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Act of Congress: How America's Essential Institution Works, and How It Doesn't (Book Review)

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attention; all the essays in this third part deal with the written word—including novels, poetry, and a book on “poetic theology.” There are no essays on theatrical productions, musical performances, or art shows (though Smith appreciatively mentions one in part four), to say nothing of movies, television series, or popular music. In fact, Smith seems to purposefully distance himself from the latter, claiming that “the church needs to move beyond its obsession with the *au courant* of pop culture and reinvest in those cultural forms that ask more of us: poetry, the novel, painting, and more” (97-98).

This claim about re-investing in certain cultural forms is underdeveloped, and it strikes me as somewhat puzzling, given much of Smith’s work elsewhere. If Smith’s *Cultural Liturgies* series has taught us nothing else, it strongly argues that spiritually deep and religiously meaningful formative practices occur in cultural things as *shallow* as Michael Bay films and iPhones. As such, it seems we should be encouraged to grapple deeply with all things and not merely be encouraged to grapple with *deep* things. Granted, we should not ignore the things traditionally described as “high” art—literature, poetry, the visual arts—and if that is all that Smith’s claim is asking for, then I have no problem with it. However, one wonders if Hunter’s claim that “world-making and world changing are, by and large, the work of elites” is not in the background here, perhaps implicitly influencing Smith’s call for Christianity to engage in what are traditionally more elitist cultural practices (67). Given his own penchant for “faithful presence” rather than for “changing the world,” Smith should work *against* this influence, not in support of it. As such, I would have liked to have seen more investigations into how *popular* artistic ventures shape the social imagination, investigations

that Smith has done so well in other venues; at least a more thorough explanation for the focus on “high” culture is warranted in *Discipleship*.

Finally, the fourth part of the book provides site-specific pieces, offering us visions of how to let the Reformed tradition speak to unique times and places, in response to unique issues in the present. These brief pieces probe issues that transcend the time for which they are written, and some of the most valuable chapters in the collection are in this section. In fact, the interview in chapter 23 is an immensely valuable introduction to Smith’s thought, and I strongly recommend it as a go-to piece if someone asks you who Smith is and what he’s all about. Still, for people not interested in the particular topic(s) under discussion—including the prosperity gospel, universalism, sports, and doubt—some of these chapters may be of little interest. Those who are interested in the topics, however, will get a glimpse of how short, popular pieces can be thoughtful, and move a conversation forward by raising a new set of questions. In this regard, these chapters are a reminder to academics that we need not confine ourselves to the monograph or the peer-edited journal in order to do something deep and meaningful; indeed, doing otherwise might help us find better ways of sharing our gifts with our brothers and sisters in Christ (204), and so help us produce “Christian scholarship *for the church*” (xxi; emphasis added).

Endnote

1. See his endorsement on the back cover of Smith’s 2009 collection of essays, entitled *The Devil Reads Derrida and Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics and the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

Kaiser, Robert G. *Act of Congress: How America’s Essential Institution Works, and How It Doesn’t*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 2013. 417 pp. ISBN 978-0-307-74451-7. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois Springfield.

According to recent Gallup surveys, Americans who “approve of the way Congress is handling its job” constitute only a small minority of the people. In August 2013, just ten percent of survey respondents expressed approval. It is in the context of this discontent that Robert Kaiser’s study has appeared, a discerning study of a notably important act of Congress, properly referred to as the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection

Act of 2010.

Acts of Congress come in all sizes and degrees of complexity. This one, Dodd-Frank for short, grew increasingly complex as it passed through the basic legislative stages—initially House committees and House floor; Senate committee and Senate floor; then reconciliation of two different versions in a conference committee of both senators and representatives. This procedural outline is just as portrayed in elementary

civics texts. But the particular process for Dodd-Frank had the engagement of many players along the way to enactment. The legislative history began with the Obama administration, then moved to the House Democrats, obtained greater Republican input in the Senate, only to be overruled by the Democratic majority there. The major administrative players were under Timothy Geithner, Secretary of the Treasury. In the House, the primary player was Democrat Barney Frank of Massachusetts, first elected in 1980 and then chairman of the House Financial Services Committee. The committee itself was a broad cross section of the House with 71 members. The Senate Banking Committee was led by Chairman Chris Dodd of Connecticut, who worked hard to engage help from the ranking minority Republican, Richard Shelby of Alabama.

The story of this legislation is told in remarkable detail by a Kaiser, a deeply experienced congressional reporter from the *Washington Post*. His introduction traces the steps he took to gain extraordinary access to the congressional players, importantly including the legislative staffers who usually serve their memberships in anonymity. Kaiser was present at many decision points, and he continuously interviewed a variety of participants at key points along the way. It was Kaiser's good fortune to explain the legislative process for a bill that was often in doubt for passage but ultimately gained enactment, capped by the president's signature. Of course, he could have accounted for a bill that ended in defeat, but this story concludes with celebration in the Democratic camp for a winning strategy.

Dodd-Frank was a legislative response to the fiscal crisis that deepened in 2008 into what is now referred to as the "Great Recession." The law added 2000 pages to the United States Code. Its provisions are too numerous even to sketch out here. Suffice it to say that it changed all of the nation's regulatory laws regarding banking, securities, and mortgage lending. Lawmakers sought to prevent future bailouts and protect citizens from companies "too large to fail." Some key elements in the legislation include a Financial Stability Oversight Council, with power to break up companies whose collapse could undo the financial system. The law adds consumer protection and regulation of derivative financial instruments and hedge funds. It tightens credit regulations and mortgage requirements.

Kaiser offers three precious takeaways in this legislative saga: One, how important elections are to the substance of legislation; two, how crucial

legislative staff is to substantive quality of legislation; three, how artificial and misleading the public version of policy debate is for citizens. Here are a few words about each.

Dodd-Frank could not have passed in its present form except for the 2008 election outcome that put Obama in the White House and Democratic majorities in both the Senate and the House. Contemporary partisanship means that, particularly in the House, the minority adds very little to the substance of bills with either amendments or votes. The Senate is different, mostly because common usage of the filibuster necessitates 60 votes to pass bills. A cohesive minority party of 41 or more (in the 111th Congress there were 47 Republican Senators) can bargain on substance by threatening to kill legislation by filibuster. Consequently, Republicans in the Senate were more of a force in this legislation than were the House Republicans. Nevertheless, the bulk of this legislation reflected the will of majority Democrats.

Kaiser reports extensively on the work of congressional staff on both partisan sides. He notes again and again that the knotty details of legislative substance are routinely unraveled and smoothed out by technically competent staffers who have deeper, more thorough competence in legalese than do their politician overseers. The following illustrates this point: "Staff...meetings were held out of public view. This could often be the most important part of the legislative process, where practical decisions were made that could have a big impact when enacted into law. Members never participated in those technical conversations. They relied on their aides to respect whatever instructions they had been given. The instructions were invariably broad and vague, so much was always left to the staff's creativity and discretion" (170).

Disappointingly, Kaiser's close scrutiny revealed to him that after hours of hearings, accommodations to Republican objections and other significant compromises, Senator Shelby would still argue that "[a]ll [Democrats] were trying to do is exploit the crisis in order to expand government further and reward special interests.... [I]t will not prevent future bailouts...." (366-367). Not true, because provisions to the contrary were clearly in the legislation, but the Republican minority would not publicly abandon its partisan script. Repeatedly members of both parties attacked the bill, based on faulty perceptions or news reports, not on the actual content of the legislation. In short, member ignorance of legislative content

was repeatedly evident during the course of public debate.

One of the author's great strengths is in pausing in his chronology to explain procedures and historic context for the reader. While hardly a textbook, this thoroughness significantly helps the reader who comes with a basic understanding of the workings of Congress. As his story unfolds, Kaiser reveals his favor for the substance of the bill, but his criticisms fall upon nearly all the participants in an evenhanded way.

We may credit Dodd-Frank for making substantial improvements in a flawed regulatory environment, but the effort and accomplishment fall short of the injunctions from the prophet Amos to "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" There has been a remarkable lack of concern for penalties upon the exploiters or

for provisions to make up the losses to those who were deprived by unjust mortgages or for interest that was foregone. The political players were content with a secular rebalancing of political interests in a system that previously drifted away from regulation into exploitation. A more thorough vision for creational renewal is not present in this legislative story.

Speaking as one who desires a successful, just, effective, and trusted Congress, I find it disquieting to acknowledge that the Congress and its members typically quoted in the news media mostly mouth talking points to claim credit and avoid political blame. Substantive discussions of public justice in matters of policy are extraordinarily rare. Neither Kaiser nor I have easy remedies for this lack. I do, however, recommend *Act of Congress* as an enlightening read about the contemporary American legislative process.

Chapell, Bryan, *Christ-Centered Sermons: Models of Redemptive Preaching*. Ada, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013. ISBN: 978-080148692. Reviewed by Reverend Mark Verbruggen, Pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church, Sioux Center, Iowa, and adjunct with the Dordt Theology Department.

Every week, thousands of sermons are preached across the United States. People from every walk of life come together in churches to hear a portion from the Bible read and to hear someone preach a sermon based on that reading of the Word. Why do they come? Why do they subject themselves to a sermon drawn from a Bible reading? Generally speaking, people do not come in such numbers to other public forums. Lectures given on topics derived from works of literature, science, or some other academic discipline do not attract nearly the number of listeners as does the preaching of the Word occurring weekly in churches. There is surely something about the *sermon* that draws people to come and hear. Perhaps that is because the purpose of preaching is not like any other speaking event. Yes, some Christians do go to church because such attendance is a spiritual habit. But a sermon is not mere information about a topic or situation. It is more than that. It is a Christ-centered event.

Though thousands of sermons are preached every week, how many of them are focused on the *main thing*, that being the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Bryan Chapell, author of *Christ-Centered Sermons*, argues in his introduction that true Gospel preaching is not simply a lecture but an encounter with God. If God is real and the Word of God is living and active, then God is active in the preaching of his Word. The power of preaching is not in the preacher himself

but in the God who speaks through the preacher to convict the heart, renew the mind, and strengthen the will. Chapell calls each occurrence of these effects a "redemptive event." Sermons can lift listeners from the mundane things of this life to a view of God that brings new life to them and the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With *Christ-Centered Sermons*, Chapell, senior pastor of Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, Illinois, has given us a helpful *how-to book* for preachers. Yet anyone who values preaching or who has ever wondered what makes for a good sermon will appreciate the insights offered in this book. Church leaders—including elders, deacons, and Sunday School teachers—will find this book helpful. After a brief introduction, in which Chapell explains what preaching ought to be, the remainder of the book consists of thirteen example sermons written by Chapell himself. God, he argues, is active in his Word, so we should "preach with the conviction that the Spirit of God will use the truths of his Word *as we preach* to change hearts now!" (x). The sermons that follow Chapell's introduction are written with this conviction. Each of them comes with explanatory notes that explain why and how sermons are organized, and when and how to use illustrations in sermons. The book's other notes include how to use "Prayers for Illumination," or prayers during worship specifically about the sermon; how to introduce the