



# Theological reflection, assurance and the doctrine of God

**Author:**

Maake J. Masango<sup>1</sup>   
John D. White<sup>1,2</sup> 

**Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Congaree Presbyterian Church, Cayce, United States

**Research Project Registration:**

**Project Leader:** M.J. Masango  
**Project Number:** 02467526

**Description:**

This research is part of the project, 'Pastoral Care and Trauma Counselling', directed by Prof. Dr Maake Masango, Department of Practical Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria.

**Corresponding author:**

John White,  
camsterdad@hotmail.com

**Dates:**

Received: 12 Dec. 2018  
Accepted: 07 June 2019  
Published: 05 Dec. 2019

**How to cite this article:**

White, J.D. & Masango, M.J., 2019, 'Theological reflection, assurance and the doctrine of God', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(4), a5360. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i4.5360>

**Copyright:**

© 2019. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article focuses on the anxiety about whether God loves one or not. In the author's nearly 30-year ministry, this pastoral difficulty continues to perplex and afflict. While the presenting problem is what in theological parlance is 'a lack of assurance', a side difficulty is the poor and incorrect doctrine of God often associated with this. A Baylor University Study in 2006 characterises the kind of God that different groups of Americans believe in. While the phrase 'a lack of assurance' is a part of dogmatic parlance, and has fallen out of use, the feeling of not belonging to God can be overwhelming for people. This feeling may be overwhelming. This makes it a pastoral issue. This article suggests a pastoral response to this issue and a proposal for a clarification in the nature and character of God using the therapeutic theology of 19th-century Scottish minister-theologian John McLeod Campbell.

**Keywords:** assurance; God; theological reflection; parrhesia; frame of reference; reframing; election.

## Introduction

Samuel (which was not his name) had been a member of the congregation I served as pastor for the last several years for most of his life. Now in his 60s, he was characterised by a faith which had little joy or happiness. He lived with a fear of displeasing God. Instead, for him, church attendance was a necessary responsibility. It was something a 'good' person did. There were things, actions, which one did, and things, actions, which one did not do. For example, the congregation decided that the church picnic would be held after church on a Sunday at a nearby campground.

This involved some preparation on Sunday morning. Samuel was very upset about this. As our relationship matured, I struggled to discern the criteria for Samuel behind some of his actions and beliefs. Samuel's faith possessed a legalistic strain, not uncommon in the American South, and his overarching worldview was very legalistic. There was not, for Samuel, much grey. There was right and wrong. As a result, his expectations were sometimes unrealistic. Initially, he was suspicious of me, but as our relationship matured, he began to trust me increasingly. During the course of our interaction as pastor and congregation member, I discovered that Samuel did not believe that God unreservedly loved him. This negative belief proved to be one of the causes behind his specific and unusual actions. Samuel was judgemental towards others, but perhaps most of all towards himself. This was driven home during a visit after a few years of my ministry in that congregation when he sat in his big chair sobbing huge tears of anxiety and worry because he lacked conviction that his life measured up to God's standards (his language). He attended church, but was not sure about God. There was a disconnection, so he related, between the message found in the New Testament about God and Samuel's perception of who God was towards him. In theological terms, Samuel struggled from a lack of assurance. Assurance as a theological category has its origin in the New Testament. To have assurance is to believe and to understand with certainty that God loves one. The certainty and confidence of Paul's assertion in Romans 8 will most likely remain unsurpassed (Robins 1912:12).

While it is important to understand the theology behind Samuel's issue, what is also of importance is the act or praxis of ministry to him. Samuel is not alone; there are many others in congregations, I have discovered many members stretching in congregations from Texas to South Carolina, who struggle with a lack of assurance. How does one minister to them? This is a real pastoral issue, particularly in the American South.

**Note:** HTS 75th Anniversary Maake Masango Dedication.

James and Evelyn Whitehead in their book *Method in Ministry* propose a particular methodology, which is of use to the parish minister. They recommend a three-stage method for ministry. The first method is attending to the presenting issue through study, reflection, prayer, personal experience, Christian Tradition and cultural sources. The second method is assertion through engaging the multi-perspectival information and competing truth claims in a process of mutual clarification, critical correlation and challenge to expand and deepen religious insight. The third method is decision-making based on the amalgamation and clarification of the various resources into a coherent whole and then moving to pastoral action. Ministry, keeping this methodology in mind, to those struggling with a lack of assurance, involves, firstly, a relationship between the pastor and person with this presenting issue (Whitehead 1980:22). There must be an attitude of trust. Secondly, ministry involves understanding and knowing the historical background surrounding the problem, and this problem in particular. This involves an awareness of theology's history. Specific help within the Christian tradition is the work of little known but eminently fecund Presbyterian minister (Campbell 1831, 1843, 1851, 1996, 1873a, 1873b, 1873c, 1874, 1877, 1898) of 19th-century Scotland, particularly with regard to the specific question of assurance. McLeod Campbell was a minister and theologian who dealt with this pastoral problem in his own ministry in the early 19th century in Row, Scotland. The members of his parish struggled with precisely this particular issue. His writings may, thus, be consulted beneficially for assistance. Thirdly, ministry to the person, struggling with this concern, involves clarification of the nature and character of God. Fourthly, ministry involves both education and mentoring towards a change in perception and understanding. One of the aspects of this issue is the misperception of who God is and what God desires of us. Fifthly, the praxis of prayer is fundamental in this process, no matter the occasion. The goal towards which ministry is directed is the inculcation of the praxis of parrhesia (παρρησία), which may be translated as 'joy, confidence and assurance'.

That Samuel is not alone in his feelings of being unloved by God is shown in a recent study. In an examination of beliefs by the Baylor (University) Institute for the Study of Religion, entitled 'American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US' (Bader 2006), it was revealed by the respondents that there is still confusion about God's nature and character among people in the United States. Presenting survey questions to interviewees, the researchers divided interviewees' views about God into four categories in the United States based on the answers.

The four different categories are the following.

### **Type A: The authoritarian God**

Individuals who believe in the authoritarian God think that God is highly involved in people's daily lives and world's affairs. They believe that God helps them with their decision-making. God is responsible for global events such as economic depressions or upturns, natural disasters and

weather changes like tsunamis or earthquakes. God, in this view, is wrathful and angry, capable and quite willing of meting out punishment to the unfaithful and the ungodly. Samuel's view of God would fall into this category. This category, one may note, may be found in certain strains of evangelicalism.

### **Type B: The benevolent God**

Those who believe in the benevolent God are similar to those who believe in the authoritarian God in that they see God as very active in the daily lives of individuals. However, in this group, God is not angry or wrathful. Instead, God is mainly a force for positive influence in the world. God is less willing to condemn or punish people. One may suggest that this is liberalism.

### **Type C: The critical God**

Believers in this category feel that God does not interact with the world. However, God still observes the current state of affairs globally in an unfavourable light. God's displeasure may not be known in this life, but it will be recognised in the next life, as also will God's justice and punishment.

### **Type D: The distant God**

The people in this category believe that God is not active in the world. God is also not particularly angry either. These individuals think about God as a cosmic force, which sets the laws of nature in motion. God does not, however, interact with the world and does not have an opinion one way or another about people's activities or world events. One may note that this is deism (Bader 2006:25).

As may be seen from these four groups, there are unclear and diluted beliefs about God's nature and character in the 21st century in the United States. One may attach, interestingly enough, philosophical-like names for each category of the God believed in. Type A reminds one of Puritan Preacher Jonathan Edwards and his American sermon from the early 1700 entitled 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'. The emphasis, of course, is on 'Angry God'. The question here is, 'how does one deal with an angry God?' Type B reminds one of the happy parents paternally involved where everyone gets a trophy for participating. The question that may be begged here is, 'are there any repercussions to our behaviour?' Type C is the critical, reserved, typical magistrate-like parent for whom one's efforts are never enough. This is the child who runs up to the parent on the soccer field hoping for a kind, loving comment, but receives nothing except indifference because the parent is too busy speaking with another parent. The question here may become what behaviour elicits a response. Type D reminds one of Aristotle's Unmoved Mover. God is uninvolved or simply 'watching' as in Bettie Midler's song from the early 1990s. None of these views is remotely accurate according to Scripture or the Reformed Theology from which the author takes his orientation. Each presents the necessity for extreme clarification among congregation members. Not only clarification, but also

correction; this is where the Church may become the locus for a kind of construct change or to use Thomas Kuhn's phrase 'paradigm shift' mandated to meet the problem of a lack of assurance. This occurs through preaching, teaching and pastoral care. There is also an educational component involved. The goal, of course, is not only different thinking but also, as importantly, different acting.

James Loder in his book entitled *The Transforming Moment* discusses the process in moving from one frame of reference to another. This is Archimedes' 'Eureka!' moment when the tub overflowed. This is Paul's 'Alleluia' moment illustrated in his doxology at the end of Chapter 8 in his Letter to Rome. Life involves, for Loder, one frame of reference issuing in discrepancies, which begs a new frame of reference.

Samuel, as we mentioned above, experienced a discrepancy in the God revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament and his own personal understanding of God's nature and character. This moment of transformation, this 'new' frame of reference, issues sometimes in powerfully new insights, which alter our horizons and the seeming intelligibility of the world we inhabit. There is movement, in other words, from the duck of the Gestalt psychologists to the rabbit. What Loder is speaking of here is a conversion, change or modification of our outlook. Loder (1989) notes that:

1. First, there is a *Conflict-in-context*, which is experienced as a 'restless coherence, a dichotomy of reality, or a situation or situations that may be fragmented'. These difficulties defy our elemental longings for coherence. This may be, however, more unconscious, than conscious. (p. 37)
2. Second, there is an *Interlude for scanning*. The Holy Spirit in our psyches cannot rest with a restless coherence, a dichotomy of reality or situations that are fragmented, unclear and inchoate. Thus, there is a conflict and the Spirit searches for a resolution. (p. 37)
3. An *Insight felt* with intuitive force. This is the *constructive act of the imagination*. This is an insight. It is an intuition about an answer that resolves a dilemma. The incongruity of the Spirit will surprise us and even delight us with a constructive resolution that reconstitutes the elements of the incoherence and creates a new, more comprehensive context of meaning. Without distorting the integrity the previously conflicted elements or frame of reference are solved by a new context. The elements of a ruptured situation are *transformed*. Here a new perception is elicited. A new perspective opens up. A changed world-view is bestowed upon the knower. (p. 38)

Here, no one can know or comprehend the central meaning of a convicting experience from a standpoint outside it. There is, in reality, no outside. There is, here, no such thing as an 'objective' viewpoint. It is like trying to describe what marriage feels like from outside a marriage. It is impossible. Thus, for Loder (1989:22), the 'validation of a word from God is uniformly established by God's initiative, and not by any generally recognised human procedures'. That is, one may not come up with particular criteria, and then seek to judge

what has been received by that standard. The word sets its own benchmarks. This 'revelation' is a unique, participatory, knowing pattern. One may not know the relation from outside. One may only know from within. Knowing anything is to indwell it and to reconstruct it in one's own terms without losing the essence of what is being indwelt.

There follows:

4. A *Release and re-patterning* that is the constructive resolution of the problem  
This is the release of pent-up energy. Archimedes cried 'Eureka'. This is the 'aha', in place of the difficulty. This is the true 'hosanna', at the discovery of a resolution to the dilemma or problem. The previous energy spent in trying to make sense of the difficulty – which did not in fact work – is now available for testing and re-patterning of the old frame-of-reference in light of the new resolution. (Loder 1989:39)
5. Finally, there is an *Interpretation and verification*. This is where the Holy Spirit seeks confirmation and verification by interpreting the new insight back into the old incoherence to see whether the conditions for a solution have indeed been met. There is a two-way endorsement here. Backwards, the sought after congruence now works. This action of affinity solves the dilemma previously unanswered. These are explicit connections. Working forward there is also a correspondence. Thus, there is a transformation of 'at least some of the elements and an essential gain over the original conditions'. (Loder 1989:40)

Transformation, here, is not merely a synonym for positive change. Rather it occurs, whenever, within a given frame of reference or experience, hidden orders of coherence and meaning emerge to alter the axioms of the given frame and thus to reorder its elements accordingly (Loder 1989:4). Loder picks up an example from T.F. Torrance, late professor of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, when he describes the well-known psychological experiment of Theodor Erismann of the University of Innsbruck in which glasses or goggles have been altered through specially devised mirrors to invert the visual image from right side up to upside down.<sup>1</sup> Erismann invited his student to wear a pair of hand-engineered goggles or glasses. Initially, one student named Kohler stumbled wildly. Navigation was almost impossible.

Simple tasks proved to be almost impossible. Grasping a plate, walking upstairs, eating and playing games appeared comical. However, slowly, the student named Kohler found himself adapting. After about a week and a half, he had grown so accustomed to the transformation in his sight that everything seemed to him normal, clear, right side up so that he could do everything perfectly well, ride a bicycle, walk along a crowded sidewalk and function doing normal tasks. As the researchers continued to study this phenomenon, they realised that almost all people suited with these goggles are

1. [http://www.awz.uni-uerzburg.de/en/archive/film\\_photo\\_and\\_tone\\_archives/video\\_documents/th\\_erismann\\_ikohler](http://www.awz.uni-uerzburg.de/en/archive/film_photo_and_tone_archives/video_documents/th_erismann_ikohler), viewed 01 June 2016.

able to make this kind of adjustment in their discernment and recognition, this drastic change in their vision, perception and sight, issuing in an immense alteration in their frame of reference. Kohler, one of the test subjects, noted that after several weeks of wearing this contraption that he was able to drive a motorcycle through Innsbruck perfectly. A question may be asked here: can this become a model for us to transform thoughts and perceptions positively about God?

The goal of the pastor in the care of persons struggling with a lack of assurance is the space in which such a change in construct may occur. Such a change in outlook may be prepared for through the relationship between pastor and parishioner. Modelling grace is important here. It may occur in the content of the conversations between pastor and parishioner. It certainly can occur in the content and subject of the sermons on Sundays, material at Bible studies, prayer meetings and so on. Visitation in the home is also called for in seeking to create the space for a transformational moment.

Samuel broached the subject of God with me his pastor hesitantly with trepidation. He was not sure what I would think about his theology. In some sense, he was almost ashamed. He was, in his own estimation, not worthy of love. Surely, his pastor would agree with his self-assessment. I asked Samuel about the God we see revealed in Scripture and in particular in the New Testament. Who is this God? How does Jesus ask us to pray, I asked him? He answered, 'Our Father who art in heaven ...' The process leads me to ask Samuel as to 'why he supposes Jesus would tell us to pray like that? This begs the question of who God is. There was silence. Samuel struggled with what he was hearing ... Theology leads us to analyse the works of God, God's nature and character revealed in Jesus Christ, and what God expected from human beings. This was worth sharing entering into as Samuel began to perceive and experience the depth of God's love.

To understand the issues surrounding a lack of assurance and in keeping with the perspective suggested by the Whitehead in mining the Christian Tradition, and in doing so through the work of John McLeod Campbell, one might begin with the normative belief of the people of his day. Thomas Erskine, a contemporary and close friend of John McLeod Campbell, highlights this issue and illustrates the hold it had upon people's minds. In his own reflective treatise entitled 'The Doctrine of Election', he writes (Erskine 1837):

The doctrine of election generally held, is, that God, according to His own inscrutable purpose, has from all eternity chosen in Christ, and predestinated unto salvation, a certain number of individuals out of the fallen race of Adam; and that, in pursuance of this purpose, as these individuals come into the world, He in due season visits them by a peculiar operation of His Spirit, thereby justifying, and sanctifying, and saving them; whilst he passes by the rest of the race, unvisited by that peculiar operation of the Spirit, and so abandoned to their sins and their punishment. It is also an essential part of the doctrine, that the peculiar operation of the Spirit, by which God draws the elect unto Himself, is held to be alike irresistible and indispensable in the

work of salvation, so that those to whom it is applied, cannot be lost, and those to whom it is not applied cannot be saved; whilst all the outward calls of the gospel, and what are named common operations of the Spirit, which are granted to the reprobate as well as to the elect, are, when unaccompanied by that peculiar operation, ineffectual to salvation, and do only aggravate the condemnation of the reprobate. (p. 3)

In my own pastoral visits to congregation members, their own beliefs about predestination sound remarkably similar. There are those who are in and there are those who are out. It remains unclear to them why some are in one group and others in a contrasting group. In a thematic diagram from Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor in Geneva, we have an illustration of what Erskine envisioned in his quote. If one looks closely at the diagram below, one will note that there are two groups or classes of people. Those are on the left whom God elects for salvation. God elects the other group on the right for reprobation. This is precisely the issue, which troubled McLeod Campbell's parishioners. Everyone deserved reprobation according to the classical Reformed view. Only some were saved to show God's mercy. If humanity is divided into two groups, how one will know to which group one belongs? If this diagram is indeed an accurate representation of God's predestination of people on which side do I belong, then how do I come to this knowledge?

Note the two important words right at the top of the diagram: 'to elect' on the left and 'to forsake' on the right. Also, note where Christ is located on this diagram; he is after God's decrees of foreknowledge, election, creation and human corruption through Adam.

Samuel does not believe that God loves him. What does this say about Samuel? About God? This calls into question the nature and character of God. Who is God? What is ministry to Samuel here? Do we in our enlightened age just dismiss this issue out of hand as ludicrous? Many live without care for what God thinks. For Samuel and others, however, the issue of a lack of assurance is a heavy burden.

John McLeod Campbell answered this question in his own ministry through pastoral visitation, through preaching and teaching and through prayer. His theological reflection upon the issue has been called 'therapeutic' and it is clear that in his ministry, he sought for his parishioners a 'transformative moment'.

We reflect here upon a portion of McLeod Campbell's therapeutic theology regarding the nature and character of God. We do so to measure and evaluate our own theology by comparison. In Sermon No. XX (on Ps 36) in the second volume of his Sermons and Lectures (1832) from his time at Rhu, McLeod Campbell reveals the process of his thought. McLeod Campbell notes that our comfort when anxious, and the panacea for our lack of assurance and discomfort, is to be discovered not in ourselves, not in our feelings, but rather in the nature and character of God. Balm for the blister is not to be discerned in gazing upon our reflection as Narcissus did

hoping that in the process, we might discern some special mark or grade from a report card. McLeod Campbell's God is not abusive, or cold-hearted, judgemental or mercurial. Undoubtedly, the experience of his own warm relationship with his father played a part in his reading off Scripture God's nature and character. McLeod Campbell's mother passed away when he was quite young and so his father had by necessity to become both mother and father in raising him. There is something important here with to John Bowlby and the object-relation theorists.

When we fear God's nature, so McLeod Campbell notes, we are to take comfort in the true revealing of God in himself – in Jesus Christ, in Scripture firstly and in our experience secondly. Our resulting comfort and the abatement of our discomfort arises *from* a right apprehension of who God is and what God has performed, is doing and will do in Jesus Christ. In reflecting upon God in his objectivity and in taking the subjective burden from ourselves – whether we are special or chosen or worthy – McLeod Campbell is seeking to care for those who struggle. In some sense, McLeod Campbell is trying through rhetoric and relationship to inculcate in hurting people a change in their construct or paradigm for God.

Citing the Psalmist, he reiterates, 'Thy mercy, O Lord, is in the heavens, and thy faithfulness reaches unto the clouds. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments are a great deep' (Campbell 1832:13). McLeod Campbell, in this sermon, emphasises the singularity and the oneness of God's personality in that God's mercy, righteousness and faithfulness are tied together with God's judgement and truth. The issue in classical Reformed thought is that God was one way with one group and another way with the converse group. McLeod Campbell sought to clarify for them that God is not two-faced with one aspect of God's character at odds with another aspect. One person does not see one God, while another sees another God. God's nature and character are constant.

Indeed, God's actions flow from God's nature. McLeod Campbell subsumes all of these various characteristics of God – seen in this Psalm – his mercy, affection, justice, holiness, goodness and tenderness and combines them into the simple Scriptural definition that God *is* love. God's nature and character attributes do not conflict. God is not two-sided – or Janus faced. God thus may be viewed as loving, and not only loving towards a select few people, but also as loving to all people indiscriminately. God loves unconditionally and universally in Jesus Christ. In classical post-Reformation theology, God's love was categorised by its specificity, not its universality. Christ thus came for the chosen, not for all. Following this clarification of Christ's indiscriminate care and love, McLeod Campbell asserts that God's character is to be witnessed in Christ's person and actions. Just as a therapist clarifies for the patient through specific words, so too does McLeod Campbell clarify for his congregants by pointing them specifically to Jesus Christ.

He notes that people have all too frequently separated in their minds between who God is and what God does for them (Campbell 1832):

[T]hey have come to look upon what God does, not as telling what God feels, but just as if it were some blind fate or necessity that was producing events. (p. 14)

This sounds like 'C' or 'D' in the Baylor categorisation of God. For McLeod Campbell, there is no separation between God's work, activity and character. God, for McLeod Campbell, is not passionless thought existing on the edge of the universe thinking only about himself (as in Aristotle). God *is* love. Our lives' experiences and happenings occur because of God's gracious providential care and regard. God, ultimately, intends only our good through them. What happens to us is not mere blind fate or chance. There is a purpose, though that purpose may not readily be apparent. God is not merely a machine wound up and functioning without purpose or reason. One may note that McLeod Campbell has in mind here a kind of theodicy named after Irenaeus (Hick 1966). Theodicy in this way is viewed as ultimately educative. God is regarding them, all his parishioners, and God's love is working upon them and through them and others because of God's *love to them*. In this way, their lives have a meaning beyond the evident or the apparent. Donald Capps, following Richard Bandler, would call this re-framing. Philosophers and theologians would call this 'sub species aeternitatis'. That is, from God's viewpoint. To reframe something is to look at it in a different way. Because of this, God cares, and guides, helps and sustains, as any loving parent would do. Even in bad times, God is at work. Now this may sound strange to our Enlightenment ears and the scepticism of our era. For McLeod Campbell's people, however, the issue was not whether God acted in history and in particular histories and events, but what God meant by these actions. George Hill (1861), a contemporary, more of less of McLeod Campbell's wrote: 'The Supreme Being [*God*] is the cause of everything that now exists, or that is to exist at any future time'. Hill (1861) continues:

Out of this representation of possibilities which is implied in the perfection of the divine understanding, the Supreme Being selects those single objects, and those combinations of objects, which he chooses to bring into existence; and every circumstance in the manner of the existence of that which is to be, thus depending entirely on his will, is known to him, because he has decreed that it shall be. (pp. 88–92)

Furthermore, for Hill, God's will is mysterious and ultimately unknown, but all of one piece as far as God is concerned.

Discernment, then of these happenings, for McLeod Campbell's people was crucial. God acts, for them, in all things. If something difficult occurred in someone's life, was this God's judgement towards them? If a death occurred, was this God's justice for some unknown sin? For many of McLeod Campbell's people, the answer would have been, unfortunately, 'yes'. Thus, for them, the successful were blessed, and as blessed, loved. The unsuccessful were judged and thus uncared for by God, whether they were poor,

childless or unimportant. That this contradicts Jesus' own words about rain falling on the just and unjust (Mt 5:45ff) went unheeded. The great German sociologist Max Weber was not far off in his estimation of the restlessness of Reformed Christians in seeking God's favour (2005:67). Weber considers much of capitalism to be nothing other than the working out of the anxiety and fear of people over their election by God to salvation. If Weber's thesis is correct, and I believe it is, then may it be said that the struggle for a lack of assurance is at the heart of work-alcoholism? If so, is this difficulty or neurosis at its heart a struggle over one's doctrine and view of God? In my judgement, this is, in fact, the case based upon my 25 years in the parish. The issue then is how we perceive God. What then is our theology? And, upon what is our theology based?

McLeod Campbell (1832) is thus aiming at a revolution in their way of seeing God. He argues rhetorically in speech:

There is the greatest difference between seeing the rising of the sun in the morning, and the provision of your daily support for food and raiment, as coming to you just in the ordinary course of things, and seeing them as coming to you *directly* from God, the expression of a feeling in the heart of God, as distinct and as clear as though God were to stretch forth his hand and place those things in your hands. (p. 15)

We must see God in a different way, argues McLeod Campbell. God does not have to give us life. God does not have to provide the means for our livelihoods. He does not have to provide the animals by which we make our living. God does not have to provide the rain on the fields or the sun in the sky, which shines when the clouds part. He does not have to provide us with food to eat. God does not have to clothe us.

These things are not just the natural course of nature. They are, to McLeod Campbell's way of thinking, the means by which the living God cares for and preserves people. God comforts us through these things. Living then may become the occasion for joy and gladness. Someone who looks at things with a perspective that includes the right framework regarding God's nature and character *as love* sees the living God who preserves man and beast; and acknowledges in response 'how excellent God's loving kindness is in all the earth' (Campbell 1832:15). There is no reason, for McLeod Campbell, not to believe this or to live like this in the light of Jesus Christ, which is God's greatest gift to us. In a similar way, we would not question a parent's love following their solicitous care and nurture of us as we matured into adulthood. Their actions in clothing us, feeding us, cheering us on in athletic events, taking us to doctors for our health, providing us with toys (no matter what size) and taking pride in our accomplishments reveal their feelings for us. We are then invited to respond to their love with gratefulness and appreciation. For those struggling with hardship and difficulty in their lives, McLeod Campbell would have responded, as we have said, essentially with an Irenaean theodicy. Difficulty in life, for McLeod Campbell, does not mean an absence of God's love. As we have indicated, McLeod Campbell knew a

little of hardship which befalls some people in losing his mother to illness when he was a child. His father never remarried. But always for McLeod Campbell (1877:34) was the New Testament truth, no matter what circumstances befall us – that our lives are hid with Christ in God.

Surveying the scene before us on any occasion issues forth in us the realisation that all occurs through God's purposeful will. What seems harsh or difficult may be for our benefit. Immediate judgement must be reserved. Before we assert God's judgement, let us take the time to think about what has occurred and to do so in the light of Jesus Christ. That what is before us, for our benefit, is nothing less than God's bounty. It may take a lifetime to realise this. Understanding and appreciation of this may come slowly. What McLeod Campbell wanted to achieve was to dissuade people from thinking the worst about God. To achieve something or to have something and to say that it is the result of what I have performed, for McLeod Campbell, is also to belittle God and God's sovereignty and love in providing for us through a variety of means. The hairs on our head and the food for the sparrows testify to God's awareness of our needs and of his supplying them. McLeod Campbell believed that God as love gives good things to his children. He believed this unreservedly even though he was put out of the Scottish Church at the age of 30 for teaching God loves all, what his colleagues described as 'heresy'. This unconditionally giving love does not stop at providence, but even issued in God's son's, Christ's, death for every person's forgiveness and salvation – and ultimately their reconciliation with God and one another. God's love, for McLeod Campbell, is unconditionally *free* in Jesus Christ. It cannot be earned. It cannot be procured. God's love in Christ cannot be bought, wheedled from or ransomed by manipulation. God has bestowed his son and his matchless worth upon everyone. McLeod Campbell (1832) notes further along in this sermon:

You have been in the habit of seeing the freeness of God's love – that God is actually kind to the unthankful, and the unworthy – that God is always feeding and clothing his enemies, – and showing mercy to those that hate him – you have been so taught; and when a person comes and tells you that Christ died for your sins, that you might have the gift of eternal life, you immediately say, 'Yes, *those who deserve it* (emphasis mine) shall get that gift'. You see not that God's gifts are given to the undeserving, to make them deserving. And this is the great evil. If you have been accustomed from your childhood, to see every breath you drew, – every morsel that you ate, every comfort you enjoyed, was a manifestation of forgiving love – was love to a sinner – was love to an enemy who deserved it not; then when one came and told you that Christ died for you, while you were yet a sinner, you would be ready to believe it, because you would have been accustomed to see that this is in accordance with what God has always been doing – that every kindness from him has been to the unthankful and the unworthy, for there was never any deserving in us. (p. 17)

Thus, none of us deserves anything from God, who nevertheless gives because it is in his nature and character to give, for God *is* love. God's prevenient loving kindness

induces men and women to put their trust in God – those who put their trust in God conversely are those who believe in his loving kindness. This inspires, in response, a completely different kind of life. This is the road, to quote Robert Frost, taken. Here it is, observes McLeod Campbell, that ‘salvation by faith is taught’. Putting our trust in God is as if we took shelter under God’s wings. When we put our trust and belief in God we become as a strong tower, we have found the true city of refuge. By believing in God, we understand that we are protected, helped, saved. McLeod Campbell asks, ‘What is trusting in the Lord?’ It is in McLeod Campbell’s view as having knowledge of God’s character. For McLeod Campbell ‘faith’ is knowledge. This knowledge of God’s goodness raises one above all dependence on creatures, and brings people to have confidence *in* God. Is this not the conclusion that the Apostle Paul reaches in chapter 11 of his letter to the Romans? In short, God only gives to us what is *ultimately* good. The provision of God in Christ for us, as McLeod Campbell understands it, is that we have received everything pertaining to life and godliness.

On a personal note, I was given up for adoption at birth. I *could* focus on this as desertion and abandonment, and would be within my right to do so. This would be one way to look at the events. However, two loving parents adopted me at the age of 3 months. They claimed me, and have unselfishly loved me ever since. This is also true. I choose to ‘reframe’ my origin story to focus on *their* unconditional care and love. Perspective, for McLeod Campbell, is everything. It is the work of the minister to offer this additional perspective for people’s consideration.

In ministering to people with a lack of assurance, we are invited to think about the nature and character of God as therapeutic to their concern. What have they been told in the past? How do they view Scripture? What is their image of God? How may we think with them about God? The goal, of course, of this pastoral care is that ‘transforming moment’ when they come to the realisation that God *is* love.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exist.

### Author(s) contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

## Ethical consideration

This article followed all ethical standards for a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

## References

- Bader, C., 2006, *American piety in the 21st century: New insights to the depth and complexity of religion in the US*, The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and Department of Sociology, Baylor University, viewed 11 December 2018, from <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>.
- Campbell, J.M., 1831, *Notes of Sermons*, vols. 3, Paisley, Edinburgh.
- Campbell, J.M., 1831, *the whole proceedings before the presbytery of Dumbarton, and synod of Glasgow and Ayr: In the case of the Rev. John McLeod Campbell*, R. B. Lusk, Greenock.
- Campbell, J.M., 1832, *Sermons and lectures*, R. B. Lusk, Greenock.
- Campbell, J.M., 1843, *Fragments of exposition*, J. Wright & Co, London.
- Campbell, J.M., 1851, *Christ the bread of life*, Robert Ogle, Edinburgh.
- Campbell, J.M., 1873a, *Reminiscences and reflections*, MacMillan, London.
- Campbell, J.M., 1873b, *Responsibility for the gift of eternal life*, Oxford, London.
- Campbell, J.M., 1873c, *On the nature of the Atonement*, MacMillan, London.
- Campbell, J.M., 1874, *Thoughts on revelation*, Robert Ogle, Edinburgh.
- Campbell, J.M., 1877, *Memorials*, vols. 1–2, MacMillan, London.
- Campbell, J.M., 1898, *Fragments of truth*, David Douglas, Edinburgh.
- Campbell, J.M., 1996, *On the nature of the Atonement*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
- Erskine, T. (of Linlathen), 1837, *The doctrine of election...*, James Duncan, Edinburgh.
- Hick, J., 1966, *Evil and the God of love*, Macmillan, New York.
- Hill, G., 1861, *Extracts from lectures on divinity*, Blackwood and sons Edinburgh.
- Loder, J., 1989, *The transforming moment*, Helmers and Howard, Colorado Springs, CO.
- Robins, H.B., 1912, ‘The basis of assurance in recent protestant theologies’, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, Chase E. Brown Printing Co, Kansas City, MO.
- Torrance, T.F., 1987, ‘The reconciliation of mind’, *Journal for the Academy of Evangelism in Theological Education* 12(1996–1997), 8–15.
- Weber, M., 2002, *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, Penguin, New York.
- Whitehead, J.D., 1980, *Method in ministry: Theological reflection and Christian ministry*, Harper, San Francisco, CA.