“Clear as heav’n:”
Herbert’s Poetry
and Rhetorical “Divinitie”

KENNETH
J. E. GRAHAM

Cet article montre que George Herbert, tout comme d’autres interprètes de cette période, a probablement utilisé une herméneutique rhétorique dans le but de mettre en contexte et d’harmoniser des textes bibliques en apparence contradictoires. On donne premièrement des exemples de ce processus herméneutique à l’aide des réponses d’Érasme et Thomas Swynnerton au problème d’interprétation des textes bibliques sur le pouvoir de la volonté. On examine ensuite l’approche de Herbert dans son exégèse biblique du Country Parson et de la « Divinitie ». On montre finalement que l’interprétation de Herbert des passages du Nouveau Testament sur le pouvoir des clés dans le « The Priesthood » et le « Church-Lock and Key », tout comme ceux de Luther, Calvin et Richard Hooker, suggère une influence des habitudes rhétoriques de la pensée.

Reformation theology, and particularly the core doctrine of justification by faith, continues to bedevil critics of Protestant poetry. In *Milton and the Preaching Arts*, for example, Jameela Lares takes as a starting point the distinction between faith and practice, knowing and doing, doctrine and discipline. She terms this distinction “the Reformation dichotomy,” and shows that it is reflected in a prominent division of sermons into those which teach correct doctrine and reprove false—that is, those about faith—and those which inculcate good behaviour and correct bad—those about works.¹ In Herbert criticism, which has itself sometimes been divided along Reformation fault-lines, a similar sense of a split between a spiritual world where faith is all that matters and a corporeal world where works must be performed led Debora Shuger to invoke (though later to qualify) Luther’s *Zwei-Regimente-Lehre*, a form of two kingdoms dualism.² Although Paul Cefalu has recently chal-

lenged Shuger's understanding of two kingdoms theology, which he denies Herbert held, he nevertheless agrees that "Herbert maintains a distinction between the spheres of morality and grace."³ What for these critics is a dichotomy, a dualism, or simply a key distinction is for others a contradiction at the heart of Reformed religion and poetry. For example, Carol Kaske explores in *Spenser's Biblical Poetics* what she calls the "irreconcilable contradiction" between free will and justification by faith. Spenser, she argues, "could not make up his mind" on the question, and consequently wrote contradictory positions into *The Faerie Queene*, sometimes calling for works, sometimes for faith.⁴ Similarly, Michael Schoenfeldt and Achsah Guibbory have argued that Herbert's doctrinal dualism yields what they have labeled ideological conflict and contradiction in his poetry.⁵ In this way, the difficulty of comprehending a religion that privileges faith while still insisting upon works has led to a tendency to see early modern Protestantism and its God as fundamentally incoherent.

While such readings usefully place poetry at the centre of complex historical struggles (although often without clarifying the extent to which the poets themselves may have understood these struggles), in this paper I want to explore an explanation for at least some of these apparent contradictions that is both intellectually respectable and historically available to Herbert—that Herbert might have encountered either as a student and practitioner of rhetoric or as a student and teacher of theology. This explanation lies in a rhetorical hermeneutics that harmonizes apparently contradictory texts by reading for their writers' intentions rather than for their literal, uncontextualized truth. I will first examine the application of this technique of reading to questions of faith and works in Erasmus's defence of free will and in the first English Reformed rhetoric, Thomas Swynnerton's *Tropes and Figures of Scripture* (1537–38). I will then explore Herbert's similar view of a hermeneutics that harmonizes the Bible's diverse expressions of the Law and the Gospel, before arguing that this reading technique might illuminate Herbert's response to New Testament texts on the power of St. Peter's keys in two poems, "The Priesthood" and "Church-Lock and Key."

The centrepiece of sixteenth-century Protestant hermeneutics was contextualization, which was a multi-faceted principle. According to Heinrich Bullinger's popular *Decades*, for example, the would-be exegete should "mark upon what occasion everything is spoken, what goeth before, what followeth after, at what season, in what order, and of what person any thing is spoken."⁶ Here one can distinguish aspects of what Kathy Eden terms textual contextualization—"what goeth before, what followeth after," "in what order"—from components of what she calls historical contextualization—"oc-

casion," "season," "person."⁷ Textual contextualization commonly included collation, or comparison with similar passages. Historical contextualization could mean considering as much as the commentator knew about the circumstances of composition, with the end, usually, of coming to a fuller understanding of the writer's intention. Martin Bucer's commentary on Romans, for instance, considers both the occasion and the purpose of Paul's writing, while textual context, historical context, and intention were among the chief considerations of Calvin's extensive commentaries.⁸ Bullinger, Bucer, and Calvin were all important influences on English Protestantism.

Erasmus, of course, was also influential in England, and shared with Protestants a similar set of hermeneutic principles. We can see how he applied these in the free will debate with Luther in the 1520s. Erasmus's position in the debate is not simply pro-free will. Rather, he is ambivalent, certain only that Luther is too certain. He notes that scripture sometimes asserts the power of the will and sometimes denies it, but he denies that this amounts to a contradiction. Rather, he contends that it is sometimes appropriate to stress human agency and sometimes appropriate to stress human dependence on God. It depends upon the rhetorical consideration of audience, another important aspect of historical contextualization. When facing the "great ... apathy of mankind in seeking after godliness" and the "great ... evil ... [of] despair," Erasmus writes, we need to call upon the motivational force of a belief in free will; but when responding to the "intolerable ... arrogance of some who boast their own works," we need to evoke humility by reminding them of how little they can truly claim for their own efforts.⁹ Whether interpreting scripture or planning our own speeches, then, we need to keep in mind the purposes for which words are spoken. As Erasmus writes, referring to Paul, "it is not expedient to speak the truth to everybody at every time and in every way"(p. 41). For Erasmus, practical consequences as well as abstract truth must be considered.

Although Erasmus uses these rhetorical arguments to attack Luther's position against free will, they can be used just as easily to defend it; and so they were by Swynnerton in his manuscript rhetoric. While making the point that works are a metonymy or sign of faith, Swynnerton takes up James's problematic statement that justification is by works. Unlike Luther, Swynnerton does not dismiss James as the author of an "epistle full of straw."¹⁰ Instead, he finds a way to reconcile the letter with Reformed doctrine. He does this partly by distinguishing outward justification from inward, like Tyndale, and by arguing that James refers only to a publicly visible form of justification. But he also explains why James wished to stress works in the first place. He did so, Swynnerton writes, "to confound the carnell and Idell disputers

of Goddes Gospell, which prate muche of faithe, and saye they have faithe, when they have no faithe, but are very faitheles bestes.”¹¹ Here Swynnerton’s logic is the mirror image of Erasmus’s: while Erasmus explained that we must preach faith to those “who boast of their good works,” Swynnerton’s James preaches works to those who “bragg and bost of faith”(141). For both, the statements are less doctrinal than practical, less abstract truth claims than actions designed to achieve particular ends. Both, that is, view language rhetorically, in context, rather than philosophically.

Because this rhetorical hermeneutics was widespread among the overlapping categories of humanists and early Protestants, it would not be surprising if Herbert shared it. His two main considerations of theological method, while not conclusive, suggest that he did. The first of these appears in Chapter 4 of *The Country Parson*, where Herbert outlines four means for understanding scripture. The third “is a diligent Collation of Scripture with Scripture. For all Truth being consonant to it self, and all being penn’d by one and the self-same Spirit, it cannot be, but that an industrious, and judicious comparing of place with place must be a singular help for the right understanding of the Scriptures.”¹² Herbert then moves from textual contextualization to historical contextualization:

To this may be added the consideration of any text with the coherence thereof, touching what goes before, and what follows after, as also the scope of the Holy Ghost. When the Apostles would have called down fire from Heaven, they were reprov’d as ignorant of what spirit they were. For the Law required one thing, and the Gospel another: yet as diverse, not as repugnant: therefore the spirit of both is to be considered, and weighed. (p. 229)

Herbert’s example of James and John’s misunderstanding in Luke 9:54–55 is intriguing, for it attempts to elucidate the interpreter’s task by comparing it to the struggle of historical actors to understand the history they are in. This suggests that reading and acting resemble each other in requiring historical judgment, particularly when the text is history, as with the historical narrative of the gospels. Just as the apostles needed to understand what spirit should guide their actions at any moment in order to know what to speak, the interpreter needs not only to know whether the words he or she reads express Law or Gospel, but to understand why. To say that different passages speak with different “spirits,” then, is akin to saying that they speak for different purposes or with different intentions, since both spirit and intention respond to and act within specific historical circumstances. So while Herbert’s example is somewhat oblique, and doesn’t permit a confident declaration that he read scriptural passages with an eye to their speakers’ intentions in the

way Erasmus and Swynnerton illustrate, his discussion of "the scope of the Holy Ghost" does suggest that, like them, he saw the scriptures as animated by "diverse" but finally compatible spirits, one of which would emphasize works, the other faith, and that he understood these spirits as needing, like intentions, to be read rhetorically, within history.

Herbert's second main consideration of theological method, the poem "Divinitie," supports the conclusion that Herbert saw both statements of the Law (including the moral law) and statements of the Gospel as integral to the Bible's message. "Divinitie" begins with an attack on Scholastic hermeneutics that recalls many such attacks by humanists, who opposed their own rhetorical method to the more "philosophical" proceedings of the Schoolmen.¹³ After the first two stanzas introduce the false triumph of reason in "Divinities transcendent skie," the third stanza asks whether Christ couldn't have done a better job of providing "definitions" and "curious questions and divisions."¹⁴ The questions are ironic and satirical, closely resembling Erasmus's attack on the "tortured prose" and "equivocations" of the Schoolmen in *The Praise of Folly*. "Paul could display faith," says Folly,

But when he said, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," that was a very un-academic definition. In 1 Corinthians 13, he wrote a wonderful exhortation to charity, but he altogether failed to divide charity into its component parts or define it in the proper dialectical way.¹⁵

Herbert's attack on definitions and divisions thus links him to humanist attitudes towards language and exegesis and points towards their rhetorical basis. This link is confirmed when he drops the irony in the fourth stanza. Like Paul's, Christ's doctrine was "cleare as heav'n," and it is such doctrinal "beams of truth, which onely save." We are reminded here how close the humanist rejection of what they considered overly elaborate exegesis is to the mainly Protestant insistence on the plain sense of scripture.

The next two stanzas touch upon Herbert's position on doctrinal issues of faith and works. What are the doctrinal "beams of truth, which onely save"? The examples in stanzas five and six indicate that Herbert considered both practical morality and mysteries of faith to be part of this saving, plain truth. The fifth stanza cites several of Christ's best-known teachings, including the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule:

*Love God, and love your neighbour. Watch and pray.
Do as ye would be done unto.*

This is an interesting list from the perspective of the “Reformation dichotomy.” Is love a work or simply an attitude, an ontological state uncontrolled by will? Can it be commanded? What is the relation between the love of God and the love of our neighbour? Is prayer a work? And what is the doctrinal status of moral injunctions and exhortations such as the Golden Rule? It is not, of course, only Herbert critics who have spilled gallons of ink writing on such topics and who are therefore potential targets, in the next two lines, of Herbert’s “handsome Irony,” as George Ryley termed it nearly three centuries ago in his commentary on *The Temple* (1714–15).¹⁶ But it is interesting that Rosemond Tuve and several subsequent critics, labouring to define Herbert’s view of love, have missed the irony, seeing the lines as Herbert’s acknowledgement of the difficulty of such biblical texts.¹⁷ After the declaration of scriptural clarity in the previous stanza, however, Herbert’s three sentences are much more likely intended to illustrate that perspicuity. Each, as Chana Bloch has noted, “is abridged in such a way as to point up its simple truth”(21);¹⁸ each thus contrasts pointedly with the “curious questions” of the third stanza, the irony of which prepares us for that irony’s return in stanza five.

What follows in the sixth stanza also clarifies Herbert’s ironic intent, for the adversative “But” that begins the stanza turns the thought, not to something easier than “Watch and pray,” but, as Ryley understood, to something much harder:

But he doth bid us take his bloud for wine.
 Bid what he please; yet I am sure,
 To take and taste what he doth there designe,
 Is all that saves, and not obscure.

When read in the context of the poem’s discussion of scriptural controversy, the eucharistic language calls to mind the bitter and divisive sixteenth-century controversy over the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. Christ’s words on the subject were famously difficult for the reason to understand—filtered through the Reformers’ scorn, the Vulgate’s *hoc est enim meum corpus* gave us the phrase hocus pocus—but were, the Reformers insisted, accessible to faith. As Luther wrote,

When I fail to understand how bread can be the body of Christ, I, for one, will take my understanding prisoner and bring it into obedience to Christ; and, holding fast with a simple mind to His words, I will firmly believe, not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ.¹⁹

Whether or not Herbert refers literally to the sacrament of communion in this stanza, his point would appear to be the same as Luther’s: God may ask of us

what he wishes, and we are to respond faithfully and obediently, whether we understand or not.²⁰

The crucial point for our purposes is that this obedient faith does not supersede any response anticipated to the partly moral instructions of stanza five. The experiential "To take and taste" balances the pedagogical "he taught and gave," and "Is all that saves" exactly matches "which onely save," giving stanzas four through six a frame and a structured coherence within the poem and indicating that both the clearer instructions of stanza five and the more puzzling request of stanza six are part of the essential message. For Herbert, injunctions to works and calls to faith, the spirit of the Law and the spirit of the Gospel, are equally authentic parts of God's Word.²¹ Both are ultimately matters of the saving faith with which the poem concludes. The biblical language of works and the biblical language of faith, that is, may be "diverse," but they are not "repugnant." Each, in the right circumstances, serves a useful purpose.

To see how this understanding of the Word might affect our reading of apparent contradictions in Herbert's poetry, I will look at how he treats the power of the keys in "The Priesthood" and "Church-Lock and Key." Both are challenging poems that have divided critics around the issues of clerical power, in the first case, and of the individual's power to effect salvation, in the other. Both might be taken to illustrate the ideological contradiction now often seen as normative in Herbert and post-Reformation Protestantism. But I want to show that they might also be seen as consistent with rhetorical hermeneutics applied to one of the most perplexing aspects of God's Word to the early modern Protestant mind, the power of St. Peter's keys.

The subject of considerable controversy during the Reformation, the power of the keys resembles the power of the will, concerning not the ability of the individual to choose good or evil but the authority of human agents to discipline saints and sinners on behalf of God. Its scriptural basis lies chiefly in three New Testament texts. One of these is John 20:23, where Jesus, having breathed the Holy Ghost on the disciples, tells them that "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained"(AV). In the other two, Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, Jesus speaks of "binding" and "loosing." The first of these is the only one of the three to mention keys; Jesus, having told Peter that he is the rock upon which he will build his church, says: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In the Middle Ages these passages were made the basis of ecclesiastical powers such as excommunication and the confessional, which in turn were the means

of enforcing church law. As Donald Kelley writes, “The translation of this remark of Christ to Peter ... into legal terms ... represents the central theme of the story of canon law.”²²

Consequently, when Luther pioneered the Protestant view of this ecclesiastical power in his 1530 treatise *The Keys*, he complained that Roman Catholics “have made the office of the keys into a law.”²³ To do so is a fundamental error, he wrote, because “the keys are not associated with the performance of any works” (p. 375). Instead, the emphasis of Luther’s interpretation of the keys falls on faith and the spiritual power of the Word, which alone can bind or loose: “He who believes the key which threatens has satisfied it before and without performing any works... . He who has faith in the key [which looses], has satisfied it by means of such faith, before and without performing any works” (pp. 375–76). We should therefore “Rely on the words of Christ and be assured that God has no other way to forgive sins than through the spoken Word,” which is no less God’s Word for being “spoken through men” (pp. 365–66). This would become a central Protestant emphasis.

However, while stressing that the power of the keys is a function of the Word in a way that limits the authority of the church hierarchy, Luther also accepts the full force of the power that the keys impart to the church. “The key which binds,” he writes,

is the power ... to punish the sinner who refuses to repent by means of a public condemnation to eternal death and separation from the rest of Christendom. And when such a judgment is pronounced, it is as a judgment of Christ himself... . The loosing key is the power or office to absolve the sinner who makes confession and is converted from sins, promising again eternal life. And it has the same significance as if Christ himself passed judgment.”(p. 372)

Luther, in fact, firmly rejects the idea of a *clavis errans*, or erring key: when the church excommunicates or absolves it does not err. Such inerrancy, however, applies only to true churches. False churches, such as Rome, do not possess the keys: “the pope really never bound or loosed any person,” because “where the Word of God is not found the keys do not remain either” (p. 362). Luther is not especially concerned with the institutional details of how this power operates. He cites Matthew 18:15–17, stresses the role of the congregation (in “tell it to the church”), and comments that “You cannot go wrong if you follow his [Christ’s] instructions” (p. 369).

Later Protestants were divided on this power. Calvin wrote that the power of binding was “accidental and as it were unnatural to the Gospel,” and worried that scriptural statements of the power of the keys appeared

to give men power over things that "cannot be in man's power."²⁴ Richard Hooker also treats the keys carefully. He asserts that "really to effect the removal or continuance of sinne in the Soule of any Offendor, is no Priestly act, but a work which far exceedeth their ability."²⁵ The church may apply or remove rewards and punishments of its own, but as regards God's actions its power is only to *declare* what God has done (O1r). The most controversial proto-Laudian works of the 1620s, Richard Montagu's *A New Gagg for an Old Goose* and *Appello Caesarem*, describe the clerical power of the keys with similar caution.²⁶ In contrast, the moderate Puritan Richard Greenham wrote:

Behold a miracle, heaven made subject to earth. O what is man that thou art so mindfull of him, not onely to give him the rule of the earth, but even of heaven? Whom the Church doth loose on earth, the Lord doth loose in heaven; and whom the Church hath bound on earth, he also hath bound in heaven. He doth many things without us. yet [sic] when we have done this, he will not alter it, nor doe otherwise.

Greenham also stated that "God cannot loose them whom the Church hath bound."²⁷ We shouldn't assume, then, that a strong view of the power of the keys indicates Catholic or Anglo-Catholic tendencies.

The doctrinal challenges posed by the scriptural texts on the keys were inseparable from the hermeneutic challenges those texts posed. One sign of this is the frequent return of commentators to first principles. Luther and Hooker, for example, comment explicitly on the need to be guided by context. To guard against the excessive claims made for the keys by the pope, Luther warns, "We must observe closely of what Christ is speaking in any given passage and treat the words accordingly, so as not to stretch them beyond their meaning" (p. 374). Hooker, explaining that the power to loose from sin operates differently for voluntary penitents than for those who must be "brought to amendment by Ecclesiasticall censures," observes that "the words wherein he [Christ] hath given this Authority must be so understood as the subject or matter whereupon it worketh will permit"(M4v).²⁸

But it is when commentators like Luther, Calvin, and Hooker discuss the purposes and effects of scriptural texts on the keys that their rhetorical hermeneutics are most pronounced. Here their interpretations of the power of the keys bear a striking resemblance to Erasmus's and Swynnerton's interpretations of the power of the will. Because Christ knows the frailty of human nature, Luther reasons,

He has given us this remedy, the key which binds, so that we might not remain too confident in our sins, arrogant, barbarous, and without God, and in the key which looses, that

we should not despair in our sins. Thus aided we should stay on a middle road, between arrogance and faint-heartedness, in genuine humility and confidence... (p.373)

Calvin follows Luther closely. On the one hand, he writes, Christ “wanted to give comfort to troubled consciences and release them from fear, and so He declares that whoever has sinned is freed from guilt before God if he is reconciled to the Church.” On the other hand, “Christ wants to break down obstinacy by fear and declares that the judgment which they [“ungodly rascals”] now despise will be ratified in heaven.”²⁹ Finally, Hooker, whose interpretation of the keys owes much to Calvin, makes similar claims. Christ “promised to ratifie” the censures of his ministers “lest their acts should be slenderly accounted of, or had in contempt”(D1r), and he gave the power to loose or absolve from sins partly “to the end that hereby, as well his Ministers might take encouragement to doe their duty with all Faithfulness, as also his people admonition, gladly, with all reverence”(M2v). The dual desires to encourage and free some from fear while instilling a healthy fear of authority in others ties the interpretive challenge of the keys closely to the interpretive challenge of the will.

Herbert’s better-known reference to the keys, the first stanza of “The Priesthood,” initially appears to have less in common with these cautious, rhetorically sensitive interpretive moments than with Greenham’s strong support for this clerical power:

Blest Order, which in power dost so excell,
That with th’one hand thou liftest to the sky,
And with the other throwest down to hell
In thy just censures; fain would I draw nigh,
Fain put them on, exchanging my lay-sword
For that of th’ holy Word.

Critics have been troubled by these lines. Diana Benet writes that “In the context of the employment sequence, ... [this] reference to the sword of power in an embattled world seems a reference to a different universe.” Christopher Hodgkins comments that Herbert here “describes the Order’s power in awe-struck terms that usually refer to the power of God himself,” a perception James Boyd White amplifies when he calls the speaker’s imagination “that this power, which actually is God’s own, would belong to him if he were a priest [...] a distortion of mind and feeling.”³⁰ But this is both the point and the difficulty of scriptural passages on the keys: they do appear to place in human hands a power belonging to God. And in these lines, Herbert appears willing to do so too.

However, it is possible that Herbert intends to refer to a more limited power here, just as many Protestants thought that scriptural texts on the power of the keys referred to a more limited power than might appear. He might, for example, have in mind the role of gestures in the pulpit, as William Perkins does when he writes in his *Arte of Prophecyng* that "The shifting up of the eye and hand signifieth confidence, the casting down of the eyes signifieth sorrow and heaviness."³¹ He might also refer more generally to the power of "th' holy Word," since the passage on the keys in Matthew 16 was frequently taken to refer to a pedagogical power inherent in holy doctrine.³² If he is referring to disciplinary censures rather than doctrinal instruction, he might mean to suggest the limits of church censures by noting that they must be "just," in the same way that Hooker emphasizes that God ratifies only "orderly and lawfull proceeding[s]" (D1r). Finally, if the gestures are understood to accompany a fundamentally verbal act of censure—a speech act—Herbert might again see such verbal power in the limited way Hooker describes when explaining his understanding of ecclesiastical binding and loosing as declarative only. Although "the Ministerial sentence of private Absolution . . . can be no more than a Declaration what God hath done," Hooker writes, ministers can still be said to absolve. Certain words, such as "to blesse, to justifie and to absolve, are as commonly used for words of judgement, or declaration, as of true and reall efficacie." Hence "it may be soundly affirmed and thought that God alone doth remit and retain sins, although hee hath given power to the Church to doe both; but he one way, and the Church another" (N4v). Herbert's "Blest Order," then, may lift and throw down in a way quite different from God's.

The remainder of "The Priesthood" supports such conjectures, qualifying the strong view of clerical power. Herbert's stress on the insufficiency of "foul and brittle" earthen vessels to perform the "sacred and hallowe'd" tasks of God signals a partial retreat from the opening elevation of priestly power, as, perhaps, does his concluding hope that God will of his "lowly matter" make a vessel "for high uses meet." Herbert also continues the hands imagery begun in the first stanza, using it to describe the relation of human to divine power in a way that may call into question the former:

When God vouchsafeth to become our fare,
Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands.

Heather Asals correctly observes that these lines retain "some of the distinction between the 'hands' of God's ministers and of God."³³ But the lines also blur the distinction between ministerial and divine power through Herbert's use of the rhetorical figure of antimetabole (Puttenham's "Counterchange").

According to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, antimetabole “occurs when two discrepant thoughts are so expressed by transposition that the latter follows from the former although contradictory to it”; for the seventeenth-century rhetorician John Smith, it is “a changing of words, by contraries.”³⁴ Herbert’s use of it here beautifully captures his sense of a God who is both powerful enough (as he writes in “Providence”) to “Lay hands on all” and vulnerable enough to place himself, defenceless, in human hands. At the same time, it conveys a correspondingly paradoxical sense of the human: like the poem as a whole, it first seems to grant, then to qualify, ministerial power. Perhaps the second clause simply cancels the first, leaving all power in the hands of a God whose will determines all action; or perhaps the circularity of the line carves out a place for meaningful human agency. What is clear is that the logical status of human power becomes much less clear once God’s act of vouchsafing reminds us who grants supreme blessings. As the poem’s emphasis moves from priestly reward and punishment to gifts of divine origin, the authority of the priesthood grows shakier.

If “The Priesthood” reflects cautiously upon the belief that priests properly fired by God might possess the full force of the power of the keys, Herbert’s second main reference to this power, the little-studied poem “Church-Lock and Key,” approaches the power of the individual believer with similar caution. The third poem in Herbert’s church architecture series, “Church-Lock and Key” appears to be a simple poem. Sin is the lock that prevents prayers from being heard by God, and Christ’s blood is the key that opens the lock, permitting successful petition. Although it has been doubted that the poem is about the power of the keys, this outline is consistent with the Protestant view of the keys as carrying forward both the Law’s condemnation of sin and the Gospel’s liberation of faithful sinners through the power of the Word.³⁵ Further, George Ryley appears to have connected the poem to the power of the keys, and later poetic treatments of the keys by Francis Quarles and Christopher Harvey may have been influenced by Herbert’s poem.³⁶ If we do read the poem this way, we must first note that, because it discusses the keys strictly at the level of the individual believer’s relationship to God, “Church-Lock and Key” can be said to contribute to the Protestant undermining of clerical authority, and thus to counter the thrust of “The Priesthood.” But the underlying question of whether human beings have the power to contribute to the work of salvation and damnation remains.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the poem’s outline, its highly metaphorical language wrestles with the problem of agency that lies at the heart of Protestant theology. The poem begins by asserting that humans possess the power to bind:

I know it is my sinne, which locks thine eares,
And bindes thy hands... .

As an interpretation of the power of the keys, however, this is very unusual. It was a commonplace that the key which binds has the power to bind *us* to sin: it reveals God's power in its aspect of Law. But here it is God who is bound, as if sin has all the power and God can no longer act as he wishes. This is so odd that one critic misreads the first line, paraphrasing it as "Sin 'locks' the ears against God."³⁷ But the line so clearly restricts God's hearing that we might conclude that the poem makes no reference to the power of the keys were it not for a similar conceit in "The Sacrifice." There, Herbert's Christ says:

See, they lay hold on me, not with the hands
Of faith, but furie: yet at their commands
I suffer binding, who have loos'd their bands... .

The hands of fury in "The Sacrifice," like the angry hands in the second stanza of "Church-Lock and Key," contrast not only with the hands of faith but with God's implicitly bound hands. The bound Christ of "The Sacrifice," then, suggests that the bound God of "Church-Lock and Key" is no accident, but part of a poetic reinterpretation of the power of binding. Despite the lines on the keys in "The Priesthood," then, Herbert may have shared Calvin's unease with placing such power in human hands. If so, he may have found a way to understand its purpose by making sin its possessor and God its victim.

The second stanza pursues the responsibility for sin by means of another difficult figure of speech:

But as cold hands are angrie with the fire,
And mend it still;
So I do lay the want of my desire,
Not on my sinnes, or coldnesse, but thy will.

Gene Edward Veith, who suggests that the poem, "like Calvinist doctrine in general, would worry an Arminian," rightly notes that in these lines Herbert "blames his own lack of desire for moral reformation on the sovereign will of God."³⁸ He fails to observe, however, how unreasonable this blame is made to sound. It is silly to be angry with a fire, especially when one has the power to mend it. Similarly, the next two lines invite us to connect possessive adjectives: "my desire" matches "my sins," not "thy will." Finally, the poem's argumentative structure exposes the speaker's thought in the second

stanza as erroneous: “I know it is my sin”—this is right—“*But ...* [I blame] thy will”—this is wrong. The final stanza then turns back to good sense with a second adversative, “Yet.” God’s will may be sovereign, Herbert implies, but we choose sin with our will nonetheless. In this way Herbert’s consideration of the key of binding connects its maximization of human agency with the victimization of God.

Yet Veith is not wrong to tie the poem to what he calls “the dilemma of a strict Calvinism.” For if we can only desire or have faith in God if he plants the desire or faith—if, as Herbert writes in “The Holdfast,” “ev’n to trust in him, [is] also his”—then God’s will *is* in some sense responsible for our lack. This dilemma produces the main insight of the final stanza, which turns to the key which looses: “Yet heare, O God, onely for his bloods sake/Which pleads for me.” Like Luther, who wrote that “there must lie hidden in the keys of Christ his blood, death, and resurrection, by which he has opened to us heaven” (p. 328), Herbert finds that the unmerited gift of sacrificial blood renders human efforts redundant, its exclusiveness—“onely”—the central link in a chain that leads away from the speaker—“pleads for me,” “heare ... for his bloods sake”—leaving no action for him to undertake. At this point the poem has backed away entirely from the human power to loose, preferring, like Calvin and Hooker, to emphasize a divine power to liberate from sin. In both “The Sacrifice” and “Church-Lock and Key,” the power to loose seems God’s alone.

Herbert concludes the poem with a similitude that complicates this position without reversing the poem’s direction:

For though sinnes plead too, yet like stones they make
His bloods sweet current much more loud to be.

These are the poem’s most difficult lines. On the one hand, the way Herbert handles the simile may seem to present a final image of cooperation between God and man, as if the power which looses resides in a combination of our prayers and Christ’s blood, much as Luther imagines Christ explaining that any use of the keys “shall be one single action, mine and yours, not a twofold one” (p. 365). “For this speaker,” as Louis Martz writes, “through the sacrifice of Christ, the situation caused by his sin is redeemable partly through the effect of his own cries, working within the sweet current of Christ’s blood.”³⁹ On the other hand, the poem’s tight logic calls for a final statement of the stones’ powerlessness. After the first two stanzas insisted that the speaker accept responsibility for the sins and lack of desire that have locked God’s ears, the final stanza has turned in its first two lines to an unequivocal statement of the speaker’s total dependence on Christ’s blood to unlock those ears.

Beginning with "For," the last two lines bear the logical burden of providing a reason for or an explanation of this dependence, and they can do so if their point is that the previously impotent stones gain the power to loose God's hands and unlock his ears from the river. Read this way, the lines use the stone as a metaphor for the absence of agency—as Swynnerton himself did.⁴⁰ Either way, the poem shows a Herbert who is more willing to accept human responsibility for sin, and hence the human power to bind, than human responsibility for grace, and hence the human power to loose.

There is, however, another way to understand the human contribution to loosing in the final stanza, and this is to see the stanza as performing rather than describing this power. While the first two stanzas analyze the speaker's failure, the third stanza does more than analyze the conditions necessary for success; it also seeks to invoke Christ's necessary power through prayer—"Yet heare, O God." So although the poem logically discounts the possibility of a human contribution to salvation, it nonetheless seeks to make just such a contribution by praying in Jesus's name. From this perspective, the power of individual prayer imagined by the poem is analogous to the declarative power of institutional loosing that Hooker describes: "he one way, and the Church another."

"Church-Lock and Key," then, treats both binding and loosing in a way that is consistent with Reformed readings of the biblical keys through a rhetorical hermeneutics. It appears to grant sinners power over God's hearing, which they cannot possess in a straightforward, doctrinal way. And it appears, more cautiously, to suggest that some measure of human power operates in the work of salvation, if not by amplifying the sound of Christ's rushing blood, as Martz argues, then by calling on God through prayer. In both cases the power claimed can be reconciled with doctrine: sin did lead to the binding of Christ's hands, and successful prayer does facilitate access to Christ's sacrifice, if only because God so wills it. But from a rhetorical perspective, Herbert's poem also serves the purposes that Luther, Calvin, and Hooker all see in biblical statements of the power of the keys, and that Erasmus and Swynnerton find in apparently contradictory biblical pronouncements on faith and works. The first part of the poem attacks arrogance and encourages humility by reminding its audience of the destructive power of sin and by warning of the loss of God's warmth that sin can effect. The second part, in contrast, offers assurance and confidence to despairing consciences. The poem as a whole stays in Luther's middle road.

In their self-styled return to the text of the bible, humanist and Protestant reformers alike often practised a rhetorical hermeneutics that was alert to questions of textual and historical context. Their method could be particu-

larly fruitful in confronting interpretive challenges such as the power of the will and the power of the keys, since it allowed them to resolve apparent contradictions in God's Word by harmonizing diverse texts with what they took to be the overall meaning and purposes of scripture. Herbert, the former University Orator, whose writings on scriptural method in *The Country Parson* and "Divinitie" suggest a willingness to apply a rhetorical hermeneutics to scripture, may also have drawn on such a hermeneutics in writing such poems as "The Priesthood" and "Church-Lock and Key." These two poems provide differing representations of human spiritual power. "The Priesthood" first presents the power to bind and loose in dramatic fashion, but then emphasizes human frailty and dependence. "Church-Lock and Key" first seems to endorse the human power to bind, reinterpreting it as a function of sin, before retreating from the power to loose, leaving only a faint suggestion that human agency can contribute to the Gospel's liberation of sinners. While these representations of human spiritual power may seem ambiguous or self-contradictory, a rhetorical interpretation casts them in a different light: Herbert, it suggests, may have written "The Priesthood" and "Church-Lock and Key" to serve multiple purposes and multiple spirits, one leading him to envision men powerful enough to consign their fellows to the pains of hellfire, as James and John wished to do in the spirit of the Law, the other, to imagine a people barely able to warm their cold hands and colder hearts without the grace promised by the Gospel.

University of Waterloo

Notes

1. Jameela Lares, *Milton and the Preaching Arts* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), p. 61.
2. Debora Kuller Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics, and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
3. Paul Cefalu, *Moral Identity in Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 136.
4. Carol V. Kaske, *Spenser and Biblical Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 154.
5. Achsah Guibbory, *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion, and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael C. Schoenfeldt, *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Guibbory argues that Herbert's poetry "expresses the ideologically contradictory impulses of the English church" (p. 44), while Schoenfeldt judges *The Temple* "an ideologically conflicted work" (p. 92). Ronald W. Cooley, 'Full of all knowledg': *George Herbert's Country Parson and Early Modern Social Discourse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), differs

from Schoenfeldt and Guibory in granting Herbert a better understanding of ideological contradictions. While each critic uses different terms and explores different aspects of the problem, the underlying issue in each case can be seen as some version of the conflict between spiritual and secular values.

6. Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades*, ed. Thomas Harding, Parker Society, 3 vols. (1849; New York: Johnston Reprint, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 77–78.
7. Kathy Eden, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 66. Eden emphasizes the ties between Protestant and humanist hermeneutics; but for an argument stressing the continuity between medieval and Protestant exegesis, see Richard A. Muller, "The Hermeneutic of Promise and Fulfillment in Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament Prophecies of the Kingdom," in *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. David C. Steinmetz (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 68–82.
8. On Bucer, see T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (London: SCM Press, 1971), especially p. 46. On Calvin, see Parker, Muller, and Hans Joachim Kraus, "Calvin's Exegetical Principles," trans. Keith Crim, *Interpretation* 31 (1977), pp. 8–18.
9. Desiderius Erasmus, *De Libero Arbitrio*, trans. E. Gordon Rupp and A. N. Marlow, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. E. Gordon Rupp, A. N. Marlow, Philip S. Watson, and B. Drewery, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 86. A further reference appears in the text.
10. Martin Luther, "Preface to the New Testament," in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 19.
11. Richard Rex, ed., *A Reformation Rhetoric: Thomas Swynnerton's Tropes and Figures of Scripture*, Renaissance Texts from Manuscript, no.1 (Cambridge: RTM Publications, 1999), p. 140. A further reference appears in the text. Luther offers a similar explanation in his preface to James's epistle: "he wished to guard against those who depended on faith without going on to works." See Dillenberger, ed., p. 36.
12. George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple, or, the Country Parson*, in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 229. A further reference will appear in the text. For discussions of the importance of collation to Herbert, see Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), and Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reformation Spirituality: The Religion of George Herbert* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985).
13. For examples, see Rita Guerlac, ed., *Juan Luis Vives Against the Pseudo-dialecticians* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1979).
14. All citations of Herbert's poetry are from *Works*, ed. Hutchinson.
15. Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1989), p. 58.
16. John Martin Heissler, "Mr. Herbert's Temple and Church Militant Explained and Improved by a Discourse Upon Each Poem Critical and Practical by George Ryley: A Critical Edition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1960), p. 444. Marion White Singleton also finds the lines "sarcastic" in *God's Courtier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 110.

17. See Tuve's influential 1959 essay, "George Herbert and *Caritas*," in *Essays by Rosemond Tuve: Spenser, Herbert, Milton*, ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 171. Tuve is followed by Terry G. Sherwood, *Herbert's Prayerful Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 55, and Cefalu, p. 148, both of whom refer to her essay.
18. Bloch, p. 21. Bloch cites Ryley approvingly.
19. Luther, *The Pagan Servitude of the Church*, in Dillenberger, ed., p. 269.
20. Richard Strier argues that the blood and wine of the final stanza are not literally eucharistic, in *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 46–47.
21. On the Reformed view of scripture as *autopistos*, or self-authenticating, see John R. Knott, Jr., *The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 34–35, 46, and 110, and my *The Performance of Conviction: Plainness and Rhetoric in the Early English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 7–8.
22. Donald R. Kelley, *The Human Measure: Social Thought in the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 76.
23. Luther, *The Keys*, trans. Earl Beyer and Conrad Bergendoff, in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 40, *Church and Ministry II*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 332. Further references appear in the text.
24. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, trans. T.H.L. Parker, in *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), vol. 2, p. 187; *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 2, IV.xi.1. Calvin's view of the keys was well-known, having been promulgated in the notes to the Geneva Bible.
25. Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie; the Sixth and Eighth Books* (London, 1648), sig. M4v. Further references appear in the text.
26. Montagu's position on the power of the keys appears chiefly in *A Gagg for the New Gospell? No. A New Gagg for an Old Goose* (London, 1624), chap. 11, and *Appello Caesarem* (London, 1625), chaps. 35–36.
27. Richard Greenham, *Workes*, 4th ed. (London, 1605), sig. Cc4v, sig. Aaaa6v. For a recent appraisal of Greenham, see Kenneth L. Parker and Eric J. Carlson, "Practical Divinity": *The Works and Life of Revd Richard Greenham* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998).
28. When discussing the power of the keys, Calvin also approaches interpretive difficulties with an eye to contextual restrictions, including those of audience: "But there is a problem here. The Church tolerates many hypocrites and also absolves many who only pretend to be penitent. Are such people absolved in heaven too? I reply that this word is addressed to those who are truly sincerely reconciled to the Church" (*Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, p. 230).
29. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, pp. 230, 231.
30. Diana Benet, *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 170; Christopher Hodgkins, *Authority, Church, and Society in George Herbert: Return to the Middle Way* (Columbia, MO: Uni-

versity of Missouri Press, 1993), p. 129; James Boyd White, *"This Book of Starres": Learning to Read George Herbert* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 238.

31. William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecying*, in *Workes of . . . William Perkins* (London, 1626), vol. 2, p. 672; cited in Hodgkins, p. 96.
32. A marginal note to Matthew 16:19 in the Geneva Bible reads: "The preachers of the Gospel open the gates of heaven with the worde of God, which is the right keye" (*The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, intro. Lloyd E. Berry [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969], sig. CCii).
33. Heather Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 35.
34. George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, intro. Baxter Hathaway (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1970), p. 217; Anonymous, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), IV.xxviii.39; John Smith, *The Myserie of Rhetorique Unveil'd* (London, 1664), p. 113.
35. The poem is entitled "Prayer" in the Williams manuscript, and it is a measure of the poem's difficulty that even its title has provoked disagreement. For Frank L. Huntley, the title fits the poem so badly that he concludes it is a scribal error and recommends that the poem be renamed "Prayer" and removed from the church architecture series ("A Crux in George Herbert's *The Temple*," *ELN*, 8 [1970–71], pp. 13–17). But for Mary Ellen Rickey, the title "Church-Lock and Key" clarifies "a metaphorical dimension merely implied in the body of the poem" (*Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* [Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1966], p. 92).
36. Ryley ties the poem to excommunication, which is usually understood to be part of the power of binding (Heissler, p. 184). See Quarles's epigram, "On Peter's Keys," in *Divine Fancies*, 5th ed. (London, 1664), and Harvey's "The Sexton," in *The Synagogue, or, the Shadow of the Temple* (London, 1661). Quarles echoes the "excel/Hell" rhyme of the opening of "The Priesthood."
37. Robert Higbie, "Images of Enclosure in George Herbert's *The Temple*," in *Essential Articles for the Study of George Herbert's Poetry*, ed. John R. Roberts (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1979), p. 273.
38. Veith, p. 262.
39. Louis Martz, "The Generous Ambiguity of Herbert's *Temple*," in *From Renaissance to Baroque: Essays in Literature and Art* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 77.
40. Rex, ed., pp. 118–19.