding, many contemporaries have introduced the so-called "seeker service." This debate has a long history. The closed communion versus open communion debate within the Stone-Campbell movement reflects our own struggle with this question, although the issues in this debate are more complicated.

Our understanding of conversion as an intellectual choice may have reinforced the notion that the gathering of believers for an act of worship was an exclusive occasion for the redeemed. But, again, I am not sure

that general practice necessarily followed doctrinal understanding. *I would like to suggest that it is not uncommon for unbelievers to find in the praise language of scripture or in the act of corporate worship something that gives meaning and focus to their innate sense of awe and wonder.*

Whether or not a person is a believer, he or she would have to be crass or disillusioned to be devoid of wonder when contemplating the creation. There are times when both outer space and inner space overwhelm us with a sense of wonder and awe. Many of the psalms are expressions of this sense of awe. Just as Psalm 8 sees the majesty of God in the creation that surrounds us, so Psalm 139 praises God as the One who knows our inmost being because he has created us. The psalm of praise gives us both a language and a theology to express the awe and wonder we experience when contemplating the elegant complexity of creation.

Earlier this year the violinist Yehudi Menuhin died at age 82. He had first startled the musical world as a child prodigy. When only twelve years old, he played concertos by Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, conducted by Bruno Walter. In the audience at one performance was Albert Einstein. After the concert Einstein followed the boy backstage. He hugged him and said, "Now I know there is a God in heaven."⁸ I doubt that the young Menuhin thought he had been doing apologetics. And yet often when people are filled with awe, they find themselves feeling that there must be an awesome Creator of the wonder that they experience.⁹

The philosopher William Alston recounts the impact of the music of praise in bringing him back to the church after having abandoned the faith of his youth. While in Oxford he was encouraged by his daughter to attend a service at Christ Church Cathedral. It was the first religious service, apart from weddings and funerals, that he had attended in about fifteen years. For him it was the beginning of his return to faith. He comments, "Oxford is a marvelous place for being drawn back into the church if music plays a large role in one's communication with the divine, as is true in my case."¹⁰

Even Colin Dexter's world-weary Inspector Morse finds himself looking heavenward to find the source of the beautiful music that brings relief to the sordidness of a policeman's world. A Christian woman asks him, "Do you believe in God?" He responds wistfully, "Some-

times—when I hear beautiful music.” And in another episode, when asked if he believes that there is a God, he responds, “I hope to God there is! A God of justice.” One might look to reason and insight to solve a crime, but for beauty and justice, one looks to God.

It is this hope for a God of justice that helps us understand the dramatic shift in tone that occurs in verses 19–22:

If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
 Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
 They speak of you with evil intent;
 Your adversaries misuse your name.
 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD,
 And abhor those who rise up against you?
 I have nothing but hatred for them;
 I count them my enemies.

These verses seem to be a stark realization that even in a world that expresses in so many ways the awesome power and majesty of God, there are those who would pervert the divine order with their wickedness. Their wickedness is made all the more loathsome when contrasted with God’s goodness. Therefore, out of his wonder before God, the psalmist wants to put himself as far away from them as possible. The omniscient, omnipotent God is also the righteous Judge before whom evil will not endure.

Inspector Morse’s hope for a God of judgment is echoed in the development of the thought of the playwright Tom Stoppard. It was the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* that launched him as a major writer. The play was an example of what was known as the “theater of the absurd,” and it certainly caught the existential mood of the time—existence is ultimately an absurdity, and one looks in vain for a moral order. But at some point Stoppard began writing plays that challenged political injustice. The television play *Professional Foul* challenged the injustice of Communism in his native Czechoslovakia while at the same time chiding the inadequacy and unwillingness of contemporary British philosophical analysis to deal with injustice. But to argue for a sense of international justice is to deny that the world is ultimately absurd as portrayed in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. You cannot have it both ways. And so Stoppard comes to believe that if we accept the reality of justice, then there must be a Judge.

Of course long before Stoppard, Immanuel Kant had developed such a conclusion into what we know as the moral argument for the existence of God. As an *argument*, it has its problems. As an insight and a longing of the heart, it is an empirical reality. Perhaps this is what the apostle Paul has in mind when he says:

For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Rom 1:20)

One might suggest that the cosmological and teleological arguments for the existence of God are found in Rom 1:20. Aristotle, the father of the cosmological argument, developed it as an explanation for motion in his treatise on physics. Behind all movement there must be a first cause, an unmoved mover. It is with this thought in mind that we can understand Paul’s seeing God’s “eternal power” in creation. The teleological argument is based on seeing order and purpose in creation. Just as Stoppard reasoned that affirming justice leads to the conclusion that there must be a Judge, so seeing order and purpose in creation leads one to look for the Creator whose “divine nature” is that of perfect order and purpose.

Whether or not the cosmological and teleological arguments accomplish their intended purpose is a mat-

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ter of debate. Anyone who has followed the history of these two arguments will know that they are hardly the solid rock on which our faith is founded. Too often they have become the sinking sand Jesus warns against in

Matt 7:26. And yet, as insights and explanations, they seem to work. Paul accurately observes that those without benefit of revelation still look for a Creator who is both powerful and purposeful when they contemplate the creation. And in our own day, even after two hundred years of Enlightenment rationalism, there are those who look beyond the skepticism and naturalism of our culture to the Creator of the awe-inspiring power of the creation and the elegant beauty of its order.

Richard Wurmbrand was a Romanian pastor who suffered much under Communism. In his book *Tortured for Christ*, he tells of a Russian couple who were both sculptors. When he talked to them about God, they responded, “No, God does not exist. We are ‘Bezbozhniki’—godless. But we will tell you something interesting which happened to us.” They then told of how they had been working on a statue of Stalin. The wife asked her husband,

Husband, how about the thumb? If we could not oppose the thumb to the other fingers—if the fingers of the hands were like toes—we could not hold a hammer, a mallet, any tool, a book, a piece of bread. Human life would be impossible without this little thumb. Now, who made the thumb?¹¹

The husband’s first response was one of anger: “Get into your mind *once and for all* that there is no God. In heaven there is *nobody*.” But evidently his anger was only a cloak for his own doubts in his faith in atheistic Marxism. His wife responded, “—if in heaven there is nobody, I, from my side, am decided to worship from all my heart the ‘Nobody’ who has made the thumb.” Eventually they both became worshipers of the “Nobody,” and in time they were able to give him his proper name. Wurmbrand draws a parallel between the “Nobody God” of this Russian couple and the “Unknown God” that Paul found at Athens.

One could interpret this story as a natural application of the teleological argument for the existence of God. That is, the unbelieving couple must ask the question, From whence do order and purpose come? And they are driven to the conclusion that there must be a Creator who embodies purpose and order. But this form of reductionism takes no notice of the need this woman has to praise the Creator. In fact, in one place she says, “We praise Edison and Bell and Stephenson who have

invented the electric bulb, the telephone and railway and other things. But why should we not praise the one who has invented the thumb?” It is my opinion that what we are seeing here is a human emptiness that seeks to be filled by the experience of praise. And it is this experience that may well cause a person to look for the One who is worthy of praise. Hence, were we to ask this woman her reason for the hope that she has in her Christian faith, she might well respond with an account of how the worship of the Creator of the thumb led her to the God revealed in scripture. It is in this sense that I am suggesting that being led to worship through the experience of wonder and awe may itself be an apologetic.

In giving an account of his own journey to faith, the philosopher Peter Van Inwagen says:

Although I think that some versions of two of these arguments—the Design Argument and the Cosmological Argument—are as good as any philosophical argument that has ever been presented for any conclusion, I don’t think that they have any more to do with my religious beliefs than, say, arguments for the existence of other minds have to do with my belief that my wife would never lie to me or my belief that democracy is a good thing.¹²

Even in Tom Wolfe’s cynical, secular world, he still must have a character that looks beyond himself for strength and meaning. In his latest book, *A Man in Full*, there is an interesting irony. Whereas the faith of a Lutheran family from Wisconsin “never survived the trip” in their move to California, another character, Conrad Hensley, finds faith in reading the Stoics, and hence he begins praying to Zeus. Even more ironic, if not somewhat contrived, is the conversion of the main character, Charlie Croker, to Stoicism. Although I doubt that Wolfe’s novel will be the catalyst for a revival of late-classical Stoicism and the worship of Zeus, it is telling that he must have these characters look beyond self-serving materialism to the divine for meaning and strength.¹³

Psalm 139 is a powerful and beautiful expression of praise for the Creator of inner space. If Psalm 8 praises the Creator of heaven and earth, Psalm 139 praises God as my Creator. He is the one who “knit me together in my mother’s womb,” who “perceives my thoughts from

afar,” and who has written in his book “all the days ordained for me.” It is this sense of being so completely known that leads the psalmist to burst forth in poetic praise. Just thinking about God’s all-knowing presence is overwhelming:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain. (v. 6)

And there is praise that arises out of both wonder and fear before such an all-powerful God:

I praise you because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well. (v. 14)

Of course, the author of Psalm 139 is a believer who expresses his wonder and awe in the language of a certain understanding of God. As a Hebrew, he is the heir of a theological tradition that gives him a language by which to create this liturgy of praise. But I would suggest that the psalm arises out of the same wonder and awe that inspired our Russian atheist above to begin looking for the Nobody God, the Creator of the Thumb. This kind of psalm can be seen as an avenue to faith for the searching unbeliever who is trying to find the language to express what she is experiencing as a need or desire to praise the Creator. Perhaps this is, in part, what Pascal had in mind when he said that the heart has its reasons for believing of which the mind knows not.

Let me add a final cautionary note. Someone has said that whenever you worship someone else’s god, you come under the power of that worshiping community. This was spoken as a warning against idolatry, and the truth of it is obvious. But the positive side is equally obvious. When searchers find expression for praise in the Christian community, they will, to some degree, come under the power of that worshiping community. I have developed this thought in a lecture entitled “Believing, Behaving and Belonging,” in which I argue that faith, morality, and membership in the Christian community are integrally bound up in each other, rather than representing some kind of sequence of development. Believing brings us to the Christian community, but at

the same time the community nurtures faith and morals. Having been thus brought, we can only hope that the community is itself directed by God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as found in scripture.

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Notes

¹ Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*, in *A Pocket Book of Modern Verse*, ed. Oscar Williams (New York: Washington Square, 1964), 112.

² All scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

³ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 23–24.

⁴ James L. Mays, *The LORD Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 63ff.

⁵ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, xiii.

⁶ Leroy Garrett’s commencement address entitled “The Spiritual Side of Our Heritage” (Emmanuel School of Religion Commencement Service, 23 May 1999) documents decisively that Alexander Campbell and other Restoration leaders were quite aware of the need for a balance between head and heart in conversion as well as in Christian practice.

⁷ Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁸ “Obituary: Lord Menuhin, OM,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), 13 March 1999.

⁹ Anne Lamott’s account of the role of singing in her conversion is another illustration of the evangelistic power of praise. For her, it was wanting to listen to the gospel singing of a small congregation that led to fellowship, which in turn led to an understanding of the gospel message. See *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 47–50.

¹⁰ William P. Alston, “A Philosopher’s Way Back to the Faith,” in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23.

¹¹ Richard Wurmbrand, *Tortured for Christ* (Middlebury, Ind.: Living Sacrifice Books, 1969), 24.

¹² Peter Van Inwagen, “Quam Dilecta” in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 47.

¹³ Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998).