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John Witherspoon on Justification and Regeneration with Peter Lillback

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Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In this bonus episode, Kevin talks with historian and WTS president, Peter Lillback, about the life and ministry of John Witherspoon. In particular, they discuss Witherspoon's treatises on justification and regeneration, a new (old) book being published by Westminster Seminary Press. Listen in as Kevin and Pete talk about their shared love of history and old books.

Transcript

This episode of Life in Books and Everything is sponsored by Westminster Seminary Press. I'm really excited about the work that's coming out of the Westminster Seminary Press, a lot of good stuff, some of which we've highlighted. I've highlighted on this podcast before.

In particular, they are publishing a new old work, John Witherspoon's "Two Treatises on Justification and Regeneration" practical writings on saving faith. This is a work that I helped to provide an introduction for and edit and is really exciting to see this come out in print because it was a really well-known work and that's what we're talking about on life in books and everything. This is a part of the Library of Presbyterian Classics, which the press is putting out, healthy doctrines of justification and regeneration have always been essential to the Christian's faith and knowledge of God, which is why this work, more than just historical curiosity, is important and hopefully edifying for the Christian.

One of the most influential works on the topic back in the 18th century was Witherspoon's essay on justification and then the companion piece, which came out a few years afterward, is practical treatise on regeneration, which hopefully can also point a new generation toward saving faith in Christ and help us understand these key doctrines. Both are reprinted in this volume and I've provided some helpful notes and a new introduction. Visit wtsbooks.com to pre-order and rediscover this classic work for today.

[Music] Greetings and salutations. Welcome back to Life and Books and Everything. I'm your host, Kevin DeYoung, and we have a special bonus episode.

I am joined by my friend and also the president at Westminster Theological Seminary. He's been a pastor, scholar. He does a lot of different things.

He's a well-respected historian, Reverend Dr. Peter Lilbeck. Very good to have you joining me for this brief time. Well thank you, Reverend Dr. Kevin DeYoung.

Well, yes. I wanted honor to be with you. We can keep up honorifics upon each other.

Also, Father extraordinaire, I understand of nine children on top of all. At least I have an extraordinary number, whether I'm an extraordinary father or not, remains to be seen. So you're sitting, I think we're going to put this on YouTube and people can actually see it and most people will be listening to it.

But as I'm looking at you, you have a wonderful backdrop. Is this your study at Westminster? Is this like your private loo here? Yeah, this room is the president's office at Westminster Seminary. And it used to be Cornelius Van Til's teaching room.

So there's an aura of history. And while it's hard for you to see it, maybe you can see the chairs back there in the table. That's the original faculty table.

So you can imagine around that table Paul Willy and John Murray and Cornelius Van Til were wrestling over issues of importance. Yeah, oh that's great. That's a great history.

So what we want to talk about for a few minutes is a book that I'd say I have coming out, but it's not really my book, but I'm really excited about it. It's a book by John Witherspoon. Two works put together, his treatise, his essay on justification and his treatise on regeneration.

And we put these two together. I've provided something of an introduction to Witherspoon's life and to the two works themselves. And then it's not quite an academic apparatus, but I provide some footnotes throughout the work so people can understand what Witherspoon is talking about, some of the historical context.

Just a little bit more about these two works. So John Witherspoon, look, this is a problem. A guy does his dissertation in the rest of his life.

He wants to tell people about things that they don't want to know. Well, you have a story we're telling people about. People need to know about Witherspoon, so thank you.

Well, how about, I'll get to these two specific works, but tell us a little bit about why you just said what you said, why Witherspoon has a story worth telling, important both to Christians and just to Americans. Well, Witherspoon is someone who has a pedigree that is enviable, a direct lineal descendant of John Knox, the great reformer of Scotland, a

very successful pastor of a substantial congregation in Scotland. He was asked to come and fill the prestigious president's role at Princeton or the College of New Jersey, and he turned it down and they begged him to come and he finally came.

And not only did he bring with him a history of writing, publishing, pastoring, but he came with that Scottish love of liberty and he came at just the concatenation of history when there needed to be a man of intellect, faith and courage to lead a wonderful, scary moment in time, which is should we really become an independent nation. And so he not only was a leader that people looked up to, but he was a trainer and as the process of his training, he ends up training a future president, a vice president, Supreme Court justices, justices, senators, congressmen, the list goes on, educators, journalists. So extraordinary swath of influence.

And there's still, as far as I know, a statue of John Witherspoon at Princeton today. So go and see it before they take it down. Yeah.

Oh, that's a wonderful sketch of Witherspoon's life. 1723 to 1794. He comes to America.

As you said, they asked him. He turned it down in 1766. He finally comes 1768.

As far as we can tell, his reason for saying no was a good reason. His wife didn't want to make the transatlantic voyage with a number of their children. Not all of them.

Some of them were older, but with their children, but she relents in 1768. And in a wonderful, providential moment in history, who is the first person to greet him at the docks in Philadelphia, but a hodge. Is that amazing? Yeah.

Yeah. And of course, whose descendant will soon be Charles Hodge. And so he was instrumental, John Witherspoon, not only, as you said, as a pastor for half of his career in the Church of Scotland and quite a controversial list and quite a well-known well-regarded pastor, say more about that in a moment.

But then he comes to take over the College of New Jersey, which at that time, you know, we think it's Princeton, Princeton. And it did have a succession of impressive presidents who had a penchant for dying, which is why he had to come and take over. But yeah, to remember, this was really compared to where he was coming from in Paisley, which was a booming textile city outside of Glasgow, a congregation of some 1300 people.

They had to enlarge the building to see all the people that were coming to Witherspoon. And then he comes to what really is backwater, backwoods, Nassau Hall. That's all they have to be the president.

But he did because he believed that he could train ministers. In fact, one of the people that convinced him to come was George Whitfield, who said famously, "Every Gownsmen can be a legion, meaning you can come and you can train up people and you can send

them off all across this new continent." And then, as you alluded, he trains a whole generation of statesmen and becomes most famously the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. He would famously wear his Geneva bands there at the Continental Congress and preach really one of the most important sermons in the history of this country that's not an exaggeration in May of 1776.

He said to his listeners at Princeton, "You'll allow that this is the first time I've introduced politics into the pulpit." And the first half of that sermon was really a good old-fashioned evangelical. "Come to Jesus, you're sinners, you need to cross sermon." And then the second half talked about how the rights of liberty with religious faith are connected to the rights of liberty with civil government and connected the two and made an earnest plea for independence. We've had opportunity before, just recently, to see some of the sites in Philadelphia.

Why was this so important? And we'll get to the book itself in just a moment, but just say a little bit more about that impulse toward liberty. John Adams famously called Witherspoon, "An animated son of liberty." Why was that so important and what role did he play? One of the amazing things is when in the British Parliament, one of the spokesman who had known something about the American context said, "Cuz an America has run off with a Witherspoon, with a clergyman." With the Presbyterian Parsons, something like that, yes. That's right.

When you look at George Washington's army, all of his generals, except for one, were Presbyterians. That's not an insignificant fact because the Anglican tradition obviously was not real happy with the formation of an independent nation breaking from the mother country and the mother church and the head of the church. The Presbyterians had a long struggle with that tradition and they were willing to stand with the independent movement and Witherspoon gave to them a sense of an intelligent, intellectual and religious leadership.

And he played that role so significantly that when you go through the journals of the Continental Congress and you look at who served on what committees as a good Presbyterian, he served on more committees than any other member of the Continental Congress. So his leadership was felt all across the entire founding period of America. And of course, this real leadership for the church happens just as a new constitution is being developed.

He is presiding over the General Assembly, creating the Presbyterian church in our country. Yeah. So let's talk about Witherspoon as a pastor because if people know him, they may hear a little bit about, yes, the clergymen to sign the Declaration of Independence, the actress Reese Witherspoon, I'm told claims to be a descendant.

I don't know that. I think the daughters of the revolution, I think they debate and dispute that lineage. But we'll let Miss Witherspoon do as she pleases.

So he's well known if he's known at all for that. But one of the burdens in my study of Witherspoon was to try to reintroduce him not only for those accomplishments, but really as a winsome, reformed apologist and those two aspects of Witherspoon, he never separated and we shouldn't separate either. And there's a whole half of his career in Scotland in particular where he's a parish minister at two different congregations and beef and then in Paisley each for about 10 years.

And he writes a number of really impressive works and two of those we've put together and it was a joy to work with Westminster Seminary Press and you have a very excellent team there for this book that's coming out, which is really, you know, it sounds cheesy, but kind of a dream of mine to see Witherspoon because these two works in particular were really highly regarded. I don't know if people can see these. These are two of my prize possessions.

These were both gifts. One was a gift from my previous church and one was a gift I think, Alistair Bag found for me when he was in Edinburgh. So this is an original copy Witherspoon's treatises with the introduction by William Wilberforce.

So I won't crack it open, but this is original 1830. And then I have this one, which is the treatise on regeneration, the first edition from 1764. Oh, there it is.

Get it in the camera. So I put these prominently on my shelves. Don't let my kids touch them.

So that's how much I'm fond of these. He wrote the essay on justification as all books are in a particular cultural moment. And in particular, he was trying to come to the defense of an Anglican minister named James Harvey, or it's spelled looks like "Hervey," who had written a very long ponderous work defending justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

And that was controversial. And Wesley and others weren't very fond of that doctrine. And the chief argument against it, and it's not unlike the arguments we might hear today, is that too much of an emphasis on justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness will lead to a laxity of morals.

That it just makes it seem as if Christ has done everything, which he has. Therefore, we can live as we want. That's a very old objection.

And so Witherspoon writes, really, what started off as a couple of sermons, and he puts it into a book. It's not terribly long, maybe 70 pages in the original, and really a fine work on justification. Then a number of years later, he writes, "The Practical Treatise on Regeneration." And again, he's dealing with some of the same issues in the air, namely, how does Orthodox reform theology not undermine true virtue, but really is the only basis for true God-glorifying virtue.

One of the big issues during the Enlightenment and in the 18th century is how do we relate true religion and true virtue? So Witherspoon writes this book on regeneration in 1764. I imagine that most of the listeners here and watchers have probably never read anything by Witherspoon. You may think, well, 18th century is going to, isn't that when Jonathan Edwards wrote, you need to disabuse yourself of that.

Edwards wrote in a very different sort of style and different complexity. Witherspoon, I find even today, is a very clear author. Lots of organization points, subpoints, his sermons are very clear.

They're not difficult to understand. So that's why I'm so excited to see this reissued because I think it's a work that people can pick off the shelf. People in our churches today can read, and even though it's what's the math, 250 years old, it's still relevant and very readable.

It's those two works that really gave Witherspoon his reputation as an imminent theologian. It was John Newton who said he wasn't aware of a finer popular level work on regeneration than the one from Witherspoon. And I forget who it was.

I'd have to check my own footnotes, but was looking around the time of the revolution and said that Witherspoon was the finest example in America of theological excellence. So he is well regarded, or at least was, as a preacher, pastor, theologian. And I want to try to recapture some of that for a new generation to read.

Maybe say a little bit about what is Westminster Seminary Press? I've been really happy to partner with him. What's the aim behind WSP? What are you trying to do? What other sort of works have you been doing? Well, good. Well, one of the things that we hope to do is precisely what you've done, which is take classical literature that maybe is not going to be in the wheelhouse of other publishers because they're looking to make public splash because they need to have an income.

What we're trying to do is keep treasures of theology and relevant issues available in print because we believe at the end of the day a book is a great teacher. It too is a legion, just like when you think about Whitfield speaking to Witherspoon. People read a book and one person being persuaded may become a preacher that has a whole ministry shaped by the doctrine that he receives in that book.

So it's a great investment leadership. So Westminster Seminary Press started because we recognized that it was now possible to have self-published books that could be done with excellence and there were things that the Westminster wanted to have that other publishers were not printing. A good example was who would care about J. Gressa-Machins' letters from the front in World War I? Well, students who studied at Westminster might care about that.

A small audience, but we said, "Well, we can publish that." Someone had edited them, so we did it. The prayers of John Murray from Chapel Talks. Well, if you've heard John Murray on tape or read something, you might say that would be a treasure.

I remember hearing him on our chapel service online. He was resurrected to preach and after about five minutes of his praying before the chapel service, I was weeping. I said, "What a powerful prayer." I said, "I've got to collect every prayer he's ever done." So we have the prayers of John Murray, some of his short writings that would ever been seen the light of day.

And people are reading those and being blessed by it. As a result of that, we've discovered other books have become possible. We have a scholar who's come along, who's discovered James Usher's early work that shaped very much the thinking of the Westminster Assembly theologians lost to history.

That's going to be coming out in the next year, a high quality work. In the same genre, if you will, the Witherspoon. But two things that are really important that are exciting because they are best-sellers.

We're actually three. Out of our great debate over hermeneutics, we created a booklet called "Seeing Christ in All of Scripture." That little booklet that came out of our hermeneutics discussion that made the theological front pages for a while, that's a best-seller on the Amazon list. We collected the radio talks and re-edited them from ancient called "Things Unseen." Yeah, those are really wonderful.

They're treasures. They're beautiful, succinct, powerful. And then most interestingly, we realized that aboveing, great work, the wonderful works of God was out of print.

We reissued that. And that's been now going into its third printing. And it's a wonderful gangbusters.

We're introducing people all around the American and English-speaking world to Boving's theology in a shortened form, but with life-giving energy. So this ministry has now got legs. We have a whole staff working on it.

We even have a Westminster Semine Press Korea, where we're beginning to do the same thing in the Korean language. So Kevin Deung, we're glad to welcome you to the West. Kind of our new superstars on our Westminster Semine Press.

Yeah, well, and they really are high-quality books. I know both of us are big fans of the banner and all of the banner books over the years. And one of the things you could always count on with the banner of truth book is going to be good, rich theology, devotion.

And it was going to be a high-quality book. You're going to like that. And so I'm reading

Johnny Gibson in the book, "Thomas Witherrow." Right.

Do I have the right name? Yes. So I was not familiar with him in Ulstermen, Northern Ireland. And he does quite a lengthy biography at the front end of the book and then pulls together some of his works on polity and baptism and Sabbath.

So I'm using that right now with just read a few pages part of my devotional time. I'm actually using it. I also have underneath that on my desk Johnny's book, "Be Thou My Vision," which Crossway published.

So it's a Johnny Gibson morning for me on mini-morning. So these are really high-quality books. And they, like you said, they're recovering maybe treasures from people we've heard of like Machen or maybe from some people that many folks in America wouldn't have been familiar with.

But books that are not very accessible to get and yet they're very accessible to read. And so I was really pleased when I was able to work with your team to get these Witherspoon books out and provide something of an introduction and some footnotes along the way. And I really hope that people in the churches will pick up and read because they'll be blessed.

Let me say a quick word about the Witherrow book. When I came to Westminster Seminary to do my doctoral studies many years ago, I was new to the Reformed faith. I didn't know where I was going to land.

All I knew is that I loved Reformed soteriology. And I was given a book by our good friend Dr. Joey Piper, fellow classmate. And he said, "I've got this mimeographed book by a man named Witherrow on the Apostolic Church.

You should read this. This might help you to understand the biblical basis for the Presbyterian form of government." I read that book and it revolutionized the way I looked at the church. I owe my conversion to Presbyterian ecclesiology to this Ulster man.

And so when I heard that Johnny was re-editing it, I said, "We have to get that in print because I owe a legacy to this man." I read his book years ago and I hope it will have the same impact on many others who come from an independent evangelical background. Is Presbyterian isn't biblical? When you read Witherrow, you'll say, "It's the Apostolic Church. It's powerful." I hear.

Yeah. So, yeah, I do recommend that book as well. Thank you, Pete, for what you're doing.

Serving at Westminster, of course, and with this new venture Westminster Seminary Press. And I'm sure you can find these on the WTS bookstore online and you can get them on Amazon as well. So thank you for being here.

Love to talk history and talk books with you and hope our listeners, watchers enjoy this bonus episode. So, go or if I got, enjoy them forever and read a good book.

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