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THEOLOGICAL LIFE TODAY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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The Only Future Left to Us

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Abstract. This study examines the relationship between Protestantism and modern political ideologies, with particular attention to the Protestant theological roots of liberalism and conservatism. It argues that the emphasis on both freedom of conscience and social conformity can be traced back to the Protestant tradition and continues to shape ecclesiastical and social debates to this day. The author illustrates the tension between these two legacies through the Hungarian Reformed Church's recent social engagement, with particular reference to the 1989 events in Timișoara and the 2024 grace scandal. It concludes that the future of the Protestant Church also depends on its ability to maintain a dynamic balance between its conservative and liberal legacies through open dialogue.

Keywords: liberalism; conservatism; politics; political ideologies; the pardon case; the events in Timișoara

In 1979, starting from a symbolic laundry room, Tamás Cseh and Géza Bereményi turned irony into a tool of silent resistance. They wrote a prophetic song¹ about how they no longer wanted to remain in the same environment 'Ten Years After', nor did they want to sing the same monotonous song. And behold, exactly ten years later, this lament was heard when the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, and the music of servitude was replaced by the music of freedom. Yet in 2016, Bereményi added the following ominous lines to the prophetic song:²

While people once again turn against each other along religious and cultural lines. It never even crossed my mind that this would be the future, / It never occurred to me that

¹CSEH Tamás; BEREMÉNYI Géza: *Ten years after*, 1979. <https://csehtamasarchivum.hu/dal/classic/ten-years-after> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhETUuTm7o> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

my own humankind, That ancient breed would reach for this again — This only future left to us.

The song that once expressed hope now laments the return of religious and cultural battle. Religion and culture, which ought to promote community and solidarity, are once again drawing dividing lines and have even become a source of conflict. We have witnessed a succession of campaigns characterised by mutual attacks and hatred. But does God really want us to attack one another on the basis of ‘religious and cultural lines’, when the other might be a stranger, a Christian brother or sister, or even a family member?

European history warns us of what happens when faith becomes a weapon. Our continent has endured the French Wars of Religion, the English Civil War, but above all, the devastation of the Thirty Years’ War, which laid waste a significant part of Central Europe. From these tragedies came the realisation that questions of God cannot be settled by force or arms. Mark Lilla identified the contemporary global “shadow” of the religious wars when he wrote these lines at the beginning of the 21st century: “Today, we have progressed to the point where our problems again resemble those of the 16th century, as we find ourselves entangled in conflicts over competing revelations, dogmatic purity and divine duty. [...] We had assumed this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.”³ We forget not only the power of religious ideas, but also that the conflicts along which we clash often spring from the same source. Indeed, in contemporary polarised differences of opinion, conservative-liberal and collective-individualist ideas can be traced back to the foundations of Protestantism. Building on this, Ferenc Horkay Hörcher,⁴ drawing on the insights of, Clark and Pocock, arrives at the important conclusion that in the formation of modern political ideologies Protestantism was not merely a backdrop, but a formative milieu.

The Protestant roots of liberalism can be understood through its emphasis on the freedom of conscience. In the Reformation, faith was no longer merely obedience to the church, but a personal conviction in which a person stands before God – a historical example of this is Martin Luther’s stand. From this grew the idea that faith cannot be enforced by political power, which led to the concepts of individual rights, freedom of conscience, and limited state power.

The Protestant roots of conservatism lie rather in the preservation of ecclesiastical and social order, in which religion upholds the moral fabric of the community.

³LILLA, Mark: *The Politics of God*. In: New York Times, 2007.08.19. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/19/magazine/19Religion-t.html> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

⁴HORKAY HÖRCHER Ferenc: *Politikai teológiák és ideológiák*, in: BORBÉLY Gábor; GÁBOR György; GERÉBY György; SZÁNTÓ Veronika (szerk.) (2018): „Királyá lett a te Istened”. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. https://mersz.hu/dokumentum/m456klati__6/#m456klati_3_p8 (2026. 05. 04.) <https://doi.org/10.1556/9789630599443>

In the Anglican tradition, the church became the guardian of historical continuity and duty, whilst in Hungarian Protestantism the profession of faith was often intertwined with the defence of the native language and culture against Catholic Habsburg rule.

Thus, “both liberalism and conservatism are part of Protestant political thought, and their ongoing debate is a consequence of internal conflicts among Protestant denominations”.⁵ This tension persists to this day. Theology helps us see that this debate is not merely political but concerns a deeper question: whether humans are first and foremost beings of free conscience or responsible beings living within a communal order. In this, Jesus is the greatest example, who was radically free (Mark 2:27), yet fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17). He was not simply liberal or conservative, but transcended the logic of both, for whilst both sides find justification in him, he does not allow either to become exclusive. Debates among us intensify when one side, drawing on the liberal tradition, insists on an individual ethical approach (‘what am I allowed to do?’), whilst the other, drawing on the conservative tradition, insists on a collective ethical approach (‘what does the community expect?’). These principles typically clash in complex ethical debates, where we have recently, often for political reasons, come to present one ideology as the Protestant position. Neither Hungarian nor foreign Protestant churches are immune to this temptation, as both conservative and liberal ideas can become hegemonic by invoking Christian values.

Although the statements of the Hungarian Reformed Church on these issues contain both liberal-individual and conservative-collective values, in public life we tend to represent only one side – usually the conservative one⁶ – in isolation. It has not entered the public consciousness that a balanced position was, for example, the 2015 statement on migration,⁷ in which the Church, on the one hand, defends Europe’s cultural integrity on a collective-conservative basis, and on the other hand, calls for the assistance of those in need on an individual-liberal basis, – regardless of the refugee’s religion, education, persecution or financial situation – thereby transcending those generalising categories (e.g. ‘economic migrant’) that suit the community saying no to the refugee.⁸ Yet from the fruitful dialogue between these two principles, we could have arrived, both as a community and as individuals, at a form of self-reflection in which responsibility towards the vulnerable and the memory of our own vulnerability could have mutually shaped one another. After all, Israel too had to remember

⁵HORKAY HÖRCHER Ferenc: *Politikai teológiák és ideológiák*, in: BORBÉLY Gábor; GÁBOR György; GERÉBY György; SZÁNTÓ Veronika (szerk.) (2018): „Királlyá lett a te Istened”. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó. https://mersz.hu/dokumentum/m456klati__6/#m456klati_3_p62 Letöltve: 2026. 05. 04. <https://doi.org/10.1556/9789630599443>

⁶SINKOVICS Ferenc: *Cián a kockacukorban*, in: *Demokrata*, 20/39. 2016.09.28. 24–25.

⁷A Generális Konvent Elnökségének nyilatkozata az európai migrációs válságról. 2025.11.11. <http://reformatus.hu/magyar-reformatus-egyhazi/gk-nyilatkozatok-lista/generalis-konvent-elnokegenek-nyilatkozata-az-europai-migracios-valsagrol/> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

⁸Magyar Távirati Iroda: A baloldal be akarja hozni a migránsokat, <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek/magyarorszagon-keresztendemoqrata-allamot-epitettek-fel> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

time and again that it had once been a foreigner in Egypt (Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33–34; Deuteronomy 10:19).

At the same time, over the past two years, the Reformed Church in Hungary has ignored the dynamic polarity of these two legacies, and we have instead witnessed a form of isolation reminiscent of the socialist era. By sidestepping the necessary theological work and guided by communicative or political imperatives, we have on several occasions shied away from discussing more sensitive social issues and from expressing our own views in international Protestant forums. This was the case when we stayed away from the 2024 General Assembly of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE),⁹ or when we floated the idea of withdrawing from the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC).¹⁰

The problem is not that Hungarian Reformed Christianity takes a more conservative stance on ethical issues than the European mainstream, but that by avoiding debate, it neither shapes nor is it shaped. Participation in and engagement with debate would also be important, as the Protestant open-minded approach to social issues appears to have great community-building power.

When Protestant churches openly play a key role in social change, their responsibility is also multiplied accordingly. In recent decades, we have witnessed this twice in the life of the Hungarian Reformed community, in almost diametrically opposite ways. Whether intentionally or not, two of our Reformed bishops who lived through the transition to democracy played a decisive role in significant political changes. On the one hand, in connection with László Tőkés, we witnessed a courageous stand, as the biblical motif of freedom and liberation became a social reality during the Timișoara revolution in December 1989. However, we also saw the opposite of this in Budapest, when, following Zoltán Balog's actions and explanations, the Protestant concept of grace became so distorted that it provoked social outrage extending even beyond the church in 2024.

The first case demonstrated the courage of Protestant thought that takes freedom seriously, in the form of a distinctive Central and Eastern European theology of liberation. Individual freedom of conscience and outspokenness in the face of the oppressive regime became a prophetic force, setting in motion the fall of the Romanian dictatorship.

The second case was the opposite. In the so-called grace scandal,¹¹ the episcopal explanation was accepted by our church's governing bodies in such a way that one of the most important conservative principles—respect for the rule of law and the

⁹Hungarian Reformed Church will not take part in the CPCE General Assembly. 2024.07.31. <https://reformatus.hu/english/news/hungarian-reformed-church-will-not-take-part-in-the-cpce-general-assembly/> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

¹⁰Felülvizsgálja tagságát a REV-ben a Magyar Református Egyház. 2026.02.02. <https://reformatus.hu/magyar-reformatus-egyhaz/hirek/felulvizsgalja-tagsagat-a-rev-ben-a-magyar-reformatus-egyhaz/> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

¹¹Parókia Portál: Összefoglaló a Református Megújulás Konferenciáról, <https://www.parokia.hu/v/osszefoglalo-a-reformatus-megujulas-konferenciarol/> Letöltve: 2026.05.04.

administration of justice—was overridden in defence of the status quo. Thus, the majority voice of the Reformed Church has become not prophetic and liberating, but self-justifying. This has simultaneously caused an identity crisis within our church (due to the concept of grace) and a crisis of credibility in the representation of conservative values. The latter contributed significantly to the political changes of 2026.

For want of a better alternative, even in the future that now lies before us, we cannot avoid the question of whether the church's social mission truly serves God's work of liberation, or whether it becomes a justification for our own self-preservation. Can we return to a social dialogue in which we can authentically and dynamically present the conservative and liberal heritage of Protestantism? Will we be able to proclaim the Gospel to as many members of society as possible, or will we continue to function merely as an ideological enclave?

Is the Holy Spirit Religious?

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English translation

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Abstract. In both ecclesial discourse and personal religious practice, the church and religion are often imagined as existing outside secular culture and society. Through an exposition of Paul Tillich’s theology of culture, Sára Tóth’s article offers a more nuanced account of the relationship between religion and culture, one that resists a dualistic separation. For Tillich, the opposition between religion and culture, and between the sacred and the secular, is a consequence of the Fall. Human beings are therefore called to live in anticipation of ultimate fulfilment, when the presence of God will permeate the whole of culture. Tillich names this theonomy, understood as a reality that can already be partially realised through the Spirit.

Keywords: paul tillich; culture; culture and religion; protestantism; secularism

Reflections on Paul Tillich’s Theology of Culture

The perennial intellectual and spiritual temptation of religious people is to imagine two separate spheres for religious and secular matters. It is as if the church and religion were somehow situated outside secular culture and society, and we were establishing contact with “the world” from another place, issuing our worldview and moral judgments, as well as carrying out mission from there. This places us in a continuous tension: whatever presents itself to us “from the world,” whether a person or a phenomenon, must be judged, and we must either fight against it or make it the object of mission.

In Hungarian usage, the meaning of the word “culture” is quite narrow. Many people associate it simply with the concert hall, the art gallery, or poetry. However, the term has a broader meaning as well. Culture is the world created by human beings, which emerges on the one hand through human perception, the imaginative ordering

of reality, and the attribution of meaning (language), and through the transformation of the environment (technology), on the other.¹ This also includes the organization of society and the state.

Against this background, it is understandable why Richard Niebuhr's enormously influential work *Christ and Culture* was subjected to so much criticism by later theologians. Surveying the history of the church, Niebuhr identifies five typical modes of relating "Christ" and "culture."² Yet in order to do so, he must tacitly assume that there exists a pure, culture-free "Christ," as well as a pure, religionless culture. As Anglican theologian Kathryn Tanner and earlier critics of Niebuhr have pointed out, this is an artificial separation.³ Even divine revelation would not reach us by bypassing culture. "We could not even read Paul's words without the wisdom of the world which enables us to understand ancient texts," Tillich notes in one of his sermons.⁴ Religion itself makes use of the materials of a given culture—its narratives, symbols, and lived experiences—and transforms it into religious culture.

"Asked what the proof is for the fall of the world," Tillich writes, "I like to answer: religion itself, namely, a religious culture beside a secular culture, a temple beside a town hall, a Lord's Supper beside a daily supper, prayer beside work, meditation beside research, *caritas* beside *eros*."⁵ Yet the purpose of religious practice is not to separate the sacred from the secular. We do not set aside particular times for prayer in order to detach prayer from our other activities. Quite the contrary, we do so to extend the prayerful orientation to the whole of life: to learn to pray without ceasing, to open ourselves to the divine presence. Religion is more than a system of rituals, symbols, and emotions; it is the state of being grasped by God, or in Tillich's famous phrase, ultimate concern.⁶ Human beings intuitively know that nothing "penultimate" in life can provide ultimate meaning, and that every penultimate reality points toward the meaning-giving ultimate, whose call they experience. In Tillich's theology, self-transcendence characterizes the entire created world: everything points beyond itself toward its creator; in other words, it has a sacramental character. Every thing—though finite—is inexhaustible. Every thing is more, greater, and deeper than what is immediately given. And since only humans are capable of meaning-making, they are also capable of experiencing this mysterious manifestation of the sacred. Sacramentality is therefore not a natural phenomenon but a cultural one.⁷

¹Paul TILlich: *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, 72–73. *Systematic Theology*, 1–3. vols., University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963. Hereafter ST/1, ST/2, ST/3.

²Richard NIEBUHR: *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper & Row, 1951.

³See, for example, Kathryn TANNER: *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1997. Hereafter TC.

⁴Paul TILlich: *The New Being*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955, 110.

⁵Paul TILlich: *The Shaking of the Foundations*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, 49.

⁶Paul TILlich: *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams, University of Chicago Press, 1948, 59.

⁷See ST/1, 21–25; Paul TILlich: *Dynamics of Faith*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1957, 1–29.

From this follows the striking conclusion that religion is inherently cultural, and culture inherently religious. Religion is the transcendent—or self-transcending—dimension of human meaning-making. Religion gives culture its meaning, horizon, and depth, while culture is the totality of forms in which the fundamental striving of religion is expressed. In Tillich's well-known definition, "religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion."⁸

In our alienated world, the mutual interpenetration of religion and culture is hindered by two processes. The first is profanization, when culture begins to ignore—or even deny—the sacredness of other people and things, their meaning that points beyond themselves. In such cases, we reduce and objectify the elements of reality, stripping them of the mysterious and inexhaustible depth that arises from their self-transcending, that is, sacramental character. The human brain becomes "nothing more than" a piece of flesh, love is "merely" the product of hormones, "there is nothing wrong" with the child except that she is lazy, and this tree is „good for nothing but" firewood. In this way, culture closes in upon itself and, lacking any ultimate orientation, becomes shallow and empty. We are all drifting toward the secular; we flee from the presence of God, Tillich writes. "Religions are the restraining, balancing power."⁹ The Reformers were right to say that "every day is the Lord's Day, yet in order to say this, there must have been a Lord's Day and that not only once upon a time but continuously in counterbalance the overwhelming weight of the secular."¹⁰ Paradoxically, this need then gives rise to a distinct sphere of religious culture, which develops its own rituals and institutions and then claims for them a privileged role in mediating the sacred. Tillich calls this process—the appropriation of the sacred—demonization. Whereas profanization obscures and erases the sacred, demonization sharpens the separation between the secular and the sacred.¹¹

When the secular absorbs the religious, autonomous culture emerges. When demonization becomes dominant—that is, when the religious absorbs the secular—culture becomes heteronomous. In autonomous culture, human beings as rational creatures are in the center as the source and measure of culture and religion, carrying out their creative activity without ultimate reference. Heteronomous culture, by contrast, subjects human thought and action to the authority of the church or of

⁸For this reason, TILlich criticizes natural religions and philosophies that posit natural power as entirely immanent, with human consciousness as a kind of degeneration. On the contrary, the power of nature as such, Tillich claims, is silent and meaningless; it has no transcendent reference that would endow it with meaning.

⁹ST/3, 112–113, 278–280; TC, 42.

¹⁰Mackenzie D. BROWN: *Ultimate Concern – Tillich in Dialogue*, New York, Harper & Row, 1965, 166. Religion Online by Harry W. and Grace C. ADAMS. <https://media.sabda.org/alkitab-2/Religion-Online.org/%20Books/Brown/%2C/%20D./%20Mackenzie/%20-%20Ultimate/%20Concern/%20-%20Tillich/%20in/%20Dialogue.pdf>

¹¹„The Significance of the History of Religions for the Systematic Theologian (1966)", in Werner Christian DANZ, Werner SCHÜßLER és Erdmann STURM (eds.), *Ausgewählte Texte*, Berlin / New York, Walter de Gruyter, 2008, 458. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110211740.455>

political pseudo-religions. Opposed to both, in theonomy, as Tillich understands it, religion and culture interpenetrate rather than compete with one another.¹²

Theonomy, as Tillich uses the term, is the state of culture in which the triune God is manifest in all created things, when being grasped by God permeates every human activity. Its foundation is the Christ-event: the manifestation of the eternal Logos in a concrete personal life, and indeed his descent into the very depth of that life, even into complete God-forsakenness. In the historical reality of the incarnation, the primordial unity of God and humanity is restored; and the new life brought about by the resurrection and the Holy Spirit anticipates the full realization of this unity. Theonomy is therefore an eschatological reality, which can only be realized fragmentarily in temporal life, through the work of the Spirit. Yet believers anticipate the harmonious intersection of the sacred and the secular from the eschatological perspective of fulfilment and find their bearings in culture guided by this theonomous vision.

Let us consider what this so-called theonomous intersection means—my own term, based on Tillich—through a concrete example: healing. According to the theonomous view, the divine dimension and the created dimensions are not arranged in a hierarchy of levels separate from one another; rather, they mutually penetrate one another in such a way that the more comprehensive dimension includes, but does not abolish, the less comprehensive one. Healing is a multidimensional reality, since even a headache has biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions—not to mention depression or other more complex illnesses. Only in a secularized culture are divine healing and medical healing, salvation and biological recovery split apart. In such a context, dualistic thinking dominates: it is either God or medication which heals. Either the soul is healed, or the body. In a theonomous context, by contrast, the divine saving power is manifest in every instance of healing; and conversely, salvation is itself healing, in which both body and soul participate. The growing cooperation in the Western world between physicians, mental health professionals, and pastors may be regarded as a theonomous tendency—and Tillich already welcomed it in the middle of the last century.

This cooperation is a positive manifestation of what is often called twenty-first-century postsecularism. Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher and one of the foremost contemporary interpreters of secularization, wrote as early as 2007 that expectations resembling Tillichian theonomy were emerging within our culture: “Knowledge, morality, art, government and the economy should become religious, but freely and from inside, not by compulsion from outside.”¹³ Since Taylor wrote these words, however, culture-war-driven and heteronomous tendencies have unfortunately gained strength even in the Western world. We are witnessing the flourishing of autocratic political systems that exploit both the institutional church

¹²ST/3, 104–110.

¹³For the explanation of the three concepts and a brief account of their historical dialectic, see ST/1, 99–103.

and Christian nationalism¹⁴ and certain theological conceptions even demand the subordination of modern society and the state to biblical law.

Heteronomous ambitions are always idolatrous; in Tillich's sense, they are demonic. To absolutize one's own religion and impose it upon the wider culture is itself a form of idolatry. It is important to note that, as a Protestant, Tillich is far more critical of heteronomy—that is, toward the church's domination over the world—than of autonomy. He associates the world's coming of age with the Reformation and evaluates this development positively, calling it the “emancipation of the secular.” This emancipation, he writes, was necessary for the recognition that “the Spirit is not bound to the churches”—so much so that the Spirit may even be manifest in groups openly hostile to them.¹⁵

Tillich's insights on theonomy call the community of the church to humility and to what was, from the beginning, a central insight of the Reformation: not to absolutize its own institution or its own identity. The treasury of Christianity's rich spiritual heritage can be opened only when the church and the believer relinquish both the longing for heteronomy and the anxious policing of boundaries, and instead initiate constructive and generous conversations within society, free of the impulses of culture war. Christians should “pray without ceasing”: that is, they should be present in the world with openness to the sacred, with deep, vigilant, and reverent attention. They should attend to what is more, greater, and deeper than what is immediately given, regardless of whether it appears “religious” or not. Paul Tillich's fragmentary and anticipated theonomy can become visible only through such gentle presence.

¹⁴Here TAYLOR is quoting Nikolai Berdyaev. Charles TAYLOR: *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 2007, 535. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674044289>

¹⁵See Péter BUDA, “Fundamentalizmus és politika: a politika szakralizációja és a szakrális instrumentalizációja,” in Tibor FABINY and Orsolya HORVÁTH (eds.), *Fundamentalizmus, protestantizmus, modernitás*, L'Harmattan Kiadó – Hermeneutikai Kutatóközpont, 2024, 167–183.

Beyond Identity Politics...

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Abstract. The concept of identity is experiencing a boom. Identity politics, and the demand for the formation of collective identities, has become a strategic instrument of political power in modern societies. Meanwhile, for the self-understanding of the churches of the Reformation, it is no longer dogmatic-confessional and liturgical traditions or differences that are ultimately decisive, but rather rootedness in the socio-cultural environment—and the question of identity that follows from it. This leads to fragmented identity constructions and to vulnerability in the face of collective identity formation—especially where the concept of identity has become a kind of buzzword whose content remains largely undefined, together with all the consequences this entails. Addressing these problems requires social-scientific, philosophical, and theological reflection on both the dangers of political identity formation and the legitimate elements of Reformed self-understanding. In this context, the question must be asked again: what role and significance can theological reflection have in the internal life of the church? The phenomenon deserves further study; the present essay merely points out the problem.

Keywords: identity politics; culture; moltmann; reformed identity; identity

“Identity! Reformed identity!”— in recent years this pairing has often appeared in statements by individuals or church leaders. This has been especially the case where the aim was to display the distinctive features of a Reformed Christian profile, to articulate the community’s self-understanding in contrast to other confessional or religious groups, or to stress belonging to the unity of the nation. Yet defining what Reformed identity means on the individual and communal level is a more complex task. For the most part, such definitions are limited to stressing historical continuity, the life and work of significant figures, key events in church history and shared historical experiences, as well as fidelity to so-called “biblical and confessional” foun-

dations (without defining these precisely). Behind such efforts, however, stands a conception of identity detached from history, one that ignores the ruptures caused by historical developments and present challenges. Yet the concept of identity is very much in vogue—and here we can only point out the problem indicated by the term.

We see that contemporary Protestantism is extraordinarily fragmented in its self-understanding. At the same time, it is uncertain and vulnerable. This is true of Reformed identity in general, -image, and, more specifically, of Hungarian Reformed self-understanding in particular. The reason for this lies not so much in our relation to our confessional-dogmatic inheritance, or in the different interpretations of that heritage, but rather in the concrete lived reality of the church.

In other words, the differences among Reformation Christian churches are not necessarily explained by the plurality of confessional, theological, and liturgical traditions. A far greater role is played by socio-cultural determinants: rootedness in one's own context. For the self-understanding of the empirical church in a given time and place, adaptation to the environment becomes more decisive than dogmatic, ecclesiological, and liturgical particularities. We may also observe that contextual factors also play a greater role in articulating opposition, difference, and distinct identity.¹

It was in this spirit, for example, that the episcopal system was reintroduced from the sixteenth century onward, despite the theological criteria of the Reformation understanding of office; or that ecclesial activities came to be financed from the state treasury in the spirit of Act XX of 1848, despite the Reformation demand for congregational autonomy and the models of free churches in Europe, so often invoked by Imre Révész.

Accordingly, within a given national or regional church body, differences arise less along theological or liturgical lines and more from how churches, adapt in mentality to their environment, including political public discourse; and how far they participate in processes of modernization or in identity-political projects led by political and social actors. A wide range of historical and contemporary examples could be cited: the church under East-Central European socialism or under South African apartheid; Protestant churches in modern liberal democracies or, conversely, in anti-Western and anti-liberal "illiberal" democracies; churches in relation to nation-building projects, and so on. In the 1950s, the "official" theology and press organs of the Hungarian Reformed Church sought to present the socialist-communist state order as an instrument of divine providence, through which the church itself was to hear God's revelation. Those who opposed this claim on theological grounds were accused by the church leadership of rebelling against the Word. Today—or at least

¹For analysing and understanding collective identity formation, with regard to the drawing of boundaries between "us" and "others," the enhancement of the in-group and the devaluation of out-groups, that is, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, see Henri TAJFEL: *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982; Henri TAJFEL – John C. TURNER: "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in: S. WORCHEL – W. AUSTIN (eds.): *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Chicago, Nelson Hall, 1986, 7–24.

in recent years—what counted as good Christian and national identity, even within church circles, was often whatever political public discourse defined as Christian and as aligned with the value system condensed in the slogan “God–homeland–family,” without this being critically examined in the light of Scripture as a whole.

During the South African apartheid regime, church and congregational life organized along ethnic lines, with no meaningful interaction between communities, appeared entirely self-evident. In recent decades, Protestant churches in Western Europe—especially in Germany, Switzerland, and the Scandinavian countries—have made migration, the refugee question, resistance to far-right political forces, or the ecclesial and social recognition of same-sex marriage central themes of church life, in line with the values of their societies and the political priorities of their states.

In Hungary, we see a reverse tendency: within the Reformed Church, including at official levels, anti-Western and anti-liberal attitudes and suspicion toward ecumenical organizations have intensified in parallel with prevailing political rhetoric. This is striking in light of the church’s own historical heritage—for example, the convergence of national liberalism and Protestantism during the period of absolutism, the call for free and critical Christian thought during the decades of dictatorship, earlier sister-church relations, and its active and respected participation in ecumenical working groups—all of which sit uneasily with the current pattern of distancing and opposition.

In questions of gender roles and sexual ethics, meanwhile, the struggle against a vaguely defined “gender ideology” has often overshadowed other themes of Reformation theology. For example: what does justification by faith mean in today’s social contexts? What is the contemporary relevance of sin, the knowledge of sin, repentance, reconciliation, and peacemaking in relation to present social injustices? To what extent does eschatological teaching relativize the categories of human communal life that we know and so readily take to be Christian?

The list could be continued. The point, however, is that the themes of ecclesial public discourse have not primarily arisen from biblical interpretation, hermeneutical clarification, theological-ethical reflection, or the lived reality of congregations shaped by Word and sacrament. Rather, they have emerged as the result of largely unreflective adaptation to a “Christian and national” socio-political environment and to the media sphere that amplifies it.

These examples also show that the problem does not really lie in the desire to shape a community’s self-understanding or to explore the sources of identity—all this can be done reflectively and with a commitment to self-criticism. Since the 1990s, most European societies have engaged in efforts to uncover the historical roots of collective identity, to analyse them through the social sciences, and to interpret them culturally.²

²Lutz NIETHAMMER: *Kollektive Identität*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2000, 22.

Within this interpretive work, a key insight emerges: the question of identity becomes problematic when it becomes political—that is, when it no longer expresses and sustains a sense of belonging, but becomes a strategic instrument of power and its maintenance. In such cases, identity is shaped through identification with the aims of those in power, while belonging itself provides security. Opposition to the ruling power, if it seeks to gain or regain power, must construct an alternative identity: it must respond to popular sentiment, translate social dissatisfaction into symbols and narratives, and articulate a new and credible “we.” In this situation, identity easily becomes an instrument on both sides.

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The question is to what extent the church becomes involved in such dynamics. The temptation becomes especially acute when politically constructed identities draw on Christian concepts and values as part of their strategy. What, then, is the church’s response? Will adaptation to socio-cultural and mental dispositions once again determine the foundations of its self-understanding—so that revelation is derived from the temporary order of the world rather than from the Word, as has so often been the case in history—or does the church possess theological discernment capable of distinguishing between the inflationary use of a concept and its properly theological meaning? Can the community of believers recognize, and make visible, that the concept of identity easily becomes reductionist—a buzzword, a “plastic word,” in Uwe Pörksen’s sense?⁴ Such a concept can be extended indefinitely and is therefore remains largely undefined. At the same time, it leaves no space for dialogue, for differing experiences, or for personal narratives. It presents itself as scientific while exempting itself from critique. It acquires a quasi-fetishistic character, since it tolerates no contradiction. It claims normative authority while enabling a form of linguistic colonization, in which “experts” define what something is and how it should be understood.

Or can the church recognize that, theologically speaking, self-identity—including Reformed identity—is something more than this: namely, the capacity to testify to our faith within a given social and cultural context? It is not simply a matter of referring to a historical confessional document (thereby inadvertently attributing to it a fetish-like status of the kind described above), but of bearing theological witness to the content of faith. In other words, it is a matter of theological judgment whose dynamism is not derived from the spirit of the age, but from the work of the Holy Spirit.

³Cf. NIETHAMMER: *Kollektive Identität*, 40.

⁴Uwe PÖRKSEN: *Plastikwörter*, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1988.

Experience shows that the church turns to identity-substitutes when faint-heartedness takes hold within its own life. Jürgen Moltmann puts this well: “The danger of little faith lies in the fact that faith itself begins to die, because it wants to cling to the familiar and reaches for guarantees. [...] Weak faith wants to preserve and protect itself because fear has taken hold of it. It wants to defend its ‘most sacred treasures’: God, Christ, the doctrine of faith, and morality, because it evidently no longer believes that these are strong enough to keep themselves alive.” By contrast, Christian identity arises entirely from identification with Christ: it is understood only as identification with the Crucified, insofar as the human being receives the good news that in him God has identified himself with sinners and with those abandoned by God, among whom he himself also belongs. This double movement of identification is the process in which Christian identity comes into being.⁵

After all this, the question remains what role theology as an academic discipline, and its capacity for reflection, can play within the life of the church—especially under the pressures of inculturation outlined above. Will the institutional church, adapting or compelled to adapt to its environment, seek to control theology, expecting from it a principled legitimization of its a priori (identity-political) decisions? Or will academic theology insist on its autonomy, appealing to the freedom of scholarship and of conscience? If the latter prevails, there is hope that the concept of Reformed identity can acquire positive content: understood as the task of offering a coherent account of the faith and of identifying with the cause of Christ.

⁵Jürgen MOLTSMANN: *Der gekreuzigte Gott. Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie*, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 92007, 24.

The Freedom of Poverty

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Abstract. Throughout church history, moments of crisis repeatedly uncover deeper dimensions of Christianity that remain hidden in times of stability. This essay traces this pattern in the Hungarian Reformation and its later developments, showing how upheaval, material vulnerability, and changing relations to political power shaped the Church's life. In the decades after Mohács, a form of Reformation Christianity emerged marked by radical trust in providence and independence from patrons, yet with increasing institutionalisation these earlier forms were gradually reshaped and the Church's prophetic voice softened. The relationship between material resources and spiritual integrity emerges, therefore, not as a marginal issue but as a recurring theological and historical question—one that continues to open or close spaces for prophetic freedom within the life of the Church.

Keywords: poverty; integrity; dependence; power; Reformation

Power, Dependence, and Integrity in Church History

Throughout church history, a recurring pattern emerges: periods of great historical upheaval and social trauma often uncover deeper dimensions of Christianity that remain less visible in more peaceful times. These moments were frequently accompanied by a heightened sense of social responsibility and a deliberate renunciation of material wealth. The rise of monasticism, for example, unfolded alongside the decline of the Roman Empire—first in the form of various eremitical movements, and later through monastic communities, whose members embraced poverty as one of their defining vows.

The popularity of figures such as Saint Anthony¹ the Great and Paul of Thebes² was due in large measure to this renewed emphasis on Christ's poverty.

Both became celebrated for abandoning their wealth for Christ's sake. By the tenth century, some regions of Europe were beginning, for the first time, to experience sustained economic growth. Yet this prosperity also brought into sharper focus previously unseen disparities of wealth, as well as the increasing affluence of the Catholic Church as an institution. It was amid the social tensions generated by this economic expansion that the Waldensian movement emerged³, followed not long afterward by Francis of Assisi and his movement of God's poor.⁴

A distinctive dynamic emerges here: as ecclesial institutionalization becomes increasingly complete, it also makes institutional self-correction more difficult. Yet moments of historical upheaval often succeed in loosening even firmly established institutional frameworks, if only for a short time.⁵ In the Middle Ages we frequently see that, in times of crisis, some Christians tended to gravitate toward radical extremes. In such moments, absolute poverty or the renunciation of all possessions often became an ideal—one need only think of the Rule of Saint Francis. After the founder's death, the Order eventually fractured, above all over disputes concerning the radical interpretation of poverty.

The Reformation reached the Hungarian population at an exceptionally charged moment, and it is no coincidence that it quite literally swept across the country. It is fair to say that it did so more rapidly and more smoothly than in other parts of Europe.⁶ This is precisely because of what has just been described: the new ideas reached Hungary in a situation of existential crisis. The threat of Ottoman conquest, followed by the trauma of the defeat at Mohács, was enough to shake society to its foundations. This was further intensified in 1541, when Buda fell into Turkish hands and the country was divided into three parts. In the territories under Ottoman rule—southern Transdanubia, the regions of Tolna and Baranya, and much of the Great Plain—the earlier structures of the Church were at least partly dismantled, while most monastic communities fled.

In territories repeatedly crossed by different armies, people living under the burden of existential fear responded with remarkable openness to the mission of the itinerant preachers, which they experienced as divine consolation. Numerous leg-

¹VANYÓ László: Ókeresztény írók lexikona. Sajtó alá rend. és a bibliográfiát összeáll. PERENDY László. Budapest: Szent István Társulat. 2004. 29–30.

²GYÉRESSY Ágoston: Remete Szent Pál misztikája. In: A fehér barát. 1948.1. 4–5.

³Gabriel AUDISIO: The Waldensian dissent: persecution and survival c. 1170–c. 1570, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999. 3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139163934>

⁴Kenneth Baxter WOLF: St. Francis and His Poverty. In: The Poverty of Riches: St. Francis of Assisi Reconsidered. Oxford University Press. 2003. 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195158083.003.0004>

⁵The loosening of institutional frameworks did not, of course, lead only to the emergence of Christ-like poverty or social concern; nevertheless, this too was one of the phenomena that accompanied such periods.

⁶Many have noted that the Hungarian Reformation was marked by far fewer bloody events than was the case in most of Europe.

endary stories, often containing elements of folk tale, became attached to the itinerant preachers active in these regions—especially Mátyás Dévai Bíró,⁷ István Szegedi Kis,⁸ and Mihály Sztárai.⁹ These stories, almost certainly highly embellished, nevertheless reveal the community's deep respect and affection for the preachers, who often carried out their ministry among them at the risk of their lives. What they shared was an ability to found congregations and a complete reliance on God in matters of material provision.

We know from Sztárai's own letter that he established more than a hundred Protestant congregations in the territories under Ottoman rule. His pupil and protégé, István Szegedi Kis, lived out this same dependence on God for material provision, as did Mátyás Dévai Bíró. Dévai enjoyed the patronage of several Hungarian magnates for a time, among them Tamás Nádasdy, Palatine of Hungary and lord of Sárvár, and Péter Perényi, Voivode of Transylvania and lord of Sárospatak. Toward the end of his life, he found a patron in Gáspár Drágffy, whose estates lay primarily in the region of Partium. Yet Dévai never bound himself permanently to the service of any one aristocratic patron. This kind of integrity marked his entire life and inspired those around him.

It was precisely in the decades of crisis following the trauma of Mohács that some of the finest qualities of the Hungarian Reformation came to the fore: a way of thinking that placed the cause of Christ at the center, even at the cost of material support from political power or from powerful patrons.

This does not mean, of course, that they rejected material goods as such. It does mean, however, that they valued their principles, their faith, and their evangelical freedom more highly than material support, refusing to allow their ministry to be governed by gratitude toward a patron or by expectations of loyalty. Such an attitude could, of course, easily lead to relocation, and could also provoke the anger of a formerly generous supporter. Yet it was precisely this steadfastness that made them credible in the eyes of the people.

Indeed, the character and commitment of these leaders visibly shaped the faithful, who often made truly exceptional sacrifices. One example is the case of István Szegedi Kis.¹⁰

According to a story preserved in several sources, Szegedi Kis was imprisoned because, in the service of his homeland, he had gathered intelligence for the fortress commanders in the Ottoman-occupied territories about the movements of Turkish forces. In the end, he was released only after a ransom had been paid. This ransom was raised through the donations of Reformed believers. Why does this matter?

⁷BOTTA István: *Dévai Mátyás a magyar Luther*. Budapest 1990. 63.

⁸SZAKÁLY Ferenc: *Mezőváros és reformáció. Tanulmányok a korai magyar polgárosodás kérdéséhez – Humanizmus és Reformáció*. Budapest, 1995. 116-126.

⁹KEVEHÁZI László: *A kereszt ígéjét hirdetni kezdtem Sztárai Mihály élete és szolgálata*. Budapest 2005. 173-177.

¹⁰SZAKÁLY Ferenc: *Mezőváros és reformáció. Tanulmányok a korai magyar polgárosodás kérdéséhez – Humanizmus és Reformáció*. Budapest, 1995. 119-126.

Because the integrity of the emerging church depended on a commitment to independence, even at the cost of poverty and material vulnerability.

Throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the Reformed Church was maintained without receiving full support from the state. In the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary under Habsburg rule, recatholicization intensified from the second half of the seventeenth century onward. This demanded exceptional sacrifices from the members of Reformed congregations—sacrifices they were, in many places, willing to make. For example, throughout the eighteenth century the inhabitants of Jászberény were repeatedly forced to rebuild their church or house of prayer.¹¹ In the seventeenth century, the rulers of the Principality of Transylvania were almost all Reformed, yet Transylvania did not become a confessional state. For this reason, the princes supported the Church not as heads of state, but as the region's most significant landowners—though, of course, their support was substantial. This patronage naturally placed the Reformed Church under obligations, but even so it showed many signs of independence and at times even stood in opposition to the prince. Alongside the princes, members of the growing Reformed elite also supported their Church with significant donations, which further strengthened its relative independence.

By contrast, in the nineteenth century the Hungarian Reformed Church was already struggling to secure its position as the second-largest church in the country. This goal was considered achieved when Protestant bishops gained seats in the House of Magnates.¹² This aspiration made the Reformed Church an increasingly committed supporter of the ruling order. Later, in the second half of the century, the revival movements once again brought a measure of material and political independence to the regions where they took root.¹³

Nevertheless, until 1948 the Reformed Church never became fully dependent on the state or on its patrons. For this very reason, there was no uniform voice, nor was it possible to identify a single central position. The various church districts were able to preserve many of their earlier particularities, their distinctive character, and even the possibility of initiatives arising from below. Almost everywhere, a concern for social sensitivity emerged as an important part of Reformed identity. These tendencies were still clearly visible in the first decades of the twentieth century, although they were increasingly marginalized in the church at large.

After the beautiful, Christ-like examples of the Reformation era, the Hungarian Reformed Church, as it became institutionalized, gradually integrated into the structures of the state and became a polished and respectable part of it. Even in their appearance, bishops increasingly began to resemble members of the Hungarian aristocracy. And although the Reformation inheritance still occasionally surfaced among

¹¹PETHŐ László (főszerk.): Jászberény története a kezdetektől a reformkorig. Jászberény, 2014. 386.

¹²BALLABÁS Dániel: A főrendiház örökös jogú tagsága az 1885. évi reform után. In: Pap, József; BALLABÁS, Dániel (szerk.) Képviselők és főrendek a dualizmus kori Magyarországon I.: Parlamentarizmustörténeti tanulmányok Eger, 2020. 219.

¹³NAGY János: A bel misszió és a persely. In: Protestáns Egyházi és Iskolai Lap. 1858. 745-751.

young theology students, rural pastors, and in the orbit of Reformed colleges, the visibly demanding forms of Christ's missionary calling gradually disappeared, the Church was increasingly drawn into the system, and its prophetic voice increasingly fell silent.

The relationship to material resources and the question of integrity are therefore closely intertwined throughout church history as a whole—not only at the level of institutions, but also in the lives of their members.

When material security becomes the overriding concern, God's providence is easily confused with the goodwill of patrons. From there, it is only a short step to the self-deception that whoever secures the Church's material functioning must necessarily be regarded as God's chosen instrument. This inevitably leads to a loss of integrity and the silencing of the prophetic voice.

Despite the process outlined above, it is important to recognize that both in Christianity as a whole and within the Hungarian Reformed Church, one can find not only aspirations toward material independence and the preservation of integrity, but also many concrete expressions of these ideals. When the question of the Church's integrity arises, it is therefore worth recalling the many positive examples offered by the past. This is all the more so because spiritual renewal has in many cases been closely linked to a re-evaluation of the Church's relationship to material goods, and thus to the discovery of broader spaces of intellectual and spiritual independence.

The Theological Possibility of Legitimate Distrust: Anthropological and Ethical Reflections on the Church's Credibility Crisis

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Abstract. The study examines the theological interplay between trust and distrust in the context of the Church's credibility crisis. The study proceeds from the premise that abuses of power in Christian communities, expectations of unconditional loyalty, and institutional distortions of trust call for a reconsideration of the notion of trust. The meaning of trust is analysed here in an anthropological and ethical approach, then, the notion of legitimate distrust is introduced through the insights of the Reformers and other Protestant theologians. The author argues that legitimate distrust does not mean a lack of faith, but it is a form of responsible judgement stemming from fidelity to the truth of Christ revealed in the Gospel. In other words, we can speak of legitimate distrust when appeals to trust becomes a tool of silencing criticism, of leaving power unchecked and of exploiting vulnerable people. The study comes to the conclusion that Christian trust and critical discernment are not mutually exclusive, but mutually dependent dimensions of a responsible Christian life.

Keywords: trust; legitimate distrust; church credibility; responsible judgement

The church's credibility crisis requires some rather complex theological and church leadership reflections. After the 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections, voices urging self-reflection have become increasingly prominent within church discourse. These voices highlighted that, apart from evoking people's criticism, the debates around church institutions, the tensions regarding participation in public life and the self-critical reflections voiced by church leaders themselves challenge the church's

self-interpretation too. Thus, the theological examination of the relationship between trust and credibility is not only a theoretical question, but an urgent task both from the point of view of the church and of society.¹

The church's confessional self-image and the ideal of the communion of saints are often cynically or provocatively invoked in public discourse, while Christians themselves must also repeatedly grapple with experiences of crisis concerning the church's mission. So, the question arises: how can the experience of the church's lack of credibility lead to the theological reconsideration of trust? When does obedience become a possible form of *cheap grace*, and how can Christians recognize the responsible role of distrust in their own relationships and church attachments?

Thus, this study interprets legitimate distrust as a form of responsible Christian judgement. It is based on the idea that Christ's commandment of love does not eliminate the need for critical judgement: although human beings live in a fragmented world, they cannot forego the risk and responsibility of love.

1. Trust as a fundamental feature of human existence

The purpose of the divine order of creation is to enable human beings to live freely with the gift of relational fullness. This fullness does not imply flawlessness or a state of completion in itself as an end in itself but refers to the rightly ordered unity of the relationships between God and man, man and man, and man and creation. People usually become aware that this unity is lost when they act against the will of God. As a result of the Fall, this rightly ordered unity is broken; people are alienated from God, from themselves, and from each other, and thus experience the fragility of human community.

People, as relational beings, carry in themselves both the desire for fullness and the experience of alienation. While longing for fulfilment in their relationships, they must grapple with the fact that their relationships with themselves, with others and with God are all shaped by brokenness.

The fact that human beings can be addressed and are capable of dialogue is a characteristic feature of their creaturely existence: they are beings who can be addressed and engaged in dialogue, and who are able to experience freedom and unconditional trust in their relationship with the Creator (Genesis 2–3).² Thus, the original trust depicted in the creation story can be understood not only as a lost quality, but as a free and risk-bearing openness to relationships that includes the possibility of loss.

The story of creation shows us that trust cannot remain just a psychological or moral issue, because it is one of the fundamental characteristics of human existence. In the Garden of Eden, full self-surrender still represents the original form of trust. In this order, the other person is not considered to be a threat or a rival, but to be a companion – a companion with whom living in community also means participating

¹Ehhez lásd pl. Dr. FEKETE Károly megszólalását: <https://szemlelek.net/fekete-karoly-tizantuli-puspok-a-politika-melyen-bekerult-a-reformatus-egyhazba/>

²Karl BARTH: *Church Dogmatics*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1960, III/2. §45.

in God's order of creation. So being open to each other and trusting the safety of the relationship ultimately stems from trusting the goodness of God and his will as Creator.

Yet, the tragedy of the Fall also brings about the breakdown of this order of trust. In their state of alienation, people reinterpret themselves and their relationships based on blaming, thus, they fail to relate to God, to themselves and to fellow human beings according to the order of creation.

2. "Trust!" – trust as the normative basis of the responsible practice of faith

The exhortation voiced in the Gospel in the face of existential threat points out the fundamental human significance of trust. "*Take courage (Trust me); it is I. Do not be afraid.*" (Mark 6:50 ESV) – Jesus says. In these words people encounter both the uncertainty threatening their existence and the possibility of courage regardless of uncertainty. Thus, trust is not an emotional state only, but also the experience of freedom and self-surrender in Christ. Though, as a result of the Fall, complete trust has been broken, it still remains a possible form of longing for fullness of human existence. In their response, people connect with the Creator who calls them, so, instead of being a passive state, trust becomes a living and active relationship. The vulnerability of man stems from their own creaturely condition, yet, a form of trust that transcends them is only made possible in this situation. This move means that one is participating in the order of creation which is called "good" in Genesis at the moment of creation. Therefore, "good" is not only a value judgement, but refers to the fullness of the relationship between God and man. Whenever people turn to God, to themselves or to others with trust, they become part of that original order of relationships which characterised human existence before the alienation.

It is especially difficult to experience this in any structure in which trust becomes conditional and appears as a tool for legitimating the exercise of power. Since where questioning the leader or the structure is understood as the lack of trust, and where credibility and maturity are measured with loyalty, the anthropological interpretation of trust becomes distorted, and receives an institutional framework. In the Christian tradition, however, the critical approach to power is not unknown.

The experience of the Reformation also underlines that the authentic practice of faith necessarily involves the critique of distorted church structures. This critical approach originates in the realization that the ultimate object of faith cannot be any kind of finite reality, not even the church itself.³ Thus, Christian trust is ultimately directed at the God who calls everyone personally, and not at any institution. Calvin understands the trust of faith in/as the unity of mind and heart, which comes to life, according to Christ's promise regarding the work of the Spirit, thanks to the goodness of God towards human beings.⁴

³Paul TILlich: *Létfátorság*, Teológiai Irodalmi Egyesület, Budapest, 2000, 170.

⁴KÁLVIN János: *Institutio. A keresztyén vallás rendszere*, Kálvin Kiadó, Budapest, 1995, III. 2.15.

Yet, the trust directed at God does not remain on a personal level of faith, but necessarily shapes connection to the Christian community.

So, the Christian living in community looks at Christ, who is the reality of freedom and self-surrender. Consequently, trust is freedom and responsibility at the same time. Though, being aware of the lost fullness, trusting anyone will always bear the mark of the fragmentary nature of our human existence – be it love, knowledge, or relationships, it cannot suggest that any relationship should be unconditionally accepted.

According to Bonhoeffer, Christian community is nothing other than a community in Christ and through Christ. Nothing more, nothing less. So, the responsible people who form the community must realize one by one that they need each other due to the will of Christ, it is only through Christ that they find one another, and that they are accepted and united as the children of God in Christ. Who lives in Christ lives by the Word. And the Word can only become reality in relation to others.⁵

Still, this theological realization cannot be exclusive to the ideal relationship with other Christians, as Christians must strive to follow Christ in a way that is also recognizable in the world. Consequently, trust is not only a question in solving relationship issues within the church, but an ethical task which involves the full relational reality of created man.

3. Legitimate distrust as a responsible Christian attitude

Legitimate distrust is a form of responsible ethical behaviour. It is a Christian attitude which, being aware of human brokenness, assesses every personal and institutional authority according to the truth of Christ revealed in the Gospel, while remaining open to the risk of love.

The recognition that one does not understand oneself based on some historical or institutional affiliations anymore, but from the point of view of the new life in Christ is at the heart of Christian identity. Thus, conversion is not a moral change only, but a reformulation of one's self-interpretation, too. The biblical images of the old man and the new man express this change of identity. Christian thinking also takes into account the possibility of radical change from an eschatological point of view. It is not simply about the passage of time, but the possibility for one's understanding of oneself, one's relationships and the purpose of one's life may undergo fundamental changes.⁶ So, Christians interpret their lives from the point of view of having gained new life in Christ again and again. And if one's life changes, one's goals must also change: it can mean nothing less than following Christ and serving the truth of the Gospel.

⁵Dietrich BONHOEFFER: *Szentek közössége*, Harmat Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, 11.

⁶Joel ROBBINS: Continuity thinking and the Problem of Christian Culture: Belief, Time, and the Anthropology of Christianity, in: *Current Anthropology* 48 (2007/1), 5–38, 11. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508690>

As Bonhoeffer warns, active life in Christ must always keep in mind the priority of the following of Christ and the truth of the Gospel. Thus, the characteristic of Christians at all times is that they act for the truth under the guidance of the love of the Spirit, so neither human sympathy, nor the expectation of obedience, and nor even desires can override the truth of Christ revealed in the Gospel.⁷ Consequently, being faithful to the truth of Christ necessarily involves distrust in some cases. It is not provocative cynicism, but a responsible Christian behaviour stemming from sensibly acknowledging the fragmentariness of human existence. Thus, true knowledge of Christ is brought into question in case of any abuse of power, expectation of obedience without critical judgement, exploiting the goodwill of vulnerable people, and even in cases of unconditional self-surrender in personal relationships. Despite the experience of the fragmentariness of human existence, Christian hope and trust remain open to experiencing love and to taking risks.

4. Conclusion

In the middle of the credibility crisis of the church, it is necessary to see that trust does not mean that critical judgement should be altogether abandoned, but that it should be practiced with responsibility. One of the defining features of Christians called and saved in Christ is that they do not regard grace as cheap and do not subordinate it to any relations of power or dependence.

In practice, it also implies that Christians do not cover up harassment or abuse with reference to defending the good reputation of the church, do not turn a blind eye to injustice, and do not consider obedience synonymous with unconditional loyalty. Thus, legitimate distrust is not the rejection of trust, but a form of trust which examines all practice and authority according to the truth of Christ. This is why the ultimate determination of Christians does not stem from authorities or institutions, not even their own vulnerability, but from the truth stated in Christ. So, the ethical direction of faith in Christ becomes visible in freedom, in the practice of love and in faithfulness to the truth.

⁷Dietrich BONHOEFFER: *Szentek közössége*, 25.

Fleas and Other Arthropods

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Abstract. This essay, responding to articles by Tamás Fabiny and István Gégény, examines the cultural contexts of the political use of biblical texts and concepts through the example of the David and Goliath metaphor. It approaches the issue on three levels: the theological interpretation of the biblical text, the cultural patterns that emerge from it, and their political appropriations. The essay draws attention to the fact that such political appropriations are often embedded in cultural traditions that have developed over several centuries. Although the separation of the languages of theology, the church, and politics is an urgent and important task today, this separation cannot be fully achieved because of these cultural embeddednesses. The essay therefore argues for the creation of a discourse that reflects on the social use of biblical concepts and metaphors not by seeking to eliminate these cultural embeddednesses, but by deepening, clarifying, and interpreting them.

Keywords: culture; master narrative; Bible; politics; David and Goliath

Biblical Narratives, Cultural Patterns, and Political Co-optations

- *Elephant here! Elephant here!*
- *Report, Elephant!*
- *Yes, sir. Elephant here!*
- *Speak quickly, Elephant, report!*
- *But it feels so good to say “Elephant”! After all, even a flea—or rather, a flea secret agent—can have an inner life, right?*
- *Drop the soul-searching, get to the point!*
- *Ah, that’s different. So, I’ve infiltrated...*

On April 23, I read Tamás Fabiny's article titled *After Örkeny, Freely on the Szemlélek website*.¹ Evaluating the post-election situation, the author touched on some peculiar manifestations of political Christianity, including how politicians have turned themselves into self-appointed preachers in recent years and how they have distorted the message of Scripture to serve their own political purposes. At the end of the article, Fabiny also mentions that the new political power is not free from this habit either, citing as an example how a politician-pastor used the biblical story of David and Goliath to frame the victory of the Tisza Party.

A few days later, also on Szemlélek, I read István Gégény's analysis, which—based on the memorable David and Goliath parallel in Péter Magyar's victory speech—discussed how (and how not) to interpret the election results from a biblical perspective.² The problems addressed by the authors—namely the political use of Christian religious concepts and theological language, as well as attempts to appropriate certain concepts—have accompanied the functioning of Fidesz governments almost throughout. The question, therefore, is not only who uses which biblical story for political purposes, but also through what cultural pathways these stories become political metaphors.

In connection with the above-mentioned articles, it occurred to me that back in September 2019, I also wrote—within the limits of what was possible—about this issue in the pages of *Reformátusok Lapja*, at that time reflecting on Viktor Orbán's Tüsványos speech and the attempt to reinterpret the concept of Christian freedom.³ My article, which could hardly be called revolutionary, was only published after lengthy negotiations, as the leaders of our church and the shapers of its public discourse did not consider these phenomena problematic; rather, they found it problematic that I considered them—and their silence—problematic.⁴

“The silence of the Church of the Word in cases of open abuse of the Word has persisted after the elections as well, so neither László Kövér's remarks about the victory of Satan nor Viktor Orbán's statements about alternative sources of the Word have really provoked any reaction.⁴ The justification may once again have been something along the lines that one does not need to speak out about everything; these are minor communicative fleas, not worth turning into ideological elephants.

At this point, by way of a kind of free association, the dialogue quoted at the beginning of this article came to mind, which can be heard in the opening scene of Attila Dargay's animated film *Captain of the Forest*. It is not mentioned in the excerpt, but a few scenes later it also becomes clear that the secret agent, renamed

¹<https://szemlelek.net/orkeny-utan-szabadon-fabiny-tamas-valasztasi-helyzetertekelese/>

²<https://szemlelek.net/david-es-goliat-hogyan-ne-ertelmezzuk-biblikus-nezopontbol-a-valasztas-eredmenyet/>

³<https://www.nkzs.hu/szabadsag-marketing/>

⁴Ezekről GÁBOR György írt saját közösségi média oldalán, illetve a Szombat folyóiratban fontos elemzéseket. Lásd pl. GÁBOR György: A „Fidesz-világ” és a „keresztény világ” azonosítása teológiai bálványképző művelet, Szombat, 2026. május 14., URL: <https://www.szombat.org/politika/a-fidesz-vilag-es-a-kereszteny-vilag-azonositasa-teologiai-balvanykepzo-muvelet>

from a flea to Elephant, bears the respectable civilian name Goliath. This Goliath is a fine little fellow. Self-sacrificing, he constantly risks his own physical safety for the Cause—that is, for the defeat of Evil; he is loyal to the Captain, and even if he cannot accomplish great deeds, he does what a flea can do: he bites. And although he remains a supporting character throughout, the Captain could hardly have defeated Evil without him. This Goliath is thus a truly David-like character.

How does a flea become Goliath—that is, how does a character in a 1987 Hungarian-Canadian-West German animated film receive a symbolic biblical name within the framework of a metaphorical game? Somehow in the same way as a large, high-performance long-lasting battery, a car-wash sponge that can tackle any stain, a tomato variety that produces enormous yields, a harbor gantry crane, or even one of the most powerful steam locomotives. So far, the idea is clear; everyone understands the reference, even those who, in 1980s Kádár-era Hungary, were not allowed to attend religious education. And I think this is where the core of the problem lies. The Bible as a whole, together with its grand narratives—as Gábor György, who has also dealt extensively with this issue, writes in one of his posts—is ‘the master narrative of Western culture, with its recurring patterns that can be recognized again and again in the present.’⁵

The essence of a master narrative lies precisely in this recurring, constant presence, its recognizability, and its role in constructing meaning. These narratives form part of culture, yet it is not so much the narratives themselves—the concrete stories in their literal sense—that matter, but rather what they signify: how they become meaningful, and how, through them, culture-producing subjects create the framework that gives meaning to the events of their everyday lives.

According to Clifford Geertz, the recently deceased American cultural anthropologist, ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of meaning he himself has spun,’⁶ and this web is culture. Geertz’s observation suggests that the things of the world do not possess universal meanings ‘encoded’ within them; rather, it is humans who continuously assign meaning to their actions, objects, environments, and stories. In this way, they create symbols, and through them, they produce culture—something they pass on and use as a form of preparedness for interpreting a changing reality. This web, therefore, on the one hand aids interpretation, but on the other hand it is subject to change, and for this reason humans often struggle with their own conceptual fabric.

The biblical King David has provided Western culture with several such grand narratives and cultural patterns. Beyond the story of Goliath, there is his struggle with Saul, the story of eating the consecrated bread, and Absalom—not to mention Bathsheba. These have become deeply embedded in the social consciousness, yet their use has often had little or nothing to do with the original biblical narratives.

⁵https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid06LcrF2ZrdNAkwaajY6fg3K94xjP9PW3LEX91ArGZ54xnpYFeXYKr9K6SuncjKXp9l&id=100002038264412

⁶Clifford GEERTZ: *Az értelmezés hatalma. Antropológiai írások*, Budapest, 1994, Osiris Kiadó, 171.

In relation to the social use of biblical narratives, we can distinguish at least three levels. The first is the theological meaning of the biblical narrative. The second is the level of cultural patterns—mostly metaphorical or rather allegorical—associated with theological interpretations, while the third is their actualizing rhetorical and political use.

We (I would say Reformed, but this is characteristic of all confessional theologies) tend to identify our own theological interpretations with the ‘original’ meaning of the biblical narratives, and then, in this context, we evaluate the solutions of the other two levels. At least in an ideal case. In less ideal cases, our cultural practices, denominational traditions, or political goals reshape our theological interpretations. Thus, for example, the period of the forced organization of collective farms became the *kairos* of a ‘deeper understanding’ of Galatians 6:2 (‘Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ’) for pastors who agitated from the pulpit in favour of believers joining cooperatives.

The question is whether we have access to the original meaning.

There is, for example, the episode that precedes the confrontation with Goliath, in which David tells Saul that when he was a shepherd and a lion or a bear came and carried off a lamb from the flock, he went after it and struck it down; if the beast attacked him, he seized it by the beard and killed it (1 Sam. 17:34–36). This is often understood as a harmless confession in which David’s faith is revealed: God helped him against the wild beasts, and will do so again now. But if we place lion-killing in its ancient Near Eastern cultural context, where the lion symbolized human and supernatural forces threatening civilization, and where killing it was the duty of the king and a sign of his power, and if we also consider that the scene’s iconography eerily resembles the image of David gripping the lion by the beard, then the innocence of David’s words immediately evaporates, and we begin to read his brother Eliab’s earlier remark differently as well. Of course, we cannot know for certain how familiar Saul and those around him, or even David himself, were with this symbolism, so this remains only a hypothesis. But it is a good example of how difficult it is to access “original” meanings, and of how important it is to be careful not to distill David into the archetype of the good—not only in his later life, but even in the context of this particular story.

And how are such cultural patterns to be assessed? If we look only at perhaps the most famous artistic representation of David, Michelangelo’s sculpture (1501–1504), we know that in the determined, battle-focused, muscular figure of David, Florence—freed from the Medici and standing up to the Papal States and other Italian cities—saw itself. That is why the statue was eventually erected at the center of the city’s political life, where even its placement required one to look up at it, and with its height of 5.17 meters it towered above everyone else like a true Goliath, one might say.

As a counterexample, we could mention the three paintings by Caravaggio dealing with David and Goliath, from the years 1600–1610. In all three, David appears as a young, still-developing boy’s body. The paintings have nothing to do with the

heroic David trope. One could say they are closer to David's "original" form, but especially in the case of the latest painting, the two competing interpretations among art historians raise many questions about the relationship between the image and the original story. Caravaggio painted his own self-portrait in Goliath, and according to one interpretation, in David we should see the boy with whom he had a homosexual relationship, while according to another, David is the young Caravaggio himself.

Both interpretations are closely tied to Baroque culture, both are thought-provoking, and both are far removed from the "original" narrative, however one defines it. At the same time, both Michelangelo's and Caravaggio's works, like the images of David in royal mirrors, the statues of David playing the harp on Protestant church organs in the Netherlands, the many prints of the repentant David in prayer books, and even Richard Gere's portrayal and many other cultural readings, all fed back into how biblical stories about David were read in a given social context and how the ideal ruler was imagined.

Turning to the third level, we see that the battle between David and Goliath is one of the oldest and most effective metaphors in political communication: a small, determined, morally just but seemingly hopeless figure, forced into battle for essentially ethical reasons, confronts a gigantic, aggressive, oppressive, and cumbersome "machine" (Goliath). Biblical parallels and metaphors are also important to us, Hungarian Reformed Christians, in national historical interpretation and identity formation.

It is enough here to refer to the narrative of the Jewish-Hungarian parallel of fate, which is also popular among Reformed preachers. On this foundation, the 19th-century romantic view of history also built the conviction that Protestants are the torchbearers of the cause of national freedom, and this idea meets the century's changing religiosity, in which concepts describing national identity gradually acquire a sacred character and, conversely, the nation—then forming in the modern sense of the word—becomes the privileged site for the experience of the sacred.⁷ The seed of political communication then fell into this well-prepared soil. For if we look only at this period, the David and Goliath metaphor was used not only by the Hungarian press, but by the British and American press as well, in presenting the 1848–49 War of Independence; Kossuth—who was also given the title "the Moses of the Hungarians" at home—was called the David of the modern age during his American tour. The metaphor worked just as well in connection with Trianon and 1956. Why?

First, because it creates immediate emotional identification: people instinctively root for the weaker one, the "underdog," whom they immediately also place in a morally superior position, since the image suggests that spirit, courage, and justice prevail over brute force.

This is probably what Orbán's government also wanted to exploit when it applied the metaphor in its struggle against "Brussels." And nothing shows more clearly how far the use of the metaphor has drifted from its biblical roots than the fact that today

⁷A témához lásd BRANDT, Juliane: Felekezeti és nemzeti identitás a 19. századi Magyarországon: a protestáns egyházak, *Századvég*, 8 (2003), 29, 3–36.

Palestinians fighting the State of Israel place themselves in the role of David and Israel in the role of Goliath.

The other important reason the metaphor works is precisely that, while its different levels can be analytically separated, in actual use those levels slide into one another and become connected. Political use builds on cultural patterns, refers to them, invokes them, and in a secularized, or more precisely laicized society—one that has largely lost knowledge of the confessional foundations of its own religion—that is enough. If theologians and church opinion-shapers then reinforce these interpretations, or at least do not dispute them, the result is also theological legitimation and a sacred character.

Why does all this matter? Because although I fully agree with Tamás Fabiny's and István Gégény's position, and I consider one of the most important long-term tasks to be separating religious-theological language from political language, I also think that a complete separation of the two is not achievable, and perhaps we should also reconsider whether that would truly be the best solution.

Around the turn of the millennium, as the popularity of Hungarian historical names steadily declined from previous decades, a few biblical names—among male names, especially David—suddenly became much more popular. Between 1995 and 1999, it was the most frequently given first male name. The situation has changed since then, of course: today David is in 17th place, displaced by Dominik, but even so, in the last ten years 8,505 boys have been given the name David.⁸ The Davids are therefore still here, and the D-size battery, or the LR20 / MN1300 type, is almost only called Goliath here—along with Germany, perhaps because of the many Hungarians living there? This may not be the most exalted dimension of Christian culture, but we live in this culture so long as we use these names, concepts, and references as self-evident, without needing a dictionary or explanation, as part of the mental preparedness through which we give meaning to the ordinary things of our lives. And of course, we sometimes misunderstand them, and there are and will be those who exploit them.

In other words, we are unlikely to be rid of the David-and-Goliath metaphor, or its political use, for quite some time. And when that does happen—because changes in our culture, such as the decline of church-based religiosity and confessional-theological awareness, may easily lead to such an outcome—then Christianity's social position will also be very different.

For the time being, I think it would be best if this phenomenon were surrounded by a strongly reflexive and critical discourse. Creating and sustaining that is one of the greatest failures of the past decades. Most church leaders and theologians have often deflected calls to speak out by referring to broader social debates about the separation of church and politics, saying that the church does not need to speak on every issue because otherwise its statements would lose their weight. (We are not

⁸<https://magyarnevek.hu/nevek/utonevstatisztika/2025>

doing well with these arthropods; we have not known how to deal, from a Reformed perspective, with the bedbugs that have flooded public discourse either.)

While the obvious truth of this reasoning cannot be denied, it nevertheless launched a kind of process of “flea-ification”: more and more often, every such issue was dismissed as a flea not worth mentioning. It was better not to speak out (we did not speak out), which was, from one angle or another, clearly advantageous; but in the meantime we let go of the discourse of cultural pattern formation, and this fed back into the church’s biblical interpretation and into how it related to politicians who had slipped into the role of preachers. So the fleas became embedded.

A Self-Devouring System: A Theological Critique of Capitalism

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Abstract. According to Max Weber’s famous thesis, Protestant ethics was one of the key driving forces behind the emergence of modern capitalism. Does this mean, however, that the capitalist economic and social order can be theologically justified? The author argues that it cannot; indeed, capitalism may rather be understood as a consequence of sin. Its defining features are the demand for continuous growth and the economic exploitation of human desire — in other words, capitalism builds the Tower of Babel. By contrast, the biblical order of the Sabbath foregrounds the practices of rest, self-limitation, and creaturely freedom, thereby calling into question the absolutization of production and consumption.

Keywords: capitalism; Protestant ethic; economic growth; desire; theological anthropology; creaturely finitude; cannibal capitalism; Sabbath; self-limitation; crisis

Finite World, Infinite Desire

It is hardly necessary today to persuade anyone that our world is in crisis. Many sense the fractures in the economic and social order; they see natural resources being depleted, inequalities widening, and human life becoming increasingly vulnerable. Yet most responses still attempt to cover these cracks with little more than a cosmetic patch. We place our hopes in more efficient technologies, more responsible consumption, stricter regulation, or somewhat fairer distribution, while rarely questioning the system that repeatedly generates these problems. It is therefore worth digging deeper and examining the foundations of capitalism from a theological perspective as well: what conception of the human person underlies it, how does it shape our desires, and what ultimate promise does it offer? Honest confrontation does not

in itself provide a ready-made solution, but it creates the possibility of recognising the nature of the disease rather than merely treating its symptoms, and of beginning the search for genuine alternatives. Honest confrontation does not in itself provide a ready-made solution, but it creates the possibility of recognising the nature of the disease rather than merely treating its symptoms, and of beginning the search for genuine alternatives.

It is sometimes said, not without a hint of malice, that capitalism and Protestantism are close relatives.

The charge is not entirely unfounded, although the relationship is considerably more nuanced than such a claim suggests. In his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber does not argue that the Reformation invented capitalism; rather, he shows how the Protestant ethic of vocation, inner-worldly asceticism, disciplined labour, thrift, and the reinvestment of profit contributed to the social habitus in which modern capitalism could take root and grow.¹ The historical relationship, however, does not constitute theological legitimisation. Precisely as Protestants, we may question capitalism's hegemonic position, because according to our faith no economic system can become an ultimate standard. The market may be a useful instrument, but it does not operate like divine providence; growth may be good, but not exclusively in material terms; and profit, under certain conditions, may be a legitimate aim of an enterprise, but it is not evidence of God's blessing.

According to a widely accepted economic definition, capitalism is an economic and social system in which most of the means of production are privately owned, economic actors make decisions on the basis of their own interests and profit-seeking objectives, and prices, incomes, and resources are allocated largely by the market – that is, through the interaction of supply, demand, and competition – rather than by central state planning.² In this view, the principal institutions of capitalism are private property, the profit motive, market competition, freedom of choice for consumers and entrepreneurs, and the conviction that the pursuit of individual self-interest can ultimately generate economic growth, prosperity, and social order. The economist and sociologist Zoltán Pogátsa goes further: in his view, these features are not in themselves sufficient to define capitalism, since they existed before capitalism as well. The system's true distinguishing characteristic is the imperative of continuous growth; the entire capitalist order is built upon it.³

At first sight, these appear to be sober, almost neutral definitions. Human beings work, undertake enterprises, assume risks, produce, and consume, while individual

¹WEBER, Max: *A protestáns etika és a kapitalizmus szelleme*, Ford. ÁBRAHÁM Zoltán, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2020.

²JAHAN, Sarwat – MAHMUD, Ahmed Saber: „What Is Capitalism?“, *Finance & Development*, 52/2, 2015.

³POGÁTSA Zoltán: *Fenntartható gazdaság vagy társadalmi összeomlás*, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó, 2023, 80–81.

decisions are coordinated – in Adam Smith’s famous metaphor – by the market’s “invisible hand.”

The theological question, however, is not whether all this can function, but what conception of humanity it presupposes. One of capitalism’s most powerful driving forces is human desire. This is not merely need, or the securing of the basic conditions of life, but the restless striving that wants more even of what is already sufficient. The system does not seek to discipline this desire – as the Christian tradition taught for many centuries – but converts it into demand, multiplies it, and builds economic growth upon it.

It does not merely buy and sell products; it exploits the dissatisfaction that is fundamentally present within the human condition, because only those who repeatedly experience a lack will repeatedly purchase. As Christopher Lasch observed, advertising manufactures “a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored.”⁴

At precisely this point, the narrative of the Fall reveals the anthropological depth upon which capitalism also draws. Human beings do not fall into sin because actual necessity compels them; this is no offence committed out of material necessity. The Garden of Eden is a place of abundance, and God gives humanity every tree but one. Yet temptation suggests that this single boundary renders the whole created order intolerable. “You will be like God,” the serpent says (Gen. 3:5): it offers not simply fruit, but limitlessness, infinity, and self-deification. The tragedy is not that human beings desire, but that desire becomes severed from gratitude, trust, and their creaturely place. According to Augustine, the human heart remains restless until it rests in God; when openness to the infinite is not directed towards God, however, human beings begin to invest finite things with infinitude. They expect unlimited security from money, complete fulfilment from consumption, salvation from technology, and an infinite future from growth.⁵ The Bible’s other ancient narrative, the Tower of Babel, presents the same motif on a social scale.

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens,” the people say (Gen. 11:4). Building is not sinful in itself, any more than labour, commerce, or material advancement. Yet the tower becomes a symbol of the loss of human measure: humanity is no longer content with the place allotted to it within creation, but attempts to break through creaturely limits, make a name for itself, and secure its own permanence in history. Classical theology, by contrast, regards infinity as an attribute of God. According to Thomas Aquinas’s distinction, God alone is infinite by virtue of his very essence; the being of every creature is received, bounded, and dependent.⁶ A limit, therefore, is not a defect in creation but part of its order. Human beings do not become complete by abolishing their limits, but by accepting them before God and learning to inhabit them well.

⁴LASCH, Christopher: *Az önimádat társadalma*, Európa Könyvkiadó, 1984. 93. o.

⁵Augustinus: *Vallomások*, I,1.

⁶AQUINÓI Tamás: *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 7, a. 1–2.

Capitalism, by contrast, promises an immanent infinity. It treats continuous growth as a necessity to which society, politics, human time, and ultimately nature itself must conform. Yet infinite growth is impossible in a finite world. Arable land, drinking water, mineral resources, energy sources, the regenerative capacity of ecosystems, and even the endurance of the human body, attention, and nervous system are all limited. As early as 1972, the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth* examined how the growth of population, industrial production, food production, pollution, and the consumption of non-renewable resources collide on a finite planet.⁷ The report did not offer a prediction tied to a single date, but a systemic warning: unlimited expansion may lead to overshoot and decline unless humanity changes course.

This is why Nancy Fraser describes capitalism as cannibalistic. The system does not merely extract profit from labour; it also consumes the background conditions of its own survival: nature, care, communities, and democratic institutions.⁸ It devours everything it can reach and returns it as a commodity or resource. Rest becomes a recreation industry, art becomes entertainment, attention becomes data, relationships become network value, nature becomes raw material, and the human body becomes performance. Capitalism is almost incapable of self-limitation, because stopping – or even slowing down – counts as a crisis within its own mode of operation. The absence of growth destabilises the expectations that keep the entire system in motion. Capitalism therefore does not merely use human desire; it institutionalises the inability to say “enough.” Unless it encounters external and internal limits, it will sooner or later collide with the physical boundaries it is ideologically unwilling to acknowledge. In this sense, collapse is not an apocalyptic prediction attached to an arbitrarily chosen date, but the endpoint of a system logic that demands unlimited expansion on finite foundations.

One of the Bible's most radical responses to this logic is the Sabbath. The Sabbath sanctifies non-action: it declares that the world will not collapse if, for one day, human beings neither produce nor purchase nor increase their market performance. Walter Brueggemann therefore calls the Sabbath an act of resistance to the pharaonic economy, in which there is no rest because ever more bricks are always required.⁹ The Sabbath interrupts the cycle of production and consumption and restores creaturely freedom to the human person. Within the Sabbath order, the human being, the servant, the stranger, and the animal may all rest; in the sabbatical year, even the land itself is granted rest (Exod. 20:8-11; Deut. 5:12-15; Lev. 25:1-7).

⁷MEADOWS, Donella H. – MEADOWS, Dennis L. – RANDERS, Jørgen – BEHRENS, William W.: *The Limits to Growth*, New York, Universe Books, 1972.

⁸FRASER, Nancy: *Kannibál kapitalizmus*, Budapest, Open Books, 2024, különösen 46–50.

⁹BRUEGGEMANN, Walter: *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

The Sabbath is not an economic programme but a theological rebellion: it reminds us that the world is not sustained by our performance and that our worth does not depend on how much we produce.

At present, there is no global social alternative to capitalism ready to take its place. This, however, does not render theological critique superfluous. On the contrary, it is precisely now that we must learn to speak differently about work, growth, property, sufficiency, and the good life. The aim is not to draft an ecclesiastical economic plan, but to ensure that, when the signs of collapse become visible, we possess a language with which to offer consolation and orientation. We must be able to say that human worth is not determined by market performance, that less is not necessarily failure, that rest is not uselessness, that finitude is not a source of shame, and that the future of life does not depend on unlimited growth. Even if certain forms of Protestant ethos historically contributed to the emergence of the spirit of capitalism, the gospel requires us to declare that this spirit is not identical with the Spirit of God. Infinity belongs to God. We, for our part, must finally learn to be gratefully human.

A wall is not a building

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Abstract. We are naturally inclined to divide humanity into two categories: “us” and “them,” and “they”—the other group—are perceived as a threat to “us.” For this reason, people build not only physical walls but also invisible barriers by which they seek to protect their identity. Referring to the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians, the author of the Letter to the Ephesians argues that such dividing walls are created by hostility, and that hostility itself is rooted in legalism. The moment we make salvation dependent on “commandments expressed in ordinances,” we begin to rebuild those dividing walls, abolish Christ’s work of reconciliation, and arbitrarily exclude the “other” group from salvation. Yet, as Viktor Kókai Nagy argues, there is another kind of building in which we may participate if we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit. We ourselves become the living building blocks of God’s dwelling place—the Church. And here the walls are of a very different kind, for this is a building that is capable of growing and continually expanding.

Keywords: Ephesians; dividing wall; hostility; reconciliation; legalism; Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; church; Holy Spirit; Christian identity

It is natural for us, human beings, to build walls. We take shelter behind them from the hardships of nature, we surround our cities and protect national borders with them. Walls have proven to be an extremely useful invention over the centuries, so much so that it is easy to forget that the first walls were built by Cain (Gen 4:17). At the same time, readers of the Bible know well that walls alone—however solid they are—do not provide real protection; they can be torn down, and the city they defend can be conquered and destroyed. And this is true not only of physically constructed walls, but of those inner dividing walls by which we seek to protect our identity.

“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” (Eph 2:11–22; NIV)

Discussing an ancient example of hostility in Christ’s congregation thousands of years ago, the Letter to the Ephesians also speaks of walls and buildings. For today’s Bible-readers the conflict between Jews and Gentiles—this tension about being or not being circumcised—seems distant and of little relevance. Yet these groupings are interchangeable: they can just as easily be replaced by liberals and fundamentalists, the weak and the strong, the timid and the confident. What matters, therefore, is not the labels we attach to conflicting groups, but how we respond to the presence of those within our communities who hold different views on certain questions. Maybe – not overstressing the elasticity of the text – they have different views on how to connect to the community surrounding us, in more expansive terms, to the world in which we live.

Jews and Gentiles

The letter to the Ephesians was not written by Paul. It belongs to the Deutero-Pauline Letters, to use a theological term. What does this mean? It certainly does not imply a value judgement, as if the text was less important or less authoritative than any other New Testament writing. Nor does it justify setting its teaching against that of the apostle’s undisputed letters. Its only purpose is to situate the text within its own historical context in order to understand its message more precisely.

Paul’s mission was often attacked because he reached out to the Gentiles with the gospel of Jesus, insisting that Gentiles can belong to Christ in their own right. Most of the attacks came from Jews who also confessed Christ, but they believed that the Gentiles first had to convert to Judaism before they could become followers of Jesus.

This conflict is central in the Letter to the Galatians, where Paul rebukes the congregation for imposing laws on Gentile Christians which had failed to bring even the

Jews to salvation. He accuses them of endangering the freedom in Christ, and the salvation through grace apart from the law.¹

Only faith in Christ has the power to save—this was Luther’s great insight which became the founding principle of the Reformation.

However, when we read the Letter to the Ephesians, we see a very different picture; here it is not the Gentiles who need protection from the Jews, but the other way around. The writer addresses the letter to Gentile Christians. He wants them to understand that hostility is not an option, for Christ has torn down the dividing barriers. As the Gentiles constitute the majority of the congregation, we can assume that the letter was written a couple of decades later. Another indication of this is that the community is described as built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The apostles appear as great figures of the past, while prophets are the teachers of the next generation. The author of the letter, who must have been part of the school founded by Paul, adapts the apostle’s teachings to this new situation; he warns the community not to repeat the mistake the Jews made earlier. Hostility based on legalism inevitably carries the danger of excluding certain people from salvation. Some may even be denied citizenship. According to the letter’s argument, we cannot treat anyone as stranger or foreigner in the community because all are fellow citizens.

After all, what makes someone a foreigner or a stranger? It is the law—the law with its commandments and ordinances—that provide the basis for hostility, even though we may look to it for protection.

Past and Present

To drive his point home, the author reminds his Gentile readers that they were once separated from Christ and excluded from Israel because of the law. More precisely, they could not belong to Christ, as Gentiles could only be foreigners and strangers in Israel. But now, you, my dear readers who were once far away—writes the author, who was probably a Jewish Christian—, have been brought near. You have become part of Israel through the blood of Christ. By reconciling the two peoples, the Jew and the Gentile, his death and resurrection have enabled them to walk the same path together. This was made possible only because he destroyed the dividing barrier, that is, hostility itself. To accomplish this, he abolished the law that had provided the foundation for hostility. The text leaves no doubt about the author’s meaning; for he explicitly speaks of “the law with its commands and regulations” (Eph 2:15). Therefore, the work of Christ not only abolishes the consequence—hostility—but everything that makes it possible. He destroys not only the superstructure of hostility between people – which can be rebuilt – but the commandments and decrees of the law itself, on which it rests. He brings reconciliation not through laws,² but by be-

¹See: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians/%203&version=NIV>

²About the topic of reconciliation see: Viktor KÓKAI-NAGY. “A megbékélés fogalma Pálnál,” *Studia Universitatis Babes Bolyai* no. 1 (2020): 61–82. (https://www.academia.edu/43986634/A_megbékélés_fogalma_Pálnál) <https://doi.org/10.24193/subbtref.65.1.04>

coming the new foundation of this peace: “he himself is our peace” (Eph 2:14). And he has brought peace not only among human beings, but he reconciled humanity with God, embracing all people regardless of being far from Israel or near, of being circumcised or Gentile. In the letter to the Ephesians, the church is where salvation takes place, this is where believers receive the gift of reconciliation.

Humans have always tended to divide people into two categories: “us” and “them.” In Judaism this distinction took the form of “us: Jews” and “them: Gentiles.” Gentiles, in turn, divided humanity into the categories of “us: civilized”, “them: barbarian.” After the destruction of the Temple (70 CE), Judaism, as a response to the great trauma, chose a path in which—out of a desire to protect the Torah and Jewish identity—it clung even more strongly to the Law and its commandments. Later, the rabbis came to see it as necessary to protect these commandments with an additional “fence” of further regulations.³ In other words, they did exactly what the author of the letter warns against. He bids his readers not to make this mistake, but to abandon this well-established, reassuring, and perhaps temporarily effective practice of wall-building. In the earliest period, it seems that this was indeed successfully accomplished.

“The multinational and -cultural community, which slowly integrated the barbarians, was really formed into one nation by Christian faith. A third clan, a *tercium genus* appeared.”⁴

Wall and Temple

Christianity cuts itself from its own roots if it chooses to build the wall of hostility, since this will inevitably be founded upon commandments and regulations – in other words, we recreate that which arises from human nature, yet stands in complete opposition to the reconciliation grounded in the cross. This is what the Letter to the Ephesians seeks to guard us against. Do not repeat the mistake made by the first generation of Jewish Christians, and then throughout history by many countries and communities who called themselves Christians.

If we can realize and accept that we are not foreigners and strangers but the fellow-citizens with the saints and God’s household, we can become part of a new process which is not initiated by us but happens to us. This process is not based on the Law but on the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets with Christ himself as the cornerstone, who guarantees its harmonious fitting together. According to some scholars, the word translated here as “cornerstone” can also mean keystone, as in the top stone of an arch, however, this meaning fits less well with the argument of the letter. After all, the central point is that hostility is grounded in the Law, which Christ has abolished by bringing peace and creating in himself a new humanity, the people belonging to Christ. Note that reconciliation is not grounded in humanity but in Christ himself. The law was unable to bring reconciliation, instead, it gener-

³See: <https://zsido.com/fejezetek/megyeri-jonatan-bun-es-buntetes-ereny-es-jutalom/>

⁴Ferenc Szűcs. “Teológiai etika,” (Budapest, 1993): 92.

ated hostility. Another foundation was therefore necessary, which was laid down by the apostles and the prophets – but they could not have succeeded unless the cornerstone had already been given, which sets the direction, and guarantees stability. This foundation is not optional, but the only possibility (cf. 1Cor 3:10–15),⁵ since only in this way can stable walls be built.

But then do we have to build walls after all? Isn't the author contradicting himself here? Actually, no, as there is a crucial difference. Here it is we ourselves who are being built: "and in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22; NIV). We are the bricks in this construction. This also explains the otherwise striking claim that this building—the holy temple—is capable of growing.

In this temple, then, there is no justification for hostility as a dividing wall, since the identity of the church's members is not founded on the Law but defined by belonging to Christ.

Thus, the laws that once justified hostility also loses its force, and there is no need for the defence lines that commandments might erect around us. Every regulation intended to protect our sovereignty ultimately testifies to the absence—or at best the fragility—of what it seeks to defend. Indeed, hostility is a sign of fear or lack of trust in one's own faith and authenticity. This cannot be corrected by law. Hostility and separation are signs of a weakened identity.

"A responsible life is not identical with the ethics of detached purity. It is fundamentally participation in the reality to which we belong, the reality we take upon ourselves before Christ."⁶

Building barriers of hostility is not identical with building the walls of the temple. Let us acknowledge that the dividing barrier of hostility offers only us a false sense of security. It is a futile effort and a waste of time. We are not to build the dividing walls of hostility, but rely peacefully on the Spirit, through whom we are being built into the dwelling place of God.

⁵See: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1/%20Corinthians/%203&version=NIV>

⁶FÜSTI-MOLNÁR Szilveszter, Akinek mondja magát – és ami valójában, 4. (https://www.academia.edu/168391694/Aminek_mondja_magat_FMSz?email_work_card=view-paper)