

Below are the notes I used for studying and preparing to transfer into the EPC Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic in September 2020. Nearly everything in this document is from online sources. Some of the sources are noted with links, some are not. Anything in *italics* is unique to me. Everything else is from other sources.

## EPC Transfer Study Guide

### Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic, September 2020

## Table of Contents

<b>12 Questions for the Applicant .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Bible .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Q: How do you understand the first chapters of the Bible? .....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Q: Are you a Young Earther or an Old Earther? Why? .....</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Q: What do you think of the Documentary Hypothesis? .....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Q: What is your view on Q? .....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Q: Did Paul write the Pastoral Epistles? Explain the evidence counter to your View. ....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Q: Why do you think Romans 9 is important to Reformed Theology? .....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Q: Tell us your view on the authority of Scripture. ....</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Q: What do you think of the Jesus Seminar? .....</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Q: Tell us your favorite OT book and how you would use it to preach the Gospel. ....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Q: How would you preach the Song of Songs? .....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Q: How would you preach from Leviticus? .....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Q: In your view, what is significant about God's covenant with Abraham? .....</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>Q: How do you explain repeated stories in Genesis? .....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>Q: How do you handle the violence of the Old Testament? .....</i>	<i>60</i>
<i>Q: Tell us your view of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. ....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Q: How are the Minor Prophets still applicable for our spiritual lives today? .....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>Q: James 2:24 says, "A man is justified by works and not by faith alone." Explain. ....</i>	<i>72</i>
<i>Q: 1 Tim 3:15 calls the church the "pillar and buttress of the truth." Explain. ....</i>	<i>76</i>
<i>Q: The book of James does not mention anything about Jesus' atoning death and resurrection. In what sense can you say that James teaches the gospel? .....</i>	<i>79</i>
<b>Theology and Sacraments .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<i>Q: Do you subscribe to the Essentials of the Faith of the EPC without any reservations? .....</i>	<i>83</i>
<i>Q: Is Jesus the only way of salvation? .....</i>	<i>84</i>

<i>Q: What exceptions do you have to the WCF and Catechisms?.....</i>	84
<i>Q: Do you affirm the view of Scripture found in Chapter 1 of the WCF?.....</i>	84
<i>Q: What is your view on infallibility and inerrancy? .....</i>	86
<i>Q: Explain your view of Dispensationalism and whether you hold to this view. .....</i>	98
<i>Q: Explain your view of “Openness of God” theology. Do you hold to this view?.....</i>	98
<i>Q: 1 Sam 15:11 says that God regretted making Saul king. Explain. ....</i>	105
<i>Q: How do you reconcile God’s sovereignty and our free will?.....</i>	107
<i>Q: How does one dead in sin become alive in Christ? .....</i>	114
<i>Q: What does it mean to be Evangelical?.....</i>	116
<i>Q: Tell us what it means that the Church is missional. ....</i>	123
<i>Q: How does a local church engage the theology of being missional? .....</i>	130
<i>Q: How does a Reformed church adopt Evangelical theology? .....</i>	135
<i>Q: Tell us your view of the acronym TULIP as it relates to salvation. ....</i>	149
<i>Q: What is your view on the total depravity of man?.....</i>	156
<i>Q: What are your views on the gifts of the Holy Spirit?.....</i>	162
<i>Q: Explain your view on Cessationism.....</i>	162
<i>Q: Tell us your views on Egalitarianism and Complementarianism. ....</i>	162
<i>Q: What is your view on the end times? .....</i>	162
<i>Q: Who should be allowed at the Lord’s Table?.....</i>	162
<i>Q: What is your view on paedo-communion?.....</i>	162
<i>Q: What is your view on the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper?.....</i>	162
<i>Q: In your view, who qualifies for the sacrament of baptism? .....</i>	162
<i>Q: Why do we baptize infants?.....</i>	162
<i>Q: What is your view on re-baptism?.....</i>	163
<i>Q: Why are chapters 34 and 35 of the Confession important? .....</i>	163
<b>Church History and Reformed Tradition.....</b>	<b>164</b>
<i>Q: How do some of the major contributors to Reformed thought prior to the Reformation influence your ministry today? .....</i>	164
<i>Q: In your opinion, what sets apart the Reformed tradition from other movements? .....</i>	168
<i>Q: How do the Five Solas of the Reformation support your ministry today? .....</i>	181
<i>Q: How has the Evangelical Presbyterian Church appropriately responded to some of the dilemmas arising in the mainline church?.....</i>	183
<i>Q: How has the Presbyterian Church acted with a missional emphasis since the Reformation?.....</i>	183
<i>Q: How has the Presbyterian Church participated in the Evangelical Movements in Church history? .....</i>	183
<i>Q: The Holy Spirit manifested His gifts during the Reformation in various ways. What significance for your ministry is that today? .....</i>	183

<i>Q: Tell us about how the Presbyterian Church has engaged the Charismatic Movement of the Holy Spirit. (See Pitman, chapter 3) .....</i>	<b>183</b>
<i>Q: Tell us your view of the Social Gospel movement.....</i>	<b>183</b>
<b>History of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (See Fortson): .....</b>	<b>188</b>
<i>Q: When did the Evangelical Presbyterian Church come into existence? .....</i>	<b>188</b>
<i>Q: Who were the founding churches of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church? .....</i>	<b>188</b>
<i>Q: What issues in the mainline church propelled the EPC founders to separate? (Fortson pp.17 – 26; 33 – 38; 42 – 54) .....</i>	<b>189</b>
<i>Q: Why was commitment to WCF crucial to EPC founders? (pp. 59 – 68; 137 – 144) .....</i>	<b>189</b>
<i>Q: How did Bart Hess contribute to the EPC founding? (29 – 33; 55 – 59) .....</i>	<b>189</b>
<i>Q: Who was Andy Jumper; why is his story important to the ethos of the EPC? (38 – 42; 68 – 70) .....</i>	<b>189</b>
<i>Q: Describe the controversy over “The Essentials.” How was it resolved in 2001? (144 – 166) .....</i>	<b>189</b>
<i>Q: How does the “Essentials of Our Faith” relate to the WCF in our constitution? .....</i>	<b>190</b>
<i>Q: The EPC can be described as “New School Presbyterianism.” Explain. (2 – 17) .....</i>	<b>190</b>
<i>Q: In your view, what is distinctive about the EPC position paper on women’s ordination? (95 – 99) .....</i>	<b>190</b>
<i>Q: How would you describe the EPC view on the gifts of the Spirit? (99 – 101) .....</i>	<b>190</b>
<i>Q: Describe the relationship between the EPC and other conservative Presbyterian bodies. (101 – 105; 122 – 127) .....</i>	<b>190</b>
<i>Q: How did the EPC deal with tensions between complementarians and egalitarians in the BOO in 2012? (208 – 220).....</i>	<b>191</b>
<i>Q: What impact has Ken Priddy had on the missional emphasis of the church? .....</i>	<b>191</b>
<i>Q: The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy has been a rallying point for many Evangelicals. On its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, what did our General Assembly say about it? (178 – 179).....</i>	<b>191</b>
<b>Polity .....</b>	<b>191</b>
<i>Q: Define the Book of Order.....</i>	<b>191</b>
<i>Q: What do you see as valuable is the motto of the EPC? .....</i>	<b>191</b>
<i>Q: Why do you think we value liberty in non-essentials?.....</i>	<b>191</b>
<i>Q: If a commissioner to Presbytery tries to debate a non-essential, what will happen? .....</i>	<b>192</b>
<i>Q: Who is the missional administrative director? .....</i>	<b>192</b>
<i>Q: Who is the stated Clerk of Presbytery? What is his email address? .....</i>	<b>192</b>
<i>Q: Who is the current moderator of Presbytery? .....</i>	<b>192</b>
<i>Q: Who is the chair of the church development committee?.....</i>	<b>192</b>
<i>Q: In your opinion, why are the marks of the church important? .....</i>	<b>192</b>
<i>Q: The Book of Order states that the first duty of an Elder is to represent the mind of Christ as they understand it in the courts of the church. How is this beneficial for us today?.....</i>	<b>195</b>
<i>Q: n 1984, the GA adopted a position paper on the ordination of women. Tell us what you particularly appreciate about it.....</i>	<b>195</b>

<i>Q: In 1986, the GA adopted a position paper on the Holy Spirit. Tell us what you think about it.</i> .....	196
<i>Q: Why is it important for a Session to make provision for courses of instruction to train Ruling Elders before they are ordained?</i> .....	198
<i>Q: What is your practice in regard to financial stewardship and church giving?</i> .....	198
<i>Q: Why is it important that the EPC may make no provision in the BOO to establish any trust of property held by or for a local church?</i> .....	199
<i>Q: Reflect on the purpose of church discipline.</i> .....	199
<i>Q: What does it mean that man's chief end is to glorify God &amp; to enjoy Him forever?</i> .....	199
<i>Q: Should a funeral always focus on the hope of the resurrection? How would you do this?</i> .....	199
<b>Office and Work of the Pastor .....</b>	<b>199</b>
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Homosexuality in the church</i> .....	199
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Abortion as an option</i> .....	199
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Church discipline, including restoration.</i> .....	199
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Baptism vs. Baby dedication</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Dealing with Divorce</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Motivating to Evangelism</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Remarriage after divorce</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Dealing with Suicide</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with A parishioner struggling with grief or depression</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Pastoral oversight</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Unfaithfulness in marriage</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Church conflict</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Confidentiality</i> .....	200
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Where do you see your role in relationship with the Session?</i> .....	201
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Dealing with abuse in marriage</i> .....	201
<i>Q: Describe how you would deal with Counseling someone whose infant died</i> .....	201
<i>Q: How would you counsel someone struggling with addiction to Pornography</i> .....	201
<i>Q: How would you counsel someone struggling with addiction to Gambling</i> .....	201
<i>Q: How would you counsel someone struggling with addiction to Drinking/drugs</i> .....	201
<i>Q: How would you counsel a young woman in your congregation who believes God is calling her to serve as an ordained pastor? What seminary would you advise her to attend?</i> .....	201
<i>Q: In your view, is human life sacred? Explain.</i> .....	201
<i>Q: A man in your church tells you he feels like he is really a female inside and is thinking about having gender reassignment surgery. How would you counsel him?</i> .....	202
<i>Q: What are significant challenges for pastors and the Church in America today?</i> .....	202
<i>Q: How would you counsel a member of your church who doubts their election and/or salvation?</i> .....	217

<i>Q: How would you respond if someone with cancer requested to be anointed with oil and prayed over for healing by you and the elders.....</i>	217
<i>Q: What is your opinion of this statement, "The EPC affirms the gifts of God's Spirit as biblically valid for today"?.....</i>	217
<i>Q: A missionary returns from the field and tells you about miracles he witnessed while there. How would you process that?.....</i>	217
<i>Q: A charismatic person in your congregation wants a seminary education. Where would you advise him or her to attend?.....</i>	217
<i>Q: If there was a pandemic and the governor imposed a stay at home order, how would you as pastor lead the church?.....</i>	217
<i>Q: An engaged couple seeks your services to officiate their wedding. In the process of leading them through premarital counseling you discover that they are living together and are sexually active. How do you respond pastorally to this couple?.....</i>	218
<i>Q: Would you respond differently if they have had a child together who is living in the home as well?.....</i>	218
<i>Q: How would you counsel a couple whose previous marriages ended in unbiblical divorces? Are there special circumstances that would shape your counsel? What does the EPC Position Paper say about it?.....</i>	218
<i>Q: How would you counsel someone who is trying to understand the Scriptural picture of marriage?.....</i>	225
<i>Questions about baptism:.....</i>	225
<i>Q: What would you say to a young couple with a 3 month old infant that wants to have their baby dedicated instead of baptized?.....</i>	225
<i>Q: What would be an appropriate response to a couple if they wanted to have their infant baptized in the privacy of their home? .....</i>	225
<i>Q: A member of your congregation was baptized as a child but never came to know the Lord. Now, as an adult, they have become a believer and desire to be baptized. How would you respond to their request?.....</i>	225
<i>Questions about the demonic:.....</i>	226
<i>Q: A member of your church tells you that doors open and close and the lights in their home turn on and off on their own. They think this is demonic activity. What steps would you take next?.....</i>	226
<i>Q: What is your opinion of Jesus' statement on demons, "This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting"? How do you apply this to your ministry? .....</i>	226

## **12 Questions for the Applicant**

**NOTE:** The Ministerial Committee will use this file as an introductory communication from you. We do not want detailed, wordy responses, but concise and accurate answers. Our purpose is not to find areas of weakness, but rather to help the Committee become familiar with the applicant's views so as to make the oral examination more fruitful and time effective.

**In preparing for some of these questions and for the oral exam, it is *highly recommended* that you carefully read through the modern language edition of the**

**Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger & Shorter Catechisms (adopted by the EPC**

**If you have any questions regarding this document, please feel free to contact the Presbytery Administrative Director or Chairman of the Ministerial Committee. Please use separate pages for your answers. Be brief; be clear; be truthful; be not afraid!**

- 1. How and when did you come to know Jesus as your Lord and Savior?**
- 2. How and when did you receive the call to the gospel ministry?**
- 3. What is your view of Scripture? (Please include your views on inerrancy & infallibility.)**

*Infallible* - cannot err.

*Inerrant* - does not err.

- 4. What is your view of Calvinism? (Specifically, what are your views, opinion pertaining to the Canons of Dordt, also known as the "Five Points of Calvinism," or "T-U-L-I-P.")**

T - Total depravity.

U - Unconditional election.

L - Limited atonement.

I- Irresistible grace.

P- Perseverance of the saints.

- 5. What is your view of the Reformed Faith as reflected in the following areas:**

- a) What are the essential tenets of the Reformed faith?**
- b) What do you understand re: the doctrine of the Covenant?**
- c) What are your views regarding Dispensationalism?**
- d) What is the importance of infant baptism?**
- e) What theological topics are you most interested in at this time in your life?**

- 6. What is your view of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms?**

**7. What exceptions do you take to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms? Please cite from each document. (An exception is a conscience-bound belief with Scriptural support & reference(s).)**

**8. What is your view of the five Solas? I.e.—Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Soli Deo Gloria) Comment briefly on all or each.**

Sola scriptura ("by Scripture alone").

Solus Christus ("Christ alone" or "through Christ alone").

Sola gratia ("by grace alone").

Sola fide ("by faith alone").

Soli Deo gloria ("glory to God alone").

**9. What is your view of the value of the Presbyterian form of government?**

**a) Your commitment to active involvement in the Presbytery; its influence on your personal life & ministry.**

**b) What is your opinion on EPC's position on the parity of Ruling & Teaching Elders?**

**10. What are your spiritual gifts?**

**11. The overall health of the following areas of your personal life:**

**a) If married, describe the quality of your marriage with examples of why you perceive it to be that way.**

**b) Financial stability:**

**c) Physical, emotional well-being:**

**12. (For those applying to labor outside the bounds) Describe the nature of your ministry: what it is, where do you expect to minister, who is intended to receive ministry, how supported, who is your personal oversight or accountability?**

## Bible

**Q: HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF THE BIBLE?**

## Why the first three chapters in the Bible are so important

### **Creation**

Hebrews 11:3 says that it is “by faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.” No one was there at the beginning except the Eternal One. By faith we understand His account of the creation story.

### **In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.**

Stop. Wonder and awe, what an awesome God we serve. Did you know that scientists estimate there are 100 billion galaxies in the universe? God definitely “overdid it” with His creation for a reason — He is showing us that He is a glorious God who is the author of beauty. We are so small compared to His mightiness seen in creation.

### **It was good.**

Seven times in the first chapter God describes His creation as “good” or “very good.” Genesis 1 and 2 are so important because the universe was originally created without sin — it can be our guide of God’s original intentions of the created order. In fact, Creation is often called on as evidence of the truthfulness of a doctrine in other parts of Scripture. For example, descriptions of marriage or church elders appeal to the created order (1 Corinthians 11 and 1 Timothy 2).

### **Be fruitful and multiply.**

It is here that we see God’s plan for mankind: fruitfulness and faithfulness. God says,

*“fill the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. and God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.’ ”*

In broad terms, God gave mankind dominion over the earth. A dominion to search explore the greatness of Creation. A dominion to find and cultivate new sources of food. A dominion to be faithful to steward the blessings of life here on earth by following all of God’s commands.

### **Work is good.**

That stewardship requires working. Isn’t it telling that work is instituted by God before the fall? Heaven isn’t going to be us sitting around during a full-time retirement. Adam rolled up his sleeves, ready to work, when “the Lord God took [Adam] and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” (Gen. 2:15) And so are we co-heirs of the kingdom of God and will be

working diligently in the kingdom. God is so kind to include us in the work of subduing the earth, as well as the spiritual work of evangelism and service to the church today. Only after the fall of mankind did our work become tainted with the thorns and thistles from sin, (Gen. 3:18) but a Genesis 2 shows us that work itself isn't a product of sin but rather intentionally instituted by God before the fall!

### **God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.**

Do you think God was tired after the first six days of creating? He is all powerful, infinite, and endless in energy, so why did He rest? Sabbath is for man (Mark 2:27) and is designed to be a blessing for us. We learn a theology of rest and trusting God. May we rest in His constant sustaining power that upholds the universe!

### **Sexuality and Gender**

God pauses after commissioning Adam to a life of working in the garden to make a point of showing him all of the created creatures. Why did God do this? The section is bookended by describing the need for a "helper fit for him" (Gen. 2:18, 20). We see God parading each and every "beast of the field and every bird of the heavens" and Adam gave a name to each. But still his helper was not to be found until God created woman out of man.

### **A helper fit for him.**

God invented marriage. A few paragraphs ago I said that God's plan for us is fruitfulness and faithfulness. Marriage is a way through both. Before Adam and his help-mate Eve able to be multiply (fruitfulness), it is no accident that God said "it is not good for man to be alone" right after commissioning Adam to work and keep the garden: Eve is Adam's helper for the work of God (faithfulness). Likewise today, God provides men a wife as a helper for the ministries to which God calls men.

### **Male and female He created them.**

Through Genesis we learn the God-instituted design for marriage: male and female. It is so closely tied to fruitfulness (the offspring of future generations of children) and human flourishing, which is why God made the animals (and eventually Adam and Eve) with male and female complements. Without this pre-fall narrative we might not be able to say definitively that God created both gender and traditional marriage as a good and holy blessing (a gift!) for mankind's benefit and flourishing. This is the one path laid out in Scripture for the outworking of marriage and family, any other is ultimately not faithful to God's commands.

### **Companionship.**

We have said much about the work set forth by God, but little about the blessing and joy of marriage. After meeting Eve for the first time, Adam exclaims,

*This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;*

*she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.*

Can you imagine Adam's anticipation of finding a suitable helper after naming each and every living being on the planet? He was joyful to finally meet her. God's gift of the two becoming one-flesh is just that: a gift. It is a gift of companionship, friendship, fellowship. God loves to bless His people with this gift.

### **Your desire shall be for your husband.**

Unfortunately, this gift of God is often perverted by the sinfulness of man. In the narrative of the first sin of the first couple we find blame shifting and a role reversal. We know that a husband is "the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church" and so also "wives should submit in everything to their husbands" (Eph. 5:22–24) as the church submits to Christ, because man is "the image and glory of God, but a woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man." (1 Cor. 11:7–8). We learn the roles in marriage from creation, but that's not what happened in this fateful scene between Adam and Eve. Rather than using his headship to display the sacrificial love seen in Ephesians 5 ("husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her") Adam instead chose to blame Eve: "The woman who you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." (Gen. 3:12) Likewise, Eve is seen taking a leadership role giving her husband fruit of the tree. (Gen. 3:6) We can learn much from studying the failures, role reversals, and tendency toward sin of Adam and Eve.

### **The Fall**

While we see the goodness and the intention of God's plan in the first two chapters, we also see the disruption caused by man. It's in Genesis where we can begin to ask big questions: if God is good, why is there evil in the world? We see that sin is the fault of man alone and introduces evil into this world. We see the tempter in strong pursuance of humans to persuade us to leave God's path, a fact echoed in 1 Peter 5: "your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." We see that sin causes a separation from God when Adam and Eve are driven out of the garden and God "placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to tree of life." Without that life giving power from God, sin ultimately led to death: the required punishment of all sin. We even see a hint at the future animal sacrifice required by God's law: "the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." Before this point, it seems likely that no animal death occurred and that all animals ate plants for food (Gen. 1:30). God intentionally replaces Adam and Eve's fig leaves of their shameful ness (Gen. 3:7) with the covering for sin He would require until Jesus's death: animal sacrifice.

### **Neither shall you touch it.**

An interesting conversation occurs after the serpent asks Eve to clarify God's words. Eve says that God said "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die." (Gen. 3:3) The last part ('neither shall you touch it') isn't in the original command in Genesis 2:17. Surely from the very beginning humans have been willing to change, distort, twist, and add to God's words. Was it because of Adam's lacking leadership that possibly he didn't repeat the correct command to Eve? Was it Eve's intention to give herself extra assurance that she wouldn't be tempted to disobey? Or was it merely a slip of tongue? We can't say for sure, but we can use it as a lesson to be careful when quoting the Word of God even in our lives today.

### **You will be like God.**

At the root of much of the sinfulness of our heart is the desire to be like God. In Genesis, this timeless tale might as well be told of our own hearts: "for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When we question God's commands we have a low view of God and a high view of ourselves. That pride calls into question the goodness of God's commands. Our obedience to God's commands is followed closely by His blessings: "If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth." (Deut. 28:1) Rather than try to be like God by choosing our own path, it is better to trust that His path has been laid out for us for own good!

### **Sin came through one man; and death through sin.**

I said at the outset that Genesis 1–3 is one of favorite sections of the Bible, but I am still glad we have the rest of Scripture to help us interpret it. Romans 5:12 gives us a helpful description of the fall.

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."*

I talk to many people about the incompatibility of the creation narrative with the naturalistic evolutionary worldview. Ultimately, what convinced me of the truthfulness of the Biblical narrative is not a scientific argument, but a theological one.

The passage from Romans tells us that sin is the result of the fall, not the driver of creation. A naturalist's view of evolution requires death, of course, but death and the turnover of many generations (from a single-cell organism to many-celled organisms to the creatures and animals that we know today) leads to a steady improvement and a survival of the fittest. While it is true that observable competition between species leads to a selective force on animals over shorter time scales today (natural selection, sometimes called microevolution), this perverse world view

tells us that death is a producer of something good: life. Instead, we would do well to remember the lesson from Genesis 3: sin leads to death.

### **Let us make man in our image.**

A naturalistic evolutionist will have a difficult time placing the value of a human life over another animal's life. We know that mankind has intrinsic beauty and value, regardless of disease, disability, hardship, race, gender, or any other differentiator because humans are made in God's image. With this image-bearing we can step into our role as leaders in the world, entrusted with the dominion over creation. Let's use it for His glory!

### **Grace**

Grace, what beautiful grace is seen over and over in the first three chapters of the Bible. First of all, God is gracious to include us in His creation. Not only is He our Creator but He loves His created ones! He loves us enough to give us fulfillment in work and dominion over the earth. He loves us enough to give us a help-mate when it is not good for man to be alone. He loves us enough to give us a record of creation story. He loves us enough to give us commands to follow for our own good.

### **The gospel was promised to Adam.**

God's character is put on display in the third chapter of Genesis immediately after the first sin. Before dealing with the woman, (or with the man) God instead pronounces a curse on the serpent and prophesies a coming offspring that will crush the serpent's head. We see Jesus promised to mankind even before God turns to the woman (pain in childbearing) and to the man (thorns and thistles). The first words out of the mouth of God after the first sin is a promise of a coming judgement on the evil forces of the world. What a gracious God we serve! I remember the first time I saw the gospel in Genesis 3. I was so shocked, filled with amazement of God's foresight and sovereignty. Truly the entire Bible is an unfolding narrative of His redemptive plan to save all mankind. The first three chapters just happen to give an excellent overview, summary, and foreshadowing of the rest of the story!

## **Q: ARE YOU A YOUNG EARTHER OR AN OLD EARTHER? WHY?**

### Old Earth creationism

**Old Earth creationism** (OEC) is a form of creationism which includes day-age creationism, gap creationism and progressive creationism.

Broadly speaking, OEC occupies a middle ground between young Earth creationism (YEC) and theistic evolution (TE). In contrast to YEC, it is typically more compatible with the scientific evidence on the issues of physics, chemistry, geology, and the age of the Earth.<sup>11</sup> But, like YEC and in contrast with TE, it **rejects** macroevolution, claiming it is biologically untenable and not supported by the fossil record,<sup>12</sup> and **rejects** the concept of universal descent from a last universal common ancestor.

-**Day-age creationism**, a type of old Earth creationism, is an interpretation of the creation accounts in Genesis. It holds that the six days referred to in the Genesis account of creation are not ordinary 24-hour days, but are much longer periods (from thousands to billions of years). The Genesis account is then reconciled with the age of the Earth. Proponents of the day-age theory can be found among both theistic evolutionists, who accept the scientific consensus on evolution, and progressive creationists, who reject it. The theories are said to be built on the understanding that the Hebrew word yom is also used to refer to a time period, with a beginning and an end and not necessarily that of a 24-hour day.

The differences between the young Earth interpretation of Genesis and modern scientific theories such as Big Bang, abiogenesis, and common descent are significant. The **young Earth interpretation** says that everything in the universe and on Earth was created in six 24-hour days, estimated to have occurred some 6,000 years ago. Modern scientific observations, however, put the age of the universe at 13.8 billion years and the Earth at 4.5 billion years, with various forms of life, including humans, being formed gradually over time.

The day-age theory attempts to reconcile these views by asserting that the creation "days" were not ordinary 24-hour days, but actually lasted for long periods of time (as day-age implies, the "days" each lasted an age). According to this view, the sequence and duration of the creation "days" may be paralleled to the scientific consensus for the age of the earth and the universe.

-**Gap creationism** (also known as ruin-restoration creationism, restoration creationism, or "the Gap Theory") is a form of old Earth creationism that posits that the six-yom creation period, as described in the Book of Genesis, involved six literal 24-hour days (light being "day" and dark "night" as God specified), but that there was a gap of time between two distinct creations in the first and the second verses of Genesis, which the theory states explains many scientific observations, including the age of the Earth.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> It differs from day-age creationism, which posits that the 'days' of creation were much longer periods (of thousands or millions of years), and from young Earth creationism, which although it agrees concerning the six literal 24-hour days of creation, does not posit any gap of time.

-**Progressive creationism** (see for comparison intelligent design) is the religious belief that God created new forms of life gradually over a period of hundreds of millions of years. As a form of old Earth creationism, it accepts mainstream geological and cosmological estimates for the age of the Earth, some tenets of biology such as microevolution as well as archaeology to make its case. In this view creation occurred in rapid bursts in which all "kinds" of plants and animals appear in stages lasting millions of years. The bursts are followed by periods of stasis or equilibrium to accommodate new arrivals. These bursts represent instances of God creating new types of organisms by divine intervention. As viewed from the archaeological record, progressive creationism holds that "species do not gradually appear by the steady transformation of its ancestors; [but] appear all at once and "fully formed."<sup>[1]</sup>

The view **rejects** macroevolution, claiming it is biologically untenable and not supported by the fossil record,<sup>[2]</sup> as well as **rejects** the concept of universal descent from a last universal common ancestor. Thus the evidence for macroevolution is claimed to be false, but microevolution is accepted as a genetic parameter designed by the Creator into the fabric of genetics to allow for environmental adaptations and survival. Generally, it is viewed by proponents as a middle ground between literal creationism and evolution.

**Macroevolution** in the modern sense is evolution that is guided by selection among interspecific variation, as opposed to selection among intraspecific variation in microevolution.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup> This modern definition differs from the original concept, which referred macroevolution to the evolution of taxa above the species level (genera, families, orders etc.).<sup>[4]</sup>

**Theistic evolution, theistic evolutionism, evolutionary creationism, or God-guided evolution** are views that regard religious teachings about God as compatible with modern scientific understanding about biological evolution. Theistic evolution is not in itself a scientific theory, but a range of views about how the science of general evolution relates to religious beliefs in contrast to special creation views.

Supporters of theistic evolution generally harmonize evolutionary thought with belief in God, rejecting the conflict thesis regarding the relationship between religion and science – they hold that religious teachings about creation and scientific theories of evolution need not contradict each other.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

Francis Collins describes theistic evolution as the position that "evolution is real, but that it was set in motion by God",<sup>[3]</sup> and characterizes it as accepting "that evolution occurred as biologists describe it, but under the direction of God".<sup>[4]</sup> He lists out six general premises on which different versions of theistic evolution typically rest. They include:<sup>[5]</sup>

1. the prevailing cosmological model, with the universe coming into being about 13.8 billion years ago;
2. the fine-tuned universe;
3. evolution and natural selection;
4. No special supernatural intervention is involved once evolution got under way;
5. Humans are a result of these evolutionary processes; and
6. Despite all these, humans are unique. The concern for the Moral Law (the knowledge of right and wrong) and the continuous search for God among all human cultures defy evolutionary explanations and point to our spiritual nature.

**Last universal common ancestor** or **last universal cellular ancestor (LUCA)**, also called the **last universal ancestor (LUA)**, or **concestor**, is the most recent population of organisms from which all organisms now living on Earth have a common descent; the most recent common ancestor of all current life on Earth.<sup>[1]</sup> A related concept is that of **progenote**.<sup>[3][4][5][6]</sup> LUCA is not thought to be the first life on Earth, but rather the only type of organism of its time to still have living descendants.

While there is no specific fossil evidence of LUCA, it can be studied by comparing the genomes of all modern organisms, its descendants. By these means, a 2016 study identified a set of 355 genes most likely to have been present in LUCA.<sup>[7][8][a]</sup> The genes describe a complex life form with many co-adapted features, including transcription and translation mechanisms to convert information from DNA to RNA to proteins. The study concluded that the LUCA probably lived in the high-temperature water of deep sea vents near ocean-floor magma flows.

Studies from 2000–2018 have suggested an increasingly ancient time for LUCA. In 2000, estimations suggested LUCA existed 3.5 to 3.8 billion years ago in the Paleoarchean era,<sup>[10][11]</sup> a few hundred million years before the earliest fossil evidence of life, for which there are several candidates ranging in age from 3.48 to 4.28 billion years ago.<sup>[12][13][14][15][16][17][18]</sup> A 2018 study from the University of Bristol, applying a molecular clock model, places the LUCA shortly after 4.5 billion years ago, within the Hadean.<sup>[19][20]</sup>

Charles Darwin first proposed the theory of universal common descent through an evolutionary process in his book On the Origin of Species in 1859: "Therefore I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from **some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed**".<sup>[21]</sup> Later biologists have separated the problem of the origin of life from that of the LUCA.

### Young Earth creationism

**Young Earth creationism (YEC)** is a form of creationism which holds as a central tenet that the Earth and its lifeforms were created in their present forms by supernatural acts of a deity

between approximately 6,000 and 10,000 years ago.<sup>[112]</sup> In its most widespread version, YEC is based on the religious belief in the inerrancy of certain literal interpretations of the Book of Genesis.<sup>[113]</sup> Its primary adherents are Christians who believe that God created the Earth in six days,<sup>[114]</sup> in contrast with old Earth creationism (OEC), which holds literal interpretations of Genesis that are compatible with the scientifically determined ages of the Earth and universe.<sup>[115]</sup>

## **Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS?**

### The documentary hypothesis – What is it?

The documentary hypothesis suggests that the first five books of the Old Testament were originally independent accounts that were later edited or redacted by a later editor or editors. Those who support the documentary hypothesis theory generally suggest four specific sources represented by the letters JEDP. Because of this, the documentary hypothesis is often also referred to as the JEDP theory.

The J source refers to an alleged Yahwist source that was written in the kingdom of Judah by approximately 950 BC.

The E source refers to an alleged Elohist source that was written in the kingdom of Israel (northern kingdom) by approximately 850 BC.

The D source refers to an alleged Deuteronomist source that was written in Jerusalem by approximately 600 BC.

The P source refers to an alleged Priestly source that was completed in Babylon by Jewish priests in approximately 500 BC.

These allegations completely contrast the biblical claim that the first five books were authored by Moses by approximately 1400 BC. For the documentary hypothesis to be true, Moses could not have authored the books nor could they have been completed anywhere near the time period spoken of in the books themselves.

### The Re-Emergence of Source Criticism: The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis

The Documentary Hypothesis, it must always be remembered, is precisely that: a hypothesis. It is an attempt to explain the literary phenomena of the Pentateuch: clear narrative contradiction, repetition, and discontinuity. It posits that the best explanation for these features is the existence of four independent documents that were combined into a single text, basically the canonical Pentateuch as we now have it. It is the literary solution to a literary problem, no more and no less. Scholarly claims regarding stylistic criteria or similarity of narratives are not inherent parts of the theory; they are aspects of the methods used to argue for the theory. If they do not succeed, the theory does not necessarily fail; the methods do. The theory may simply need to be argued on different grounds. Thus the very correct criticisms of anti-documentary scholars from the earliest days of the theory until our own time are not necessarily grounds for dismissing the whole hypothesis; they are, rather, a call to refine and revise the methods employed by scholars when describing and applying the hypothesis. When such refinements and revisions are undertaken, as they have been recently, the Documentary Hypothesis regains its place as the most economical, comprehensive explanation for the literary phenomena of the canonical Pentateuch.

David Wright has termed the recent source-critical approach the "Neo-Documentary Hypothesis," a label which is gaining some use among its adherents and others. What, then, is the shape of the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis? How does it differ from its earlier incarnation; how does it take into account the methodological problems of classical documentary scholarship; how does it help us to better understand the composition of the Pentateuch?

First: Whereas classical scholarship more often than not took stylistic and terminological markers as the starting point for the division of the text, the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis recognizes that these elements are valuable only as secondary, supporting criteria. Instead, we place at the forefront of the analysis plot and narrative continuity—the events that occur, the sequence in which they occur, cause, and effect. The mark of an author is his creation of and adherence to a distinctive and definable set of narrative claims: who did what, when, where, and how. Where these claims are contradictory, we must consider that a different author is at work; where they are the same, there is no need to pursue any source division. It is no small irony that in current non-documentary scholarship, style and terminology have re-emerged triumphantly as the fundamental basis for analysis, and with far greater demands for linguistic similarity than classical source-critical scholarship ever required.

Second: The belief that the documents must have all told the same stories in the same way, a hallmark of classical scholarship, is discarded in the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis. In its place is the recognition that there is no reason whatsoever that each source could not and indeed should not tell the stories however it wished. The sources in fact tell very different stories within the same larger framework, with different episodes, in different orders, and with very different viewpoints. This recognition allows for literally unified passages to remain so, and also allows for simpler source divisions.

Third: For generations now, the Documentary Hypothesis has been considered synonymous with Wellhausen's reconstruction of the evolutionary growth of ancient Israelite religion. The source division and the placement of the sources in a straight line of development from earliest to latest, from naturalistic to legalistic, has been taken as the fundamental claim of the hypothesis. This is demonstrated by the attempts in scholarship to debunk the Documentary Hypothesis by arguing against Wellhausen's view of Israelite religion, as if the former is dependent on the latter. On the contrary, however, it was Wellhausen's source division in his *Composition* that allowed for his historical reconstruction in the *Prolegomena*.<sup>[2]</sup> In the first book, he addressed only the literary evidence; in the second, he addressed only the historical questions. The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis returns to the first stage, and leaves the second unconsidered. The literary question is primary, and is in fact the only question that can be answered by the documentary theory. Even if one disagrees with or disproves the arguments of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*, the literary analysis of the Pentateuch stands on its own merits.

Fourth: In the classical model, the sources were understood as representing discrete historical periods, and were therefore dated accordingly. The order J-E-D-P was almost universally accepted, and was made the basis for much of the analysis. In the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis, the absolute dating of the sources is not a topic of investigation. There is little in the sources themselves that allows for any absolute dating. What is possible is relative dating, though only in one particular case. The relationship of D to E and J makes clear that D was written after the other two non-priestly documents. Yet whether J or E came first, or how P fits into this picture, are questions for which the literary data simply do not provide evidence. Nor does the theory rest on any specific dating of the documents: if all four were written within twenty years of each other, the literary evidence would not change; if J were written in the tenth

century and P in the Middle Ages, the literary evidence would not change. The dating of the sources has no impact on the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis.

Fifth: The classical source theory was often concerned with identifying the various strata that made up the individual sources, positing J1, J2, etc. Further, the presence of strata in the sources was used to solve supposed internal discrepancies within the sources. The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis is concerned only with the penultimate form of the text: what the compiler had at hand when he put the four documents together. This approach allows for far greater clarity in addressing the question of how the Pentateuch came to be this way, for it goes back only a single step. It is crucial to note, however, that the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis does not deny the internal growth of the sources; it is simply unconcerned with them. Like so much else, how each source came to look as it does is a secondary question. The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis does not deny that each source has a history; nor does it deny that the Pentateuch itself has a history after the compilation of the documents. It is a restricted answer to a restricted question.

Sixth: The classical approach posited at least three redactors for the Pentateuch, each responsible for one stage in the evolutionary growth of the text. The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis posits a single, almost mechanical compiler, who was responsible for the combination of all four sources. The compiler's work was entirely literary: it was no more than the combination of the four documents into a single story, with the rare small adjustments and insertions that contributed to that process. Literary activities that do not participate in the process of combining the source documents—glosses, secondary additions, theological revisions—these are not part of the compiler's work, and are not attributed to the compiler.

Seventh: The classical theory began as a fairly simple proposition: four independent documents, combined into a single Pentateuch. Over time, however, it expanded dramatically, so that even within a generation or two of Wellhausen the analysis of the Pentateuch required innumerable sigla, regular divisions of the text into half-verses and even single words, and highly complex theories about redaction. The unwieldiness of this theory inevitably led in part to opposition, as it could no longer be said that the Documentary Hypothesis was a particularly simple or elegant solution to the problems of the pentateuchal text. Ironically, of course, the newer analyses coming out of Europe are, if anything, even more complex than the most tortuous classical source-critical work. The Neo-Documentary Hypothesis restores the simplicity of the earlier scholarship. It requires precisely four sources and one compiler.

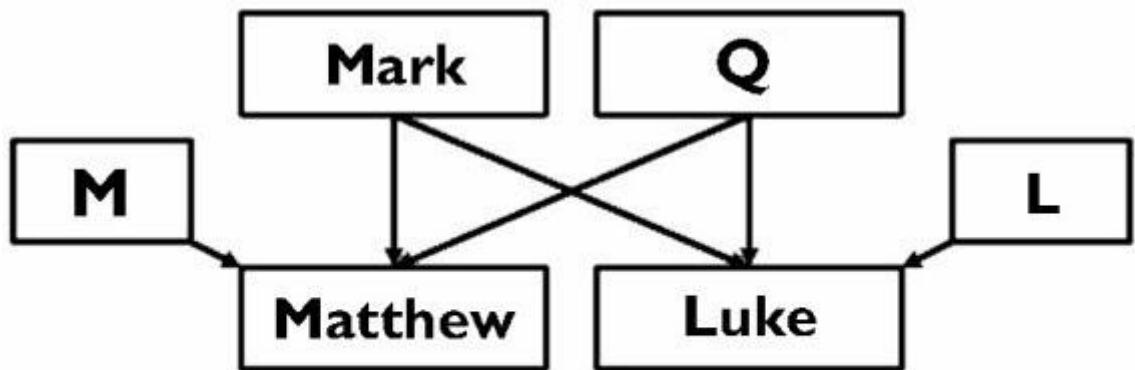
The Documentary Hypothesis, in general and in its particulars, is a literary solution to a literary problem, and no more than that. It does not begin with the search for sources in the text: the sources are the conclusion of the theory, not its beginning. It begins with the canonical text, and the literary problems that require explanation. Why the Pentateuch is incoherent: that is the driving question of all critical enquiries into the composition of the text, and the Neo-Documentary Hypothesis is the most comprehensive and economical answer to that question

## **Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON Q?**

JEDP Hypothesis, Q Theory, and the Critical Text... Oh My!

### **Q Theory**

So what do I think of this theory? Well, I take an approach similar to how I approach a similar theory about the 4 Gospels in the New Testament. Conventional scholarly wisdom about the 4 Gospels says that there is a “Q” source document for the Gospels which has been lost. It is believed that Matthew and Luke had this “Q” (along with the Gospel of Mark) and used it to write their Gospel accounts.



## Synoptics - Four Source Theory

...And this!

I never bought into this line of reasoning and remember having many long discussions and debates with other students about this when I was in Bible college and seminary. My view is a minority opinion, of course, but I was thrilled to read a few years back something that N. T. Wright wrote about Q:

*I have never completely caught the disease called Q, though from time to time I have experienced that shivery feeling, and the concomitant double vision, that those who have a chronic case of the Q disease reveal as their normal state. I have experienced, though, an interesting phenomenon: my inability to make up my mind on the synoptic problem has not, I think, in any way impaired my ability to read Matthew, Mark, and Luke as Matthew, Mark, and Luke, nor indeed my ability — though some would no doubt question this — to think and write about this historical Jesus.*

## **Q: DID PAUL WRITE THE PASTORAL EPISTLES? EXPLAIN THE EVIDENCE COUNTER TO YOUR VIEW.**

Did Paul really write the pastoral epistles? – Evidence for Christianity

I believe that it is far more likely that Paul wrote 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus than that he did not. However, I cannot prove this and I will admit that there is at least some reason to consider the possibility that he was not the actual author of the letters. Some say that it was someone from the “school” of Paul who wrote the letters—that it was a close associate of Paul who wrote these letters, but that they were written some time after Paul died. The problem for this theory is that there is no evidence to support it. It all comes down to arguments about language and theology in the book. The exact style of writing in these letters is somewhat different from that in Ephesians or Romans, because these are completely different kinds of letters. They are personal letters between friends, not formal letters from an individual to a group of people, many of whom did not even know Paul. This fact will explain the differences in style and word-usage. Besides, Romans, 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, Colossians were probably written ten or fifteen years before 2 Timothy, which can explain some difference in word choice and style. If you read the first book I wrote, the style of writing will be substantially different from my latest book—to the point that these scholars would claim with great confidence that they had two completely different authors.

As for 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, here is the bottom line for me. Those who received the letters and the church in the next generation or two as well, believed that Paul wrote these letters. It is the unanimous opinion of those who would actually know—the ones who copied these letters and the early church leaders—that Paul wrote these letters. They are not completely unanimous that John wrote 3 John, and they are not sure who wrote Hebrews, but they all agree that Paul wrote these letters. I believe that these people, who are in a much better position to know, are far more likely to be right than second-guessing scholars two thousand years later. Besides, I have read more than one of these commentaries that make the claim the books were not written by Paul. They claim a great gulf in world view and in theology between Paul and the writer of the pastoral epistles. I have looked at their arguments and found them totally unconvincing. I know of no important idea in Titus or 2 Timothy which veers away from the ideas and thoughts of the apostle Paul. The supposed theological distinctions exist more in the minds of the scholars (who make a living from coming up with controversial ideas, not from accepting the conservative idea) than in the letters.

Almost certainly Paul did use a secretary. In fact, there is fairly good reason to think that Paul had a vision impairment of some sort (2 Cor 12:1-10, Gal 6:11, 1 Cor 16:21 and more). It is somewhat unlikely that it was Luke who was the scribe of 2 Timothy, because this letter was probably written after the events of Acts 28. This is not proof, and it really does not matter much who was Paul’s scribe when he penned the pastoral epistles. The point is that the supposed majority opinion about the pastoral epistles is not the majority opinion if we listen to those who have a world view that allows for the possibility that these books are inspired by God (which they are.)

A final comment. It really does not make a massive difference in the meaning and application of the pastoral epistles (Timothy, Titus and Philemon) if it was a friend of Paul’s rather than Paul himself who wrote the letters. All that matters is whether these books are in fact inspired by God and therefore belong in the canon. If “Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 1:1) really means “Disciple A, speaking for Paul, an apostle of Jesus,” then the meaning and application of the text is little changed. However, I strongly disagree with this conclusion for the reasons I have given above. I believe that this opinion is coming mostly from people who do not even believe in the Bible and who make a reputation from controversial opinions, not from accepting the conservative position, even if the evidence favors that position.

### Is there evidence Paul is the author of the Pastoral Epistles?

At first this sounds convincing, but it ignores a statement at the end of Acts.

And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered. (NASB) Acts 28:30-31

Acts does not end with a disappointing statement that Paul died. If he did die, why not say so? If he left the prison, why not say so? The implication is that Paul was only there for two years. The Holy Spirit did not choose to tell us what happened after this. To say that Paul never visited Crete or Macedonia is to assume that we know more than the folks who lived near Paul's time. An ancient document, the Muratorian parchment (A.D 170), states that Paul went to Spain. Acts did not say that. The early church father Eusebius writes,

And Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, brought his history to a close at this point, after stating that Paul spent two whole years at Rome as a prisoner at large, and preached the word of God without restraint. Thus after he had made his defense it is said that the apostle was sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and that upon coming to the same city a second time he suffered martyrdom. In this imprisonment he wrote his second epistle to Timothy, in which he mentions his first defense and his impending death.

Ecclesiastical History, Book 2, Chapter 22

### **Other Testimony**

All three books: 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, include Paul's signature.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus . . . (NASB) 1 Tim. 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus . . . (NASB) 2 Tim. 1:1

Paul, a bond-servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ . . . (NASB) Titus

Each book bears Paul's signature. This is the first evidence that the apostle wrote each book. This is the same signature that Paul used with other books (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon).

More testimony comes from the early church fathers who claimed that Paul wrote 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. The Muratorian parchment includes 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus among the list of the books written by Paul.

As for the letters of Paul, they themselves show those who wish to understand from which place and for which cause they were directed. First of all [he wrote] to the Corinthians forbidding schisms and heresies; then to the Galatians [forbidding] circumcision; to the Romans he wrote at greater length about the order of the scriptures and also insisting that Christ was their primary theme . . . the blessed Paul himself . . . writes to seven churches in the following order: first to the Corinthians, second to the Ephesians, third to the Philippians, fourth to the Colossians, fifth to the Galatians, sixth to the Thessalonians, seventh to the Romans . . . Moreover one to

Philemon, one to Titus and two to Timothy in love and affection; but they have been hallowed for the honor . . . in the regulation of ecclesiastical discipline.

Bruce, F. F. The Canon of Scripture. IVP Press. 1988, p. 160

**Conclusion:**

Is Paul the author of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus? There is no logical reason to doubt it and the ancient testimony says Paul wrote them. The answer is “yes” Paul wrote them.

**Q: WHY DO YOU THINK ROMANS 9 IS IMPORTANT TO REFORMED THEOLOGY?**

The Absolute Sovereignty of God: What Is Romans Nine About?

In the class on salvation, we dealt head-on with the doctrines of unconditional election and irresistible grace. Romans 9 was the watershed text and the one that changed my life forever. Romans 9:11–12 said, “Though they [Jacob and Esau] were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad — in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call — she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’”

And when Paul raised the question in verse 14, “Is there injustice on God’s part?” He says, no, and quotes Moses (in verse 15): “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” And when he raises the question in verse 19, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” He answers in verse 21, “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use?”

Emotions run high when you feel your man-centered world crumbling around you. I met Dr. Morgan in the hall one day. After a few minutes of heated argument about the freedom of my will, I held a pen in front of his face and dropped it to the floor. Then I said, with not as much respect as a student ought to have, “I [!] dropped it.” Somehow that was supposed to prove that my choice to drop the pen was not governed by anything but *my sovereign self*. But thanks be to God’s mercy and patience, at the end of the semester I wrote in my blue book for the final exam, “Romans 9 is like a tiger going about devouring free-willers like me.” That was the end of my love affair with human autonomy and the ultimate self-determination of my will. My worldview simply could not stand against the Scriptures, especially Romans 9. And it was the beginning of a lifelong passion to see and savor the supremacy of God in absolutely everything.

11. The Sovereignty of God in Salvation (Romans 9)

Romans 9 is vitally important to the Christian, not only in the sense that it provides a basis for the theological doctrine of election, but in that it has great bearing on our spiritual life. If salvation finds its origin in the will of the creature, rather than in the will of the Creator, then I can never be fully assured of my salvation, for I may someday lose my faith in God, or I may decide to reject my faith altogether. If the salvation of others is not in the control of God, then I have little reason to pray for the salvation of the lost.

But if salvation finds its origin in the will of God, then I know that I am forever secure as a Christian, for even though I may change, God is immutable. Since it was He Who purposed my salvation and He cannot change, then my salvation is as certain as the One Who is its source. If salvation is that which is determined by God, then I may come to Him in prayer with the confidence that He is both able to save, and that He takes pleasure in saving as well as in answering my prayers.

Romans 9-11 were vitally important to the apostle Paul as he penned this epistle. Paul was a Jew—today we would call him a fulfilled or completed Jew, but a Jew just the same. Paul had taught that the Christian faith was no innovation, certainly not opposed to Old Testament revelation, but rather the fulfillment of all that the Jews had hoped for. In chapter 4 Paul taught that Abraham himself was saved by faith and not by works, and that the kind of faith required for salvation today is precisely the same kind as that exercised by Abraham.

But herein lies Paul's problem. If the gospel which Paul preached was the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament anticipated, then why was it that the Jews were missing out on its blessings? Why were scores of Gentiles who never had this hope coming to Christ while the vast majority of the Jews were still unbelieving, failing to realize the blessings of God?

Beyond this there is the question of the righteousness and integrity of God, for it would appear that He has purposed that which He failed to bring to pass. Then, too, the reliability of the Word of God is not beyond question, for all that the Old Testament promised to the Jew seemingly is being frustrated. To this problem, the apostle devotes himself for the next three chapters. It must be emphasized here that chapters 9-11 are a package, and that the answer to the dilemma of the unbelief of Israel cannot be adequately answered by any one of these three chapters. Chapter 9 speaks to the unbelief of Israel by stating that God did not purpose to save all Israel. In other words, God didn't choose those who disbelieve. In chapter 10 Paul presses on to state that neither did Israel choose God. In chapter 11 Paul shows how God purposed the unbelief of Israel to accomplish the salvation of the Gentiles, and that the hopes of the nation Israel are yet to be fulfilled, for the unbelief of Israel is neither complete nor permanent.

Romans 9:1-5 pose the problem which underlies the entire section. Why is Israel in unbelief in spite of all the privileges they experienced in the past, and in spite of the promise of blessing for the future? Verses 6-13 answer the question by insisting that God never promised these blessings to every physical descendent of Abraham, but only to those who were children of Abraham by faith. If the masses of the nation Israel are not saved because they are not elect, then there are two objections to the doctrine of election which must be responded to: the charge of injustice (verses 14-18) and the claim that man is therefore not accountable before God (verses 19-23). Paul concludes by turning the tables and asserting that the Word of God, far from being frustrated by the unbelief of Israel, was being fulfilled (verses 24-29).

### **The Problem Posed: Why Has Israel Failed in Spite of All Her Privileges? (9:1-5)**

**Paul's Sincere Sorrow** (vv. 1-3). The charge of the Jewish community against the apostle was that he was no friend of theirs. They claimed that the gospel which Paul preached was opposed to all that Israel had stood for and hoped for. Paul does not begin to deal with the dilemma of the Jews until he has established the fact that he is no enemy, but a grieving friend; in fact, if he could do so he would be willing to suffer the wrath of God for his people if by this means they could be brought to salvation (v. 3).

**Israel's Failure Highlighted By Her Privileges** (vv. 4-5). Israel's unbelief was not so much to be considered 'because of' as 'in spite of,' for she had privileges no other nation could claim. They were 'Israelites,' and as such they could claim these seven particulars. (1) They could claim national adoption (cf. Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1); (2) they were eye witnesses of the revelation of God's glory, such as the splendor of the theophanies and the shekinah glory; (3) they were the beneficiaries of the divine covenant<sup>46</sup> made by God with His people; (4) they were the recipients and custodians of the Law of God given at Sinai; (5) they had the privilege of the temple service, the "prescriptions for divine worship";<sup>47</sup> (6) they also were the recipients of the many promises of God, many of which were yet future; and (7) they had a lineage that any nation could be proud of; their forefathers were the patriarchs, and they were the nation through whom the Messiah came.

In spite of these great privileges the Jews as a nation were not experiencing the blessings which one might rightfully expect. It is not explicitly stated but Israel's problem is the widespread unbelief and failure to arrive at the blessings which they had been waiting for.<sup>48</sup>

### **Although Israel Has Failed, God's Word Has Not (9:6-13)**

On the surface of the issue it might seem to some that Israel's failure is to be explained as God's failure—that it is really the Word of God that has failed, since what it appears to have promised has not come to realization. Paul approaches the problem by first of all clarifying just what the Scriptures promised. The error of assuming God's Word to be at fault is two-fold. First of all the Scriptures never promised blessing to every physical descendent of Abraham. Second, the basis of God's blessing is not to be found in one's physical relationship to a particular forefather, but rather to one's spiritual relationship to God by faith.

As Paul introduces the subject of election, there is something we are to understand about it. The devout, but unbelieving, Jew not only delighted in it, but depended on it. The Jew was a devout believer in the doctrine of election—that is the doctrine of corporate election. They relished the thought that God had selected them from all the nations of the earth to be the recipients of all the blessings and privileges described by Paul in verses 4 and 5. They had no problem in viewing all the other nations as the 'non-elect.' They were perfectly content to relegate the heathen to hell.

Paul uses the theological position of the Jews as the starting point of his argumentation, but he presses their theology much farther than they intended. He takes the principle of election which they accepted on a national level, and applies it on an individual level.<sup>49</sup> If Israel could delight in their national election, then their dilemma of why so many Israelites disbelieved could be explained on the basis of individual election. Why were so many Jews failing to arrive at God's promised blessings? Because God hadn't chosen them to be blessed by salvation. While Israel's erroneous claim on God's blessing was based upon their ancestry and their works, the cause of blessing was God's calling by free choice. Such a claim must be documented, so Paul turns to the example in Israel's history of Isaac and Jacob.

**The Example of Isaac, Not Ishmael** (vv. 7-9). If blessing was guaranteed by physical relationship to Abraham, then many Gentiles would have the same claim as did the Jews for Abraham was the father of more than just Isaac. Ishmael would have equal claim to the blessings of the Jews if physical lineage was the sole cause of blessing. But as the Scriptures stipulated: "Through Isaac your descendants will be named" (Romans 9:7b, Genesis 21:12).

Ishmael was the result of Abraham's feeble efforts to bring about what God had promised, but Isaac was the product of God's work in fulfillment of His promise of a son.

**The Example of Jacob, Not Esau** (vv. 10-13). To some, the example of Isaac might not be convincing because each child had a different mother. If this is a problem, it will be swept away by the example of Jacob and Esau, for they had the same father and mother; in fact, they were the offspring of the same conception, since they were twins.

Surely all must grant that God specified the blessing to come through the seed of Jacob, and not Esau. This confirms again that the blessings of God do not belong to men purely on the basis of origin. But what is the basis of God's designation of Jacob over Esau? The Jews would claim that it was because of some obligation which God had to Jacob, but the Genesis narrative does not support such a claim. God's choice was not conditioned by any human activity or instrumentality, but was determined solely on the free choice of God.

God's choice was apart from custom or tradition, for tradition would have granted supremacy to the first-born child, Esau. Neither was God's choice influenced by any good which would be done by Jacob, or any evil done by Esau, for Paul insists, "For though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls" (Romans 9:11). Of course, God knew what Jacob and Esau would do, but His choice was not a result of this knowledge. Indeed God's choice of Jacob was in spite of such knowledge, for he was a rascal.50

What, then, was the basis of God's choice of Jacob over Esau? God acted not out of any obligation, but rather out of His sovereignty, and thus chose freely on the basis of His own will. The election of God is not based upon the works of the individual, but on the will of God. "... in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls" (Romans 9:11b). As the Scripture says, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13, Malachi 1:2f).51

Let us be sure we fully understand what Paul has said about divine election, for there are many **misconceptions** of this doctrine.

-Some would explain election in this way: *God is voting for us; Satan, against us; and we must break the tie.* Others have said that God has determined a certain number of elect, but not the specific individuals—that is up to us.

-Others seem to say that *God has elected us 'in Christ' and therefore, whoever are in Christ are the elect. Again, this leaves the ultimate determination of who the elect will be to the elect themselves.* This is the position, apparently, of W. B. Riley, when he states, "The soul's election depends upon the soul's choice. Thou, my friend are the only person who can settle this question of election. It is not settled in Heaven; it is settled on earth. It is not settled of the Lord; it is settled by man."52

Even a casual reading of Romans 9 demands that we hold an entirely different position than those just mentioned, for the election of men to eternal salvation is the work of God, and I am grateful for it. If my election depended upon me casting my vote in favor of God, I would be forever damned, for my unregenerate will would always vote against God, for as an unbeliever I was dead in my sins, and by nature God's enemy and a child of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3; Romans 3:10-18). No other kind of election could be attributed to a God Who is truly sovereign

than that which is described by Paul in Romans 9, for sovereignty implies absolute freedom and complete independence of action. God's decisions are not contingent upon ours. Our decisions are contingent upon His.

Here, then, is the answer to the problem of Jewish unbelief. Israel's unbelief was not a failure of the Word of God, but an outworking of the will of God. Israel failed because God willed it so. God's reason for Israel's unbelief will be explained in chapter 11, but for now we must accept the fact that God, far from being obliged to bless every Jew on the basis of his ancestry, is free to choose whomever He wills and to reject whom He wills. Such was evident from God's previous dealings with the nation.

### **Election Defended**

**(9:14-23)**

Perhaps one of the strongest lines of evidence for election being defined as God's absolutely free choice of those who will be saved is to be found in verses 14 and 19. In these verses, two **objections** to what Paul has taught about election are raised. The first is, "**It isn't fair!**," and the second is "**It (unbelief) isn't my fault!**" Now neither of these objections are valid unless Paul has indeed taught that God chooses men on the basis of His own free will, apart from man's will or his works. If Paul wasn't teaching the doctrine of election, then all he had to do was to answer these questions by saying, "You have completely misunderstood what I have been saying." The fact that he answers these objections demands that we understand Paul's teaching just as his objectors did—that of an act of God independent of men.

In fact, it is interesting that every time I have had the occasion to teach the doctrine of election it has never failed that the same objections that are raised in verses 14 and 19 are raised from the audiences I teach. It is, therefore, vital that we come to understand Paul's defense of his position on the doctrine of election, for we, too, will need to use these same lines of defense to answer our objectors.

**(1) It Isn't Fair (vv. 14-18).** Do you mean to tell me that if God has chosen me to be saved I will be saved in spite of myself, and that if God has not chosen me, there is no hope for my salvation? Why that isn't fair at all! Why should one person go to heaven and another go to Hell, just on the whim of God? Put in its simplest form that is the objection of verse 14: "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" (Romans 9:14). The problem is that the objector is arguing the point of justice, while Paul is speaking of mercy. Justice speaks of men getting what is rightfully theirs. God's justice has already been discussed in chapters 1-3. The justice of God demands that the death penalty be paid by every man, woman, and child, for, "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). If we demand that God be just and just alone then every soul would spend eternity in Hell.

**Election has nothing to do with justice, it is a matter of mercy.** We are speaking of the grace of God when we speak of election. Mercy withholds punishment which is rightfully deserved. The guilty criminal cries for mercy before his judge. Grace goes even beyond mercy in that it bestows that which is completely undeserved. Any man whom God chooses to save is a man who deserves to die, for "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The penalty which should be paid by the elect sinner has been paid by the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ. In addition to this, this sinner is declared righteous in the Person of Jesus Christ, and he is made a son of God and a co-heir with Christ (Romans 8:15-17). This is grace! As someone has rightly said, "The question should not be, 'Why has God not saved all men?,' but 'Why has God saved any?'" We do not deserve the grace of God, and we dare not call God unjust because He has withheld His grace from some and bestowed it upon others. I believe it

was Bill Gothard who used the illustration (to prove a different point) of a man who walks down our block giving out \$1000 bills—to every other house. Now what right do we have, if we have been passed over, to confront this man and charge him with injustice? How much time would a police officer give us if we tried to file a formal complaint? The issue is not one of justice, but one of grace.<sup>53</sup> God is absolutely free to bestow His grace on whomever He chooses, and He is not one whit guilty of injustice for withholding it from any or all men.

Paul illustrates this point by contrasting God's activity in the lives of two men who were contemporaries of each other, **Moses and Pharaoh**. To Moses, God exercised mercy, and toward Pharaoh God exercised His justice. God was just in both cases, and interestingly, God used both men to further His purposes. God raised up Moses to be a deliverer of His people and a type of Messiah to come. God raised up<sup>54</sup> Pharaoh to display His great power and to proclaim His glory: “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth” (Romans 9:17).

Stifler reminds us that, “God’s glory is promoted in the overthrow of a sinner as much as in saving one.”<sup>55</sup>

To press this point further, the hardening of Pharaoh was an act of grace so far as the Jews were concerned, for it provided the occasion of their release. All Moses had asked for initially was to let the people of Israel go into the wilderness for a time to worship God (cf. Exodus 5:1). The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart occasioned the ten plagues, which more than answered the challenge of Pharaoh, “Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice?” (Exodus 5:2). More than this, his unbelief brought about the release of the nation from its bondage. This is precisely what the unbelief of Israel is accomplishing today.<sup>56</sup>

**(2) It Isn’t My Fault (vv. 18-23).** But doesn’t the case of Pharaoh raise another problem? If God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that He accomplished His purposes, if God is truly sovereign and His will is inevitable, then how can He blame us for our rebellion? Far worse than the charge often heard, ‘the devil made me do it,’ is the protest found here, ‘God made me do it.’ This question Paul refuses to answer immediately and reserves his response to the charge until the next two chapters. What Paul does attack vigorously is the attitude which occasions such a response. “Do you realize, O man, what you are doing?” “You, have set yourself above God, and have gone far beyond your privileges as a mere creature, to challenge the Creator of the universe!” “You’re completely out of line!”

I am reminded of the Book of Job where Job begins to challenge the wisdom and the justice of God in dealing with him as He had. The final chapters record for us the rebuke of God, the Creator, of a mere creature. “Where were you, Job, when I placed the heavens?” “What part did you have in the creation of the universe?” “What did you contribute to My works?” It is at this point that Job places his hand over his mouth and remains silent.

It is at this point that Paul has figuratively placed his hand over the mouth of the objector, reminded him of who he is, and more important, Who he is objecting to. God is the potter; we are the clay. God is just in disposing of us just as He wills. And we have no right to challenge His sovereignty, but we must submit to it or be crushed by it. We can be either a Moses or a Pharaoh. As a Moses we are the recipients of God’s grace, and we are vessels which God will employ to demonstrate His mercy. If we rebel we will be used as Pharaoh, and by our hardening we will be vessels by which God will reveal His wrath on sin. Either way, God is free to dispose of His creatures, and either way we will bring glory to Him. But, oh, what a difference for us!

I am fascinated by Paul's reference to the fact that both vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath are made from the same lump. The same lump (Romans 9:21) is not the lump of innocent and deserving individuals, but the same barrel of rotten apples.<sup>57</sup> Each of us deserve the wrath of God, but God has delayed His judgment of all in order to reveal His mercy toward some. Just as God had chosen to bestow His blessings on the nation Israel, now He is blessing the Gentiles. Just as He once selected individual Jews to receive His grace, so He is choosing out some of the Gentiles for blessing as well (Romans 9:23).

### **God's Word Is Not Being Frustrated, But Rather Fulfilled (9:24-29)**

The original charge (v. 6) was that the Word of God was somehow failing due to the failure of the nation Israel to turn to her Messiah and her blessings. After correcting a misconception as to the basis for blessing (not physical descent, but faith; not on the basis of man's will or works, but on the basis of God's sovereign will) in verses 6-13, and then answering certain objections (verses 14-23), Paul now concludes this section by reminding his readers that both the hardening of Israel and the salvation of the Gentiles was foretold in the Old Testament. The point is not that the Scriptures have been frustrated by Israel's unbelief, but that they have been fulfilled. This Paul proceeds to show by quoting several Old Testament passages.

**Salvation of Gentiles Foretold** (vv. 24-26). Verse 24 returns the focus to the question at hand, the unbelief of many Jews and the salvation of many Gentiles. God's choice of vessels of mercy was not intended to come only from the nation Israel, but from the Gentiles as well. The prophet Hosea spoke of this when he wrote: "I will call those who were not my people, 'My people,' and her who was not beloved, 'beloved.' And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' There they shall be called sons of the Living God" (Romans 9:25, 26; Hosea 2:23; 1:10).

Hosea was the prophet who was to marry a harlot. His relationship with his adulterous wife was a picture of Israel's infidelity to God. Because of the infidelity of Israel, God disowned them, so that they were no longer His people. But God also promised that after their chastening He would once again draw them to Himself and call them His people.

Technically, this passage referred to God's relationship to Israel. But Paul saw in this passage a principle. This principle was that God was going to restore to Himself a people that was not His own (just as Israel had become). This principle could equally apply to the Gentiles as it could to the adulterous nation Israel.<sup>58</sup>

**A Remnant in Israel Promised** (vv. 27-29). In verses 27-29, Paul turns to the prophet Isaiah to show that God's judgment demanded severe punishment on disobedient Israel, so that the vast majority of the nation would perish. But in this message of punishment was a ray of hope, for God promised to preserve a remnant, and in this remnant rested Israel's hopes for future blessing.

The context of Isaiah's prophecy was that of the apostasy of the northern kingdom of Israel and the judgment of God through the Assyrians. Although God's judgment was devastating ('quick and thorough,' v. 28), there was the promise of the preservation of a small remnant, without which Israel's hopes would have been destroyed.<sup>59</sup>

Again in this passage, Paul deals with the presumption of the Jews exhibited in the opening verses of this chapter that God was obliged to save all Israel. These verses in Isaiah confirm Paul's contention that God's covenant promise never contemplated the salvation of all Israel.

## Summary

Why were so many Israelites failing to experience the blessing of God? Why were the Gentiles finding this blessing? Because the sovereign God is not obligated to choose on the basis of works or on the basis of ethnic origin. Just as God elected to bless the nation Israel above others, just as God chose Jacob and not Esau, Moses and not Pharaoh, so He has chosen only a remnant of the Israelites at the present time, while He is calling out a people to Himself from the Gentiles as well.

1. God is not unjust in choosing some and rejecting others because it is an issue of grace and mercy, not justice.
2. We dare not question the choices of the sovereign God lest we step far beyond our prerogatives as mere creatures.
3. Even in the Old Testament, the things which are now taking place were predicted in principle.

## Conclusion and Application

There is much more at stake in these crucial verses than the defense of some theological doctrine, although that is certainly important. There is at stake the character of God and our proper attitude toward His sovereignty.

We should not leave this chapter without a spirit of wonder and adoration. We dare not focus on the question, "Why not others?," but should exclaim "Why me!" The wonder of it all is that God chose us by His own free will, and in spite of what we are or will become. What a keynote for worship!

The doctrine of election is a doctrine of grace and of salvation. We should look on the bright side of it, and not endeavor to look on the dark side of it. The great Calvinist, Benjamin B. Warfield, underscored this when he wrote,

When Christ stood at the door of Lazarus' tomb and cried, 'Lazarus, come forth!' only Lazarus, of all the dead that lay in the gloom of the grave that day in Palestine, or throughout the world, heard his mighty voice which raises the dead, and came forth. Shall we say that the election of Lazarus to be called forth from the tomb consigned all this immense multitude of the dead to hopeless, physical decay? It left them no doubt in the death in which they were holden and to all that comes out of this death. But it was not it which brought death upon them, or which kept them in its power. When God calls out of the human race, lying dead in their trespasses and sins, some here, some there, some everywhere, a great multitude which no man can number, to raise them by his almighty grace out of their death in sin and bring them to glory, his electing grace is glorified in the salvation it works it has nothing to do with the death of the sinner, but only with the living again of the sinner whom it calls into life. The one and single work of election is salvation.<sup>60</sup>

Second, we should look at this doctrine of election as one of great comfort for it instructs us that our salvation is the work of God, that our salvation was initiated by an act of God and not by the activity of man. Our salvation is as secure as its foundations, and, my friend, there is no surer foundation for our salvation than the elective will of God. My will can change, but God's cannot. Therefore, my salvation is as secure and certain as the immutability of God. If He does not change (and so the Scriptures say, James 1:17; Hebrews 13:8), then my salvation is secure, for it began with His will and it rests on His immutability.

There should be comfort as well as far as our unbelieving friends and loved ones are concerned. If the salvation of my friends and loves ones depends either on my ability to convince and persuade, or their willingness to receive the gospel, Heaven help us. But if their salvation is in the hands of God, I have every reason for encouragement. First of all, God is able to save. Second, God is desirous to save (1 Timothy 2:4). Third, God loves to answer the prayers of His children. I would much prefer to plead with God for the salvation of the lost, than to rely on myself or on the receptivity of the lost.

I will never forget an experience I had when I was preaching on the East coast several years ago. I went to a certain church to preach and to consider ministering there. Before I went, I warned these Christians that I was a thoroughgoing Calvinist. They said in effect, "That's okay, some of our best friends are Calvinists." When I arrived, I was quickly taken to lunch with the leading man in the church movement in that area, and he was a believer only in eternal security—we would call him a one-point Calvinist. He refused to accept man's total depravity, unconditional election, and so on. When he began to put me through my paces, I turned the argument on him and asked him this question, "Brother, why do you pray for the salvation of the lost? If your doctrine is true, then God has already done all that He can so far as man's salvation is concerned. He died on the cross to make salvation possible for all who decide to vote for God. For what then do you pray, since God has done all He can and the rest is between you and the lost?"

How wonderful it is to know that God has not only made salvation possible, but that God actually saves men.

Now it is possible that you are thinking to yourself fatalistically, just as the objector in verse 19. If I am not saved, it is really God's fault and there is nothing I can do about it. And furthermore, there is no sense trying to be a Christian either, because if I am elect I will be saved in spite of myself. God forbid! I must give you enough of a preview of chapter 10 to remind you that the reason you will go to hell is because you have refused to believe in Christ as your Savior. No one has or will ever come to Him for forgiveness of sins and eternal life who will be turned away. Our Lord Jesus said, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37).

The apostle Paul wrote in chapter 10, "For whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). If you have never come to trust in Jesus Christ for your eternal forgiveness and salvation, trust in Him just now. We are saved by 'calling on the name of the Lord,' by acknowledging our sin and His righteousness in the Person of Jesus Christ. We are saved by trusting in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross on our behalf, apart from any contribution we could ever hope to make. And, ultimately, we are saved because God in His grace chose to open our hearts to respond to the gospel (Acts 16:14).

Finally, it would seem to me that there is nothing quite so telling about the spiritual condition of the Christian as his response to the sovereignty of God. The reason why so many Christians are repulsed by the doctrine of God's sovereignty is that this is not really the kind of God they want. They want a god of their own making, rather than a God Who is supreme and sovereign. Ultimately, to reject the sovereignty of God is to express our own depravity and sinfulness. We do not like to think of a God Who is in complete control over us. We want to be the 'captain of our souls' and the 'master of our fate.' My exhortation to each of us is, 'let God be God.' And thank God that He is Who He is, sovereign, holy, immutable, and not subject to the whims of mankind. To God be the glory!

## **Q: TELL US YOUR VIEW ON THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE.**

### The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture

#### **DEFINITION**

The doctrine of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is that, as a corollary of the inspiration of Scripture, the God-breathed Scriptures are wholly true in all things that they assert in the original autographs and therefore function with the authority of God's own words.

#### **SUMMARY**

The doctrine of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture is rooted in the doctrine of God; as God is true and trustworthy, so is his word recorded in the original autographs of Scriptures. This means that all things that the Scriptures assert are wholly true, both in the Old Testament, the Scriptures of Jesus and the apostles, and in the New Testament, the writings of the apostles. So far as the original autographs have been faithfully copied, translated, and passed down, Scripture is inerrant in its copies. This inerrancy means that all things that the Scriptures assert function with the authority of God's own Word for Christians.

"The trustworthiness of the Scriptures lies at the foundation of trust in the Christian system of doctrine, and is therefore fundamental to the Christian hope and life." These words from Benjamin B. Warfield highlight just how important the doctrine of inerrancy is for the church. Abandon it, and the entire Christian system of doctrine now rests on a shaky foundation. That is because without it, our assurance in Scripture's full truthfulness and total trustworthiness is thrown into question. Doubt naturally follows for the preacher of God's Word: "How can I know whether the passage I am preaching is reliable?" Much is at stake, then, with inerrancy. Faith and practice readily depend on whether we can trust God's Word and whether it is God's Word at all or in its entirety.

#### **The God of Truth**

As hinted at already, it is appropriate to associate inerrancy with God himself. Inerrancy is, after all, a corollary of inspiration. It is because Scripture is breathed-out by God (2 Tim. 3:16) that it is also truthful in all it affirms. The God who has breathed out his Word has done so in a way that is truthful; what else would we expect from a triune God who is truth itself (John 1:18; 8:40; 14:6; 17:3, 17; 18:37; 1 John 4:6)?

Assumed in such a statement is the belief that our doctrine of Scripture should be grounded in our doctrine of God. If God is Scripture's author, then we should not divorce the character of the divine author from the character of his divine speech. After all, this is God's Word we are describing; Scripture has many human authors, but it ultimately originates from one divine author. While God and the text are distinct, nevertheless, the text is his speech act; it should not surprise us that it reflects his character. Communicable attributes characterize his communicable speech, and truthfulness is one of them. As the God of truth and the God who is truth, he speaks a word of truth. The truthfulness of the text reflects the truthfulness of its divine author. Hence the psalmist could say that the God whose way is "perfect" communicates a word that always "proves true" and, for that reason, is a comfort to those who trust in it for their salvation (119:96; cf. 119:160).

**The truthfulness of the text reflects the truthfulness of its divine author.**

"But wait, isn't Scripture written by human hands? We all know humans are fallible creatures," one might object. It is true that humans are fallible. And apart from the Spirit's superintendence, any human author would be fallible. But since it is the Spirit of God—also called the Spirit of truth (John 15:26)—that carries along these human authors (2 Peter 1:21), what they say is what God says, and no human error is mixed in with it. Surely this is not beyond God's omnipotent abilities. If we, as Christians, believe the Son of God himself can become incarnate yet without sin in order to communicate a saving word to us as the Word (John 1:1, 14), then carrying along the biblical authors so that they speak truthfully is a small thing by comparison.

**Jesus' View of the Scriptures**

Moreover, when we look at how Jesus and his disciples treat the Old Testament Scriptures, it is always with utter trust and reverence, never with suspicion towards its reliability. Even Jesus's Jewish opponents did the same. While Jesus and the Jews had strong disagreements over how the OT was to be interpreted and whether Jesus is who he says he is, never—not once—do they disagree as to whether the text interpreted is trustworthy. Apart from such a presupposition, their debates never would have happened in the first place.

Jesus brings a unique credibility to the issue as well; he is, after all, the Son of God himself.

Naturally, our view of the Scriptures should be the same as Jesus's view of the Scriptures.

Beyond assuming trust in Scripture, both in its details and as a whole, the inerrancy of Scripture shines brightest when Jesus expresses his belief that God's covenant promises in the Scriptures have come true in his own life, death, and resurrection. In Jesus Christ, God's inscripturated word has proven true. God's saving promises have come to fruition in the Word, his own Son.

We can conclude, then, that the gospel itself is proof that not one word of God has failed. The truthfulness of God's Word, along with its lifegiving power, has been manifested in he who is the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6). God is faithful; all his promises find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. What greater affirmation of scriptural inerrancy could there be?

## Clarifying Inerrancy

That said, we must qualify what inerrancy does and does not mean. Paul Feinberg defines inerrancy as follows: "When all the facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with the social, physical, or life sciences." If this definition labors to define what inerrancy does and does not mean, that is because inerrancy is one of the most misunderstood and caricatured attributes of Scripture by its critics. Note several components of this definitions.

To begin with, inerrancy applies to the original autographs. That is an important qualification because sometimes critics see mistakes in copies and assume the Bible is full of errors. But when we say Scripture is inerrant, we have in mind that original text breathed out by God through the human authors (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). The product of inspiration is an inerrant text of Scripture. So far as it has been faithfully copied, translated, and passed down, it is inerrant in its copies. (And it should be noted that the copies we possess are very accurate.) Moreover, inerrancy means Scripture is “wholly true” in all that it affirms. Or as Kevin Vanhoozer says, “To say that Scripture is inerrant is to confess faith that the authors speak the truth in all things they affirm (when they make affirmations).” In whatever Scripture asserts and affirms, it speaks truthfully and in a trustworthy manner. To say it is “wholly” true means we should not limit inerrancy to Scripture’s main doctrinal message. We never see the biblical authors place such a limitation on their writings. Instead, they believe God speaks truly through them in whatever they affirm. So, inerrancy applies to all areas, including its ethical instruction, to name just one example. Just as inspiration is both verbal and plenary, so too is inerrancy.

## Inerrancy and Authority

Affirming inerrancy today can be tricky. There are some, for example, who affirm Scripture’s inspiration but reject its inerrancy. This limited inerrancy view sounds, at first glance, evangelical: “I believe Scripture is true in its message of faith.” But on further investigation, this position denies Scripture is true in all that it asserts. Yes, it is true in its gospel message, but beyond that it may error in its specifics. Ironically, this view claims it can still herald *sola scriptura*, as if Scripture is still the final authority.

The problem is, this view cannot claim Scripture is its final inerrant authority, which is what the church has always assumed in proclaiming sola scriptura. Pay attention to this key difference between a full inerrancy view and the limited inerrancy view. The full inerrancy view says, “All Scripture is our inerrant authority.”

Not so with the limited view, which says instead, “Only when Scripture addresses matters of faith is it our inerrant authority.”

Notice, the limited inerrancy view can only (consistently) claim *sola scriptura* when Scripture puts forward its main message. At other times, it is not inerrant and cannot, therefore, been the

final authority. This is not what the Reformers meant by *sola scriptura*. When Luther protested Rome and took his stand on the authority of Scripture at a Diet like Worms, it was inerrancy (among other things) that distinguished his cause. Luther made the bold claim that while popes and councils err, Scripture does not. It is because Scripture alone is inspired by God that it is also inerrant, sufficient, and the Christian's final authority.

All that to say, evangelicals today must guard themselves from those who would claim the Bible as their authority but turn around and deny its truthfulness either in part or in whole.

### What Does the Bible Have to Say about Its Own Authority? by Don Stewart

#### **Summary - Question 1**

#### **What Does the Bible Have to Say about Its Own Authority?**

The issue of who can speak with ultimate authority is of the utmost importance. The Bible says that the God of Scripture is the living God who speaks with absolute authority on all matters. He has revealed these truths to us in a Book; the Bible. Four things are clear:

First, God has spoken audibly to certain human beings. The Bible records numerous instances where this has happened.

Second, God used specially chosen humans to be His spokesmen. Scripture gives many examples where God's chosen spokesmen, the prophets, spoke to the people for Him.

Third, the words of God, as well as those of His specially chosen spokesmen, were written in a number of sacred books. Today, they have been collected into one Book; the Bible.

Fourth, because the Bible contains the words of God that were spoken, either audibly, or through His chosen spokesmen, it is absolutely authoritative on all matters in which it speaks. Since it contains the authoritative words of God and His spokesmen, it carries His divine authority. This record of God speaking is the final word on all matters of faith and practice.

The Bible, therefore, is a book that is both human and divine; it is God's Word written by human beings.

Finally, we must emphasize that the idea of an authoritative, divinely inspired Scripture is not something that the church invented; it is the testimony of the biblical writers themselves. Therefore, the words of the Bible should be believed and obeyed.

## **Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE JESUS SEMINAR?**

### Jesus Seminar

The **Jesus Seminar** was a group of about 50 critical biblical scholars and 100 laymen founded in 1985 by Robert Funk that originated under the auspices of the Westar Institute.<sup>[12]</sup> The seminar was very active through the 1980s and 1990s, and into the early 21st century.

Members of the Seminar used votes with colored beads to decide their collective view of the historicity of the deeds and sayings of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>[13]</sup> They produced new translations of the New Testament and apocrypha to use as textual sources. They published their results in three reports: *The Five Gospels* (1993),<sup>[14]</sup> *The Acts of Jesus* (1998),<sup>[15]</sup> and *The Gospel of Jesus* (1999).<sup>[16]</sup> They also ran a series of lectures and workshops in various U.S. cities.

Although never formally disbanded, the seminar effectively ceased functioning as "The Jesus Seminar" in 2006, shortly after the 2005 death of its founder Funk. Former Seminarians have

carried on the tradition of the Seminar, and continue to publish works researched and developed using the methodologies of the original Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Project was active from 2008 to 2009.

### The Jesus Seminar Under Fire

*The "Jesus Seminar" is a group of self-described scholars who have determined Jesus probably only said 20% of the quotes attributed to him by Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Greg puts their method, which includes voting with colored beads, "under fire."*

Brace yourself. With Easter just around the corner, we're about to see a flood of articles in the news weeklies and local papers about a very specific kind of missionary group. These preachers practice evangelism in reverse, for they don't want you to commit your life to the Christ of the Gospels; they want you to surrender that commitment. And they claim to have history, science and scholarship on their side. They're called the Jesus Seminar. These are people with a mission. Robert Funk, the Seminar's founder, says, "It is time for us [scholars] to quit the library and study and speak up....The Jesus Seminar is a clarion call to enlightenment. It is for those who prefer facts to fancies, history to histrionics, science to superstition."<sup>[1]</sup>

This is a strong challenge to evangelicals, depicted here as preferring nice stories to accurate history. Sometimes the best defense is knowing the right questions to ask. Here are the ones you need when the Jesus Seminar hits the newsstands.

#### Who Are the Scholars?

Journalists frequently refer to the 74 "scholars" of the Jesus Seminar as representing the mainstream of biblical scholarship. Being a bona fide scholar, though, means more than just having a degree. Generally, a scholar is one who demonstrates a mastery of his discipline and who makes an academic contribution to his field.

By this definition, only fourteen members of the Seminar qualify, including scholars like John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. Twenty others are recognizable names in the field. One quarter of the group, though, are complete unknowns (one is a movie producer), and half of them come from a cluster of three ultra-liberal schools: Harvard, Claremont, and Vanderbilt. Clearly, the Jesus Seminar cannot be viewed as a relevant cross-section of academic opinion. This doesn't mean the their conclusions are false; it means theirs is only one voice of many, viewed even by liberal scholars as suspect and on the extreme fringe.

#### What Does the Jesus Seminar Believe?

The Jesus Seminar meets twice a year to dissect biblical passages. Their goal: separate historical fact from mythology. So far, they have rejected as myth the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the virgin birth, all Gospel miracles, and a full 82% of the teachings normally attributed to Jesus--all dismissed as legendary accretions with no historical foundation. For example, only two words of the Lord's Prayer survive as authentic: "Our Father."

An article in the *L.A. Times* [2] entitled, "Scholars Cite Lack of Resurrection Evidence," also carried this subtitle: "Controversial Jesus Seminar evaluates New Testament, but members affirm that event's religious significance does not hinge on the historical record."

According to this piece, there are two things the Jesus Seminar has to say about the resurrection of Jesus. First, it never happened. There's no historical evidence for it. Second, it

doesn't matter. Christians can still celebrate Easter with its symbolic message of hope and new life.

Robert Funk calls Jesus a "secular sage who satirized the pious and championed the poor." He then adds, "Jesus was perhaps the first stand-up Jewish comic. Starting a new religion would have been the farthest thing from his mind."

Isn't that an odd thing to say about Jesus? Jesus didn't rise from the dead. He didn't work miracles. He didn't give us the greatest teaching in the world. Instead, He was a stand-up comic, according to the founder of the Jesus Seminar.

#### What Are Their Assumptions?

The most important question one can ask of any point of view (a question almost never asked by the press) is this: Why do they believe it? This allows us to determine whether the reasons lead properly to the conclusions.

Everyone has a starting point. The place the Seminar begins is carefully concealed from the public at large, but it's the most critical issue. Why do they claim there is no evidence for the resurrection? That is the key question .

Their reasoning goes something like this: It's impossible for the Gospels to be historically accurate, because they record things that simply can't happen, like dead people coming alive again and food multiplying--miracles, in other words. We live in a closed universe of natural order, with God (if there is a God) locked out of the system. If miracles can't happen, then the reports in the New Testament must be fabrications. Therefore, the Gospels are not historical. Further, if miracles can't happen, then prophecy (a kind of miraculous knowledge) can't happen. The Gospels report that Jesus prophesied the fall of Jerusalem. Therefore, they could not have been written early, but after the invasion of Titus of Rome in 70 A.D. In addition, they could not have been written by eye-witnesses, as the early church Fathers claimed.

Notice that the Jesus Seminar doesn't start with historical evidence; it starts with presuppositions, assumptions it makes no attempt to prove. This is not history; it's philosophy, specifically, the philosophy of naturalism.

Robert Funk admits as much: "The Gospels are now assumed to be narratives in which the memory of Jesus is *embellished by mythic elements* that express the church's faith in him, and by *plausible fictions* that enhance the telling of the gospel story for first-century listeners..."[3] [emphasis added]

The press reports the following conclusions that the Jesus Seminar says are based on scientific, historical analysis: the resurrection didn't happen; the miracles are myths; there is no authentic prophecy in the Bible; the Gospels were written long after the events took place; they were not written by eyewitnesses; the testimony of the early church Fathers can't be trusted.

This is misleading, though, because the Jesus Seminar doesn't conclude the Gospels are inaccurate. That's where they begin before they've looked at one single shred of actual historical evidence. When you start with your conclusions, you're cheating. You haven't proved anything at all.

#### Does Their Bias Make Them Open-minded or Closed-minded?

Philosopher J.P. Moreland points out that Christian scholars have a point of view, like everyone else. The Christian's bias, though, doesn't inform his conclusions the same way biases inform the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar.

Because people like Robert Funk start with the "scientific" view that there can be no miracles, their bias arbitrarily eliminates options before the game even gets started. Funk must conclude the Gospels have been tampered with because his philosophy demands it. He can't consider any evidence for a resurrection because he's closed his mind to the possibility of miracles. A Christian is not so encumbered. He believes in the laws of nature, but is also open to the possibility of God's intervention. Both are consistent with his world view. This means he can be faithful to the evidence, unhindered by a metaphysical view that automatically eliminates supernatural options before even viewing the evidence.

The bias of the Christian broadens his categories, making him more open-minded. The believer has a greater chance of discovering truth, because he can follow the evidence wherever it leads. The bias of the Jesus Seminar, on the other hand, makes it close-minded and dogmatic. Newspaper articles cast the issue in the opposite way, though. One mentions a dean of a prominent Baptist seminary who says the Seminar's work is driving a wedge between faith and history among Christians.

What is unfortunate about this representation is that it pits the "historical" and "scientific" analysis of the Jesus Seminar against those poor sods who rely only on "faith." And since the facts of history are sabotaging the faith of some, Christians are now upset. It's as if they were saying, "Please don't tell me these things and confuse me with the facts. It might weaken my faith." This casts believers as nincompoops, obscurantists who want to cling to fantasy. But ladies and gentlemen, that isn't the way it is at all. The conclusions of the Jesus Seminar don't represent facts. Rather, their point of view and research methods are deeply flawed because of their prior commitment to a philosophic position that is already hostile to the events described in the text of the Gospels. It isn't an issue of historical fact versus religious faith. The facts are actually on the side of the resurrection, not on the side of the wishful thinking of the Jesus Seminar.

#### Is There Any Good Evidence the Gospels are Reliable?

The so-called "search for the historic Jesus" is over one hundred years old. Virtually nothing discovered during that time undermines the Gospel accounts. There is no "new evidence" supporting the idea that the miracle-working Son of God was the result of an evolution of myth over a long period of time. To the contrary, recent discoveries have given more credibility to the content of the Gospels themselves. This is why the trend in the last 20 years has been for liberal scholars to become more conservative in their views on the reliability of the Gospels, not less. Recent finds in archaeology, for example, show us that funerals were conducted differently in Galilee than in Jerusalem, consistent with the details in the Gospels. A person fabricating a story generations after the fact would not know this because of the devastation in Galilee by the Romans in 70 A.D.

This doesn't prove that Jesus rose from the dead, but it's one of a number of things that have been discovered over time that point to the accurate detail of the Gospel accounts. This gives substance to the claim that the writers were eye witnesses at the time of the events.

We know the Apostle Paul died during the Neronian persecution of A.D. 64. Paul was still alive at the close of Acts, so Acts must have been written sometime before A.D. 64. Acts was a continuation of Luke's Gospel, which must have been written earlier still. The book of Mark predates Luke, even by the Jesus Seminar's reckoning. This pushes Mark's Gospel into the 50s, just over twenty years after the crucifixion.

It is undisputed that Paul wrote Romans in the mid-50s, yet he proclaims Jesus as the resurrected Son of God in the opening lines of that epistle. Galatians, another uncontested Pauline epistle of the mid-50s, records Paul's interaction with the principle disciples (Peter and James) at least 14 years earlier (Gal 1:18, cf. 2:1).

The Jesus Seminar claims that the humble sage of Nazareth was transformed into a wonder-working Son of God in the late first and early second century. The epistles, though, record a high Christology within 10 to 20 years of the crucifixion. That simply is not enough time for myth and legend to take hold, especially when so many were still alive to contradict the alleged errors.

There is no good reason to assume the Gospels were fabricated or seriously distorted in the retelling. Time and again the New Testament writers claim to be eyewitnesses to the facts. They give abundant geographic and cultural details not available to writers of the next century. We also now know that it was the habit of Jewish disciples to memorize entire discourses of their rabbi's teaching. First century oral tradition was not as flexible or fluid as we might imagine. But there's another problem.

#### Who Would Follow this Man?

Even the members of the Jesus Seminar admit that Jesus was executed on a Roman Cross. But why was He killed? Who would follow this deconstructed Jesus? Who would care if He lived or died?

Leading Jesus scholar John Meier notes that a Jesus who "spent his time spinning parables and Japanese koans...or a bland Jesus who simply told people to look at the lilies of the field...would threaten no one, just as the university professors who create him threaten no one."<sup>[4]</sup>

In *Jesus Under Fire* , J.P. Moreland sums up what the Jesus Seminar is asking us to believe based on nothing more than the strength of their philosophic assumptions: "It requires the assumption that someone, about a generation removed from the events in question, radically transformed the authentic information about Jesus that was circulating at that time, superimposed a body of material four times as large, fabricated almost entirely out of whole cloth, while the church suffered sufficient collective amnesia to accept the transformation as legitimate."<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Does the Resurrection Matter?

The Jesus Seminar wants us to believe that nothing meaningful is surrendered as a result of their analysis. Even though the resurrection is false, they say, it still has significance because of the story it tells.

The Apostle Paul disagreed. "If Christ has not been raised," he wrote, "your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied."<sup>[6]</sup>

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, but instead was buried in a shallow grave and later dug up and eaten by dogs, as Robert Funk asserts, then Christians have nothing to celebrate. Rather, they should be pitied, according to Paul. Pretty stories not grounded in fact save no one. Only a risen Savior can defeat death.

I'm with Paul. I pity the Jesus Seminar who thinks we can hold on to some kind of vain, empty, religious confidence when all the facts of history go against us. If that's true, then you and I and the Jesus Seminar are all still in our sins. That's not something to celebrate on Easter.

As for me, I'm going to stand with Paul. I'm going to stand with Jesus. I'm going to stand with the resurrection.

-----  
By the way, J.P. Moreland's and Mike Wilkins's book, *Jesus Under Fire*, published by Zondervan, is a powerful academic and scholarly rebuttal of the Jesus Seminar. You must get a copy of this book. The introduction alone is worth the asking price.

## **Q: TELL US YOUR FAVORITE OT BOOK AND HOW YOU WOULD USE IT TO PREACH THE GOSPEL.**

## **Q: HOW WOULD YOU PREACH THE SONG OF SONGS?**

### 3 Reasons You Should Preach through The Song of Solomon

Consider these three reasons to study and proclaim the Song of Songs:

#### **1. The Song of Songs argues commitment is foundational to sex and marriage.**

Readers love the depictions of intimacy found throughout the poem. The wife of the book enjoys being with her husband. "With great delight I sat in his shadow," she exclaims in 2:3, "and his fruit was sweet to my taste." And the husband is equally intoxicated by her: "Your lips are like a scarlet thread, and your mouth is lovely" (4:3).

As erotic as the language of Song of Songs may be, it is never unhitched from commitment. In other words, the sexual activity described is always experienced in the context of a marriage covenant.

For example, the wife says of her husband, "his banner over me is love" (2:6). This banner is a military standard, the flag that united an army. It's her way of saying, "I belong to him and he belongs to me." This is the context of their intimacy.

Later on, the wife says of her husband, "My beloved is mine, and I am his" (2:16; 6:3). She says this before noting how he "grazes among the lilies" (another less-than-subtle allusion to physical intimacy). The careful reader cannot help but see the larger point. It's not the quality of the sex that makes their love good, it's the quality of their love that makes their sex good. Their marriage is marked and blessed by intimacy and commitment—and these two are not to be severed.

The poem ends with a similar sentiment, "Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave" (8:6). Real love lasts, because it's not a one-night flight but a life-long commitment.

“Free love” was the mantra of the 1960’s. How different is the wisdom of the Bible. True love is sealed by the commitment.

## **2. The Song of Songs provides practical wisdom for married couples.**

The lessons are legion.

Godly spouses use words to encourage one another. The husband calls his wife the “most beautiful among women” (1:8). Whether this is an objective reality is not the point; she is clearly the apple of *his* eye. He repeatedly uses speech to express his appreciation for her, “You have captivated my heart,” he tells her, “you have captivated my heart with one glance of your eyes” (4:9).

The point isn’t that a godly husband needs to be a poet—the point is he ought to use words to show how much he cares for his wife. Likewise, the wife lavishes praise on her husband, “Your love is better than wine” (1:2), and calls on him to pursue her, “Draw me after you; let us run” (1:4). In a good marriage, a husband and wife are never stingy with kind words.

Godly spouses also guard against the sin of a fallen world. In 2:15, the wife urges her husband to “Catch the little foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards.” The vineyard is their marriage, and it’s a field that needs to be tended or it will be destroyed by hungry invaders. This means admitting when the relationship is strained, “I sought him but found him not” (3:1) and working hard to improve it, “I held him and would not let him go” (3:4). They guard against sin by pursuing each other physically (4:1–5:1) and regularly reaffirming their commitment to one another (4:9; 7:10; 8:6).

Song of Songs is wisdom literature. It’s here to help us live as well as we can in a fallen, broken world. The author, guided by the Holy Spirit, calls married couples to the hard work of fidelity.

## **3. The Song of Songs presents marriage as a foretaste of perfect union with God.**

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed (Gen. 2:25). The purity of their relationship was possible because they enjoyed, if only for a short season, an uncorrupted relationship with their Maker.

It’s no surprise, then, that Edenic terms are used to describe the intimate relationship between the husband and wife in the Song of Songs:

- “Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, truly delightful. Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar; our rafters are pine” (1:16–17).
- “Your lips drip nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue” (4:11).
- “Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates with all choices fruits, henna with nard” (4:13)

In the Old Testament, the Promised Land is described as a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8). So is the marriage in the Song of Songs. This husband and wife have recaptured something of the delight and innocence of the Garden.

The Song of Songs is to be read and preached in light of the entire biblical canon and through the lens of Ephesians 5:31–32 where we learn marriage is a mystery that “refers to Christ and the Church.” It is through Christ that justified sinners find their home in a new Promised Land.

The Song of Songs really does point forward to Christ. As the wife longs to be with her husband (1:4; 3:1–4), so the Christian longs to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23). As the husband woos his wife with words (4:1–16; Eph. 5:26), so Christ woos us with his Word (John 10:27). As the love of a husband and wife is to be indelible (8:7) so nothing can separate us the love of Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37–39).

For centuries the Jewish people read the Song of Songs aloud in preparation for the Passover. Why did they do this? Because in the Song of Songs they saw more than wisdom for marital living, they saw something of God's covenantal love for his people, "For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer" (Isa. 54:5).

#### **NOTE ON COMMENTARIES:**

For astute connections between the Song of Songs and Genesis 1–3, I appreciated Barry Webb's *Five Festal Garments* (IVP, 2000). In twenty short pages, I saw how Solomon's book relates to the Bible as a whole. It's not a commentary, but a helpful introduction.

Duane Garrett showed how Song of Songs, as a love song, presents a pattern for marriage every couple can appreciate. "In love," Garrett writes, "every groom is a King Solomon, a shepherd, and even a gazelle, and every bride is a princess and country maiden" (*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* [Broadman, 1993]). Good words that reminded me to read Song of Songs as wisdom literature.

I especially appreciated Tremper Longman's observation that the *entire* book is a love poem between a husband and a wife. (*Song of Songs* [Eerdmans, 2001]). Many commentaries and popular authors have seen a progression from courtship to wedding to consummation—a plot I do not see in the text itself.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### Recovering the Song of Songs as a Christian Text | Reformed Faith & Practice

So why preach on the Song of Solomon? My answer is quite simply: to know God. At one level we know so little about God. Paul says that the heavens – the universe that God has made – shout to us of something of his eternal power and his divine nature. But we still know so little about God. Yet the God who knows himself has graciously revealed to us, using creaturely language, the language of analogy to communicate something of who he is. God is incomprehensible and ultimately unknowable apart from revelation. Scripture uses the language of analogy chastened and corrected by special revelation to speak truly if not exhaustively about God. That's one of the things that we are rediscovering, as it were, as we come to look at the whole way in which we interpret the Bible today. God has given us two books by which we might know him: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. And he has given us two gifts by which we might know him: he has given us his Son and he has given us his Spirit. The whole point of the Christian life is that we might know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

So how may we know God? Throughout Scripture God is concerned to communicate to us theological knowledge, which by extension means Christological knowledge. In other words, the point of the Bible is that we might know God. In the book of nature, God teaches us all kinds of things that are available to people whether they are Christians or not, whether they are God-

fearing or not. The book of nature teaches us not just about God, but about how to live as human beings in the world that God has made. From the book of nature, we learn how to farm and how to have interrelationships with other human beings. But the special revelation we find in Holy Scripture is given to us that we might know God and that we might know God particularly as he has revealed himself in Christ.

The Song of Songs, because it is Scripture, intends to bring us to this saving knowledge of God. Up until the middle of the nineteenth century, it was treated as a book of theological and spiritual knowledge pointing us to God. In fact, one writer calls it a sacramental word that uses visible and tangible things to point us to things that are invisible and immaterial.

What happened in the middle of the nineteenth century? German higher criticism, which was the fruit of the so-called Enlightenment, reordered the focus of our handling of the Bible to a starkly literal reading of the text, on the principle that the text has only one meaning and that is the kind of surface meaning, one which the original author was aware of or would have testified to. Instead of asking the question, what was in the divine author's mind in the writing of Scripture, the question focused on what the human author was thinking. This was a naturalistic approach: what does it mean at the natural level? At the natural level, what do you read in the Song of Songs, what do you have? Keil and Delitzch say that you have a love song, period. It has nothing to do with a relationship with God or anything about our relationship with God. Can we not read the Song as a series of lyrics about love and desire? Paul Griffiths responds, "well, of course, that is possible. But to do that would not be to read the Song as a Scriptural book; neither would it be to take seriously the weight of the Song's readings by Jews and Christians over two thousand years."<sup>[3]</sup>

The Christian church through most of its history has seen the Song of Songs as a Christian book. D.M. Carr writes this, "The increasingly exclusive focus of the literal sense of the song has corresponded with the functional decanonization of the Song in those sections of the church and synagogue which have been most deeply influenced by the historical and critical method."<sup>[4]</sup> In other words, you don't preach on it. You don't want to preach on sex, don't preach on the Song of Songs (unless you are someone like Mark Driscoll!). You don't go anywhere near it. But in the history of interpretation, both in Jewish circles as well as Christian circles, it has been understood to be about God and his relationship to his people Israel and the Church.

At the first century Council of Jamnia, Rabbi Avika stated, "no one in Israel ever disputed about the Song of Songs. The whole world is not worth the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel. For all the Scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies" (*Yadayim* 3:5). The Song affirms two things. It affirms that the intimate elements of human love and marriage are important and significant, but it says it is teaching us that we must see beyond those to a spiritual, higher significance in the text.

Paul Griffiths argues for a figural reading of the text and he says that Scripture "is first and last about more than what the surface of its text says. That more is always and necessarily the triune Lord and, necessarily, that Lord's incarnation as Jesus Christ."<sup>[5]</sup> The New Testament teaches us that the key that unlocks the entire canon of Scripture are the events surrounding the sending of the Son and the Spirit in order to open the door of our understanding to a deeper knowledge of the God who is there.

It is impossible for us to avoid the Song of Songs if we have any grasp of the God that is revealed throughout the rest of Scripture. Here is a God who is passionate in his love for his chosen people Israel. He is a God who desires them for himself, who is jealous at her immorality by playing around with other gods. He is a God who is repeatedly approaching his people, wooing his people, speaking love to his people, drawing them to himself with the cords of love. Great passages such as Hosea 1-3 or Isaiah 50 or 54 or Jeremiah 2-3 and Ezekiel 16 display this passionate love of God for Israel. In the words of God, “for your maker is your husband, the Lord of Hosts is his name, and the Holy one of Israel is your redeemer. For a brief moment I deserted you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you says the Lord your redeemer” (Is 54:5-6). The language of Hosea and Jeremiah is even more intense and passionate on God’s love for his people. He communicates his love for his people through those creaturely realities of which we are aware, particularly, human love. He uses human love at its highest level – that is in marriage – and at the highest level within marriage – the sexual aspects of marriage – to communicate by analogy the intensity, particularity and passion with which he loves his people, his giving of himself to his people.

That is precisely what the New Testament writers recognize. Paul when he is writing to Corinth says, “I feel a divine jealousy for you. I betrothed you to one husband. To present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor 11:2). Or Revelation 21:9 where it is the church that is “the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

In Ephesians 5, we read that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” Here the apostle addresses Christian marriage and the responsibility of husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and he quotes from Gen. 2:24: “for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh.” That language of leaving and cleaving in the Old Testament is used of the way in which Israel is in a covenant relationship with God. Israel has to *leave* its idols and *cleave* to the Lord. This stresses “a radical change, not of domicile, but of one’s pre-eminent loyalty.” In other words, the marriage relationship becomes a template for the spiritual relationship between Israel and the Lord, between Christ and the church. Throughout the Old Testament the Lord’s relationship to Israel is that of between a husband and a wife.

When Paul is quoting that in Eph. 5, he says about marriage: that this mystery is *great*, and he’s talking about Christ and the church. Greg Beale and Benjamin Gladd in their book *Hidden But Now Revealed*, emphasize that nowhere else in the New Testament is the word mystery is labeled as “great,” in the way in which it is done here in Ephesians 5. Metaphorically, it applies to God and Israel. Sinai may be viewed as a marriage between the Lord and Israel. It points forward to the consummative marriage of Israel in the end time of which Isaiah speaks in Isaiah 61 and 62. Paul’s move is simply to identify the Lord with Christ and the church as the end time Israel. The word mystery captures the continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments and the fulfillment towards which the OT is moving. So that when Paul says of this mystery of marriage pointing to Christ and the church and says it is *great*, he is echoing the language of the Song of Songs that says the song about the marriage between the Lord and his people is the *Song of Songs*. That is, it is a superlative song as we will see in a moment.

I want to say several things about the book as a whole. First of all, it is a poem. It is not a collection of poems, but a unified piece of poetry. Now, we see poetry all over the Bible. We see it in the psalms and the prophets. We need to know something about poetry. We need to understand that poetry at its best is evocative speech. Its metaphors, images, and phrases stir the

imagination. They heighten our emotions. They are aesthetically pleasing. In poetry the effect of language is primary and uppermost. It elevates our thoughts. It is marked by the noblest of themes. It is meant to stir the purest of emotions and it should deal with the richest of ideas and should connect with the deepest feelings of our hearts. John Milton said, true poetry is "simple, sensuous, and passionate."[6]

The Song of Songs falls into the category of good poetry, even sublime poetry. When God made the world, he multiplied within the world beautiful sights and sounds and smells and senses. When he made us humans, he made us capable of enjoying and savoring such beauties. He gave us a love for beauty, and this poetic song is a work of exquisite beauty. Its theme is love, the love that is from God because God is love. Yes, it is a love song between a man and a woman, but that is only where it begins. It leaps from there to become a song of the relationship between Christ and the church.

A single woman leaving my congregation in Philadelphia early on in my series on the Song of Songs said to me at the door: "For the first time in my Christian life, I can read the Song of Songs and it can be for me." The problem with making the Song of Songs only about love and marriage, is that you disenfranchise, not just our single people and our widowed people, but you actually disenfranchise 99% of our married people because they've never had that kind of experience either. Only in their dreams, they would have the kind of experience touted by those who teach a naturalistic view of the Song of Songs. It is more than that; it is above that, it is beyond that. It is beyond our creaturely experience, and that is intentional because it is lifting our thoughts to some other dimension above our creaturely experience. God is lifting us out of ourselves and away from ourselves and saying there is something higher, greater, better — the spiritual realm of our relationship with God. It uses creaturely analogies because that's what we know as creatures. In order to help our understanding of spiritual communion with God in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit employs from the tool box of God's revelation the tools of natural things with which we are familiar. And so, this song of love points us beyond married love to something far greater, to the marriage we were made for.

It is a song that we are looking at, and the word "song" is used of many of the Psalms and other great songs in the Bible. Of particular relevance for us is that Psalm 45 belongs to that group. If you should read Psalm 45 together with the Song of Songs, you will find that there is a very close parallel between those two songs. Psalm 45 is a love song: "To the choirmaster according to the Lilies." If you read the Song of Songs, you'll find there is reference to lilies all over the place. The fact that this Psalm 45 mentions the lilies establishes a point of connection between these two songs. In Psalm 45:2, talking to the divine Son, we read, "you are the most handsome of the sons of men, grace is poured on your lips, therefore, God has blessed you forever." The Psalm goes on to talk about the throne of Christ: 'Your throne, O God is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of righteousness...therefore O God, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions; your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.' It then goes on to talk about his marriage to the princess. "All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold...with her virgin companions following behind her." The resemblances from what is a very well-received messianic Psalm and the Song of Songs are just too numerous to ignore.

A scriptural song is an act of confession. When you hear Moses or Mary or Elizabeth singing, or Isaiah's poetic songs, they are acts of confession. The principle notes of these songs are praise and gratitude. And when we sing, at Christmastime for example, Mary's great song, "My soul

magnifies the Lord," we are singing with Mary and we are saying that everything within our being is magnifying the Lord. We want to be closer to the Lord. We want to have a more intimate relationship with the Lord. We want to embrace him. We want to have a personal relationship with him in a deeper and a more vital way. We are drawing nearer. These scriptural songs that we read throughout the Bible acknowledge the surprising, awe-inspiring, and wonderful presence of the Lord. Moses Song: the great movement of the children of the Israel through the Red Sea. The presence of the Lord. They compress great ideas in one place.

The Song of Songs is scripture. It's in the Bible. If it is merely a love song, it probably shouldn't bother being there. But it is in the Bible, which means that it partakes of the inspiration of the Bible, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It partakes of what the Confession calls the *perfection* of the Bible, because God's ways are perfect. It partakes of the holiness of the Bible, because God is holy. Not only that, but it partakes of the theme of the Bible. What is the Bible all about? What did Jesus tell the people of his day what the Bible was all about? "These speak of me. You search the Scriptures, and yet, these Scriptures are about me and you don't see it." Jesus accused the Pharisees. To the disciple on the road to Emmaus, he showed them from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. The Bible is the revelation of God that culminates in the revelation of God the Son and God the Spirit.

One of the main Biblical themes that you see again and again in the Song of Songs is that of the garden. There are echoes of Eden in the Song of Songs. Eden you remember before the land was cursed was "very good." There man and woman had a perfect relationship with one another, but also a personal and perfect relationship with God who walked among them and who met with them and who spoke to them in some way that we can't speculate. God was there; he was present with them in the Garden of Eden. James Hamilton in his little book on the Song of Songs says, "The closest we get to bring to being back in the Garden of Eden in the whole of the Bible is in the Song of Songs."<sup>[7]</sup> This garden is linked in the Song with Jerusalem. Which is an interesting link because if we handle the Bible properly, very often it is better to go to the very end and to look at what happens at the very end. And at the very end of the Bible, here we have the bride, the lamb's wife, coming down from God out of heaven as a garden city. The New Jerusalem the holy city. The place where God dwells. There is no temple because God lives there. Here is the new Eden. Here are springs of living water flowing from the temple echoing Ezekiel's dream. Echoing Song of Songs' garden with the flowing living water, that phrase that is used by Jesus when he is talking in John 7 when he speaks to the woman at the well, in Revelation when it is talking about that final temple that garden temple city new Jerusalem. That language is from Song of Songs. The garden a renewed Eden. There in that garden there is a new Adamic figure. There is the beloved. Her beloved the one that she is waiting for. Who she describes as a new Adam as it were. The second Adam. He is the hero. The seed of the woman, Abraham's seed, from the tribe of Judah, son of David, who comes to the garden to meet with his church.

Consider the placement of the Song in our Bibles. Originally, it belonged to the writings. The book of the writings in the scripture are prefaced in the canon by Psalms 1 and 2. They describe the godly man who walks with God, who obeys God, who does everything that Adam failed to do. Who abides by the word of God. When Psalms 1 and 2 are closely held together they are regarded as the introduction to the book of Psalms and to the whole of the writings. In Psalm 2 you have God's king, eternally begotten of God, given the nations. The exhortation is "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry." Submit to him, kiss him, bow the knee to him, receive him and find in him the refuge you need in the day of judgment. That theme pervades the writings. In the Psalms, God's king suffers before entering glory. In the book of Job, the innocent suffers and is

restored. In Proverbs, lady wisdom is seeking the son, seeking the king, the messiah. Ruth, the wise Gentile, joins herself with God's people and becomes an ancestor of the Messiah.

In Song of Songs, these themes are brought together. Here is this woman who represents the people of God. She is the church, she is Israel. She is looking for the Messiah. She is longing to see the Messiah. Though she talks about him, though she hears him speak to her early in the book, in the middle of the book you discover that she has never actually seen him. She is challenged by some onlookers and they say "what is your beloved more than another beloved?" and she describes him. Well, you might think she was describing a statue, because she's never actually met him at this point. The book begins with a longing to have a personal relationship with him. "Kiss me, with the kisses of your mouth:" in other words, appear to me. Speak to me. Breathe in me. Be here. I want you to come here. She anticipates him coming. She sees him racing over the mountains towards her echoing the language you find in Isaiah of the mountains being leveled and everything being clear for the Lord is coming. "Behold, he comes" she says. "Behold, the Lord comes," says Isaiah. She is waiting for him to come, longing for him to come. And he comes, but she doesn't see him. There she is in her house and he is on the outside looking in. She knows that he is present, that he is looking, that he is searching, but she hasn't seen him. She goes through the garden, but he is not there. She prays to him, "will you not come?" He comes to her and says "I was there in the garden." The garden represents the temple the place of worship. The place where you meet with God. And he tells her "I was there." I was among the lilies, which is how he names his people as the lilies. He is with his people. But she hasn't seen him yet. Her longing is that one day she will see him. In her description of him, she describes him with a human appearance, but with a head of gold, and a belly of ivory, and legs of gold, in sockets of gold. It's reminiscent of the kind of pictures you see in Ezekiel and Daniel and in these apocalyptic books, that attempts to describe the indescribable: Ezekiel says, it's the appearance of the likeness of whatever. His language is bursting apart to describe the realities that are being revealed to us here.

Thirdly the Song of Songs is superlative. Just like the *Sanctum Sanctorum*, the heaven of Heavens, the Kings of Kings, the God of gods, the vanity of vanities, this is the *Canticum Cantorum*. It belongs to a special category. It is the highest song, we are being told. That's the title actually that the Bible gives: *The Song of Songs*.

Consider all the songs of Scripture. Think of Mary's song. Isn't Mary's song the most exalted song imaginable? Yes, it is. But what is she doing in that song? She is describing the Messiah. In the Song of Songs, you get to hear him speaking to his church. You hear what he thinks about his church: how he loves his people, how he delights in his people, how he projects onto his people his own characteristics so they become increasingly like him. You hear *him*. This is the *song of songs*: the very best song you could ever sing. And this is how we are to interpret this song.

Brian Toews in a paper on this song makes much of this.<sup>[8]</sup> He asks us to think about what kind of song in the Bible would be the best song. Would it be man-centered or God-centered? Would the Song of Songs in the Bible be anything other than a God-centered song? Imagine if the best song you could ever sing in your life would be of a marriage, love, and sex, in the Bible. That is inconceivable. But if this song is God-centered, then the song is the best song we can sing about God.

Think about those great songs in the Bible that talk about God. Psalm 45 is a song about the love for the king who will come to deliver his people. Exodus 15 is Moses's song about God's rescue. Isaiah 5 sings of my beloved and his vineyard. Which has connections with the Song of Songs. This song is called the Song of Songs because it describes, as the Rabbi said it describes, what happens in the holy of holies. And it is addressed to him who alone is called the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. In other words, the Messiah stands at the center of Scripture's self-revelation. The Song, then, is the superlative song of love between the believer and the church and her Lord. It transcends the songs of Mary, Simeon, Anna, and Elizabeth, because in this song the Lord speaks directly as a lover who longs for his people and desires to bring her into his presence.

There are biblical-theological connections. You find a lot about the doves in the Song of Songs. Doves? Isn't that a random thought, we might think. He has doves' eyes, which she recognizes. And she is pronounced by him to have dove's eyes. He gives her doves' eyes. You think, wow, are we getting into a bit above our paygrade here? But consider the two dominant features in the Christ figure in this song: (1) how he is named and (2) his chief characteristic. He is named the beloved and the chief characteristic his dove's eyes.

When you go to the New Testament, the first major revelation we have of the Trinity acting inseparably (apart from the incarnation of Christ where they are acting inseparably to produce the Messiah), is at the baptism of Jesus when his public work begins. Three created realities identify the invisible and indivisible persons of the Holy Trinity. There is Jesus in his incarnate humanity, human soul and body. There is the Father, who creates a voice so that he is heard. And there is a dove, a created thing, descending as a marker identifying the presence at Jesus' baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is remarkable: why would he choose a dove? As you look at the Old Testament, where would you find it associated with the Son? The answer is on Psalm 45 and the Song. Then there are the words of the Father: "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased." So when the Beloved who has 'doves eyes' gives 'doves eyes' to the woman in the Song, the eyes of the dove represent the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating Christ in His human nature and in illuminating the Church by His gift, thus opening her eyes to see her beloved. When she utters "I am my Beloved's and my Beloved in mine" she is uttering the quintessential confession of faith. There is certainly more than a clue here of what is going on in the text.

We noted that there was a garden, which of course represents ultimately the temple. When Solomon erected the temple it was decorated with details that were arboreal and garden-like. In the garden in the Song, there are trees and there is a river of living water. Both of those details we know are in the final temple. When the bride, the lamb's wife, descends from heaven, the holy city – New Jerusalem, the garden city – the trees of life line the river of life and those trees have leaves for the healing of the nations. Psalm 36 interprets the river from God's presence in Eden as a picture of the abundant life that flows to God's people:

How precious is your steadfast love O God!

The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house,

And you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life;

for in your light we see light. (7-9)

And in Isaiah 60, it is said of God to Israel to Jerusalem especially to Zion the church representing the church, "He has beautified you." God delights to beautify his people. And the point then of the book I think is very helpfully picked up by John Owen when he talks about our union and communion with the Lord Jesus.

We typically settle for a kind of semi-detached live-in boyfriend relationship with Christ. The Song of Songs challenges us to seek more in our personal relationship with Christ, to love him more, to know him better, to sound the depths of what has been revealed of him. Why are we Christians? Surely, we are Christians in order that we might know God. Why did Jesus come and why is the Holy Spirit given to us? In order that we may know the Father. The Son died and rose again that we might know the Father that we might know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of glory and of God, rests upon us that we might have a deeper love for, appreciation for, longing for the day.

When we read the very first lines of Song of Songs and we can identify with it:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!

For your love is better than wine,

your anointing oils are fragrant. (2-3)

The bride is saying, "I know of you. I have an experience of you, but there is something missing. You are missing. You are missing in your face-to-face presence. I know you are there, and I love you wherever I am and in all the circumstances of my life. But what I long for is to have you face-to-face, face-to-face with Christ my savior, when with rapture I behold him: Jesus Christ who died for me."

The Song will whet your appetite for *more*. More of Christ. More of God. More of a deep and lasting and growing relationship with the one who loves us so well.

## **Q: HOW WOULD YOU PREACH FROM LEVITICUS?**

### 5 Reasons You Should Preach through Leviticus

Here are five reasons why you should preach the Old Testament book of Leviticus.

#### **1. Leviticus reminds us of the grace of our God and the cost of our sin (1-7).**

As the new covenant people of God, it's easy to minimize our sin. After all, Jesus died on the cross and paid the penalty for our sin in full. We no longer need to bring daily sacrifices to the

temple—and praise God for that! But that very freedom can tempt us to minimize our own sin. Leviticus, on the other hand, reminds us that sin is costly.

As early as Genesis 2:15, we're told that the wages of sin is death. No matter what the sin, we deserve the death penalty. But in Leviticus, our gracious Lord establishes a system of sacrifice whereby sinners may present a substitute. Just imagine, every time a person sins, he or she was to bring an animal that would receive the death penalty they deserved. That's grace! But the sacrificial system also reminds us of the cost of sin. The substitute was to come from the sinner's own flock. Imagine if every time you sinned, you had to go out back, get a lamb from your flock, and bring it to the priest. And when you brought the lamb to the priest you presented it as the substitute who would receive the death penalty for your sin. But it's you, not the priest, who slits the animal's throat. Then the blood pours out. Think of all that blood—not just from your sacrifice but from all the sacrifices that day. Under the new covenant, we don't get this poignant picture of what our sin costs, and how God addresses it in our substitute. Leviticus helps us see the extravagance of God's grace and the cost of our sin.

## **2. Leviticus exposes God's grace in providing a mediator (8–10).**

Because God is holy, he requires a mediator to stand between himself and his people. In Leviticus, God sets apart his ministers that they may serve him and his people (8–9). But it also warns us that God's ministers must serve him as he requires and not as they decide for themselves (10). As those who represented God to the people, God's ministers were to teach God's people all that he commanded (10:11). And as those who represented the people before God, they were to facilitate atonement (10:17).

Already in Leviticus, these questions are being asked: "Who will be a faithful mediator between God and man?" "Who will facilitate atonement for sin?"

## **3. Leviticus explains what God requires of those who approach him in worship (11–15).**

In Exodus 24, Moses consecrated Israel as God's people on the basis of the covenant at Sinai. Now, God explains how consecrated Israel should live this set-apart life in order that they may approach him in worship. Leviticus 11–15 emphasizes the distinction between clean and unclean, holy and common. Those who were unclean couldn't associate with the public and couldn't worship God, but provisions were made so that the unclean could be made clean. While we may not know exactly why such laws were given outside of distinguishing Israel from the surrounding nations, we do know that obedience to these laws allowed God's people to approach him in worship. Still, there were those who would never be clean and could never approach God in worship. Furthermore, anyone who touched someone or something unclean would also become unclean. Leviticus causes us to long for one who, by his touch, will make all things clean—one who will be willing and able to approach God in worship.

## **4. Leviticus foreshadows forgiveness of sin in the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus (16–17).**

Leviticus climaxes in the glorious day of atonement—the day when all of Israel's sin was forgiven. Sacrifices were made to cleanse the temple, and to atone for the sins of the high priest and the people. A scapegoat was presented as a substitute—upon which the sins of the people were symbolically laid. This scapegoat was then released outside the camp, picturing the departure of Israel's sin.

The writer of Hebrews makes these connections for us. Leviticus 16–17 foreshadows the promised high priest who is also the scapegoat who takes away the sins of the people by taking his own blood and sprinkling it in the most holy place. We need to preach Leviticus to remember that only Jesus saves to the uttermost.

## **5. Leviticus outlines how God's people are to be holy as God is holy (18–27).**

Because God is holy, we are to be holy. Leviticus outlines how Israel was to distinguish itself (be holy) from the other nations in every aspect of their lives. Leviticus also highlights the promised blessings for those who pursue holiness (26:1–13) and the threatened curses for those who do not (26:14–39). At the same time, the conclusion of the book exposes God's merciful heart as he promises forgiveness to all who repent of their sin (26:40–46).

In a day when holiness is neglected, our people need to be reminded that we are to be holy as God is holy. God blesses holiness. Thankfully, Jesus himself has taken on the curses of the Mosaic covenant and has provided the perfect obedience that same covenant requires. Now, all who repent of their sin will receive the promised forgiveness in Christ and are therefore able to relate to the holy God.

## **CONCLUSION**

Leviticus doesn't merely detail animal sacrifices and holiness codes. It does that, but it does so much more. It exposes the heart of a gracious God who provides a substitute for the sin of his repentant people. That substitute not only received the death penalty in our place, he also obeyed in our place, gaining for us all the blessings of holiness.

Now, under the new covenant, Jesus empowers us for holy living by first granting us a new heart and the Holy Spirit. Brothers, preach Leviticus. Why? Because in it you will find the gospel!

## **FAVORITE COMMENTARIES**

The book of Hebrews – Hebrews is the best biblical-theological commentary on Leviticus. It explains how Jesus fulfills the old covenant, highlighting the language and imagery of Leviticus: sacrifice, priesthood, high priest, day of atonement.

*The Book of Leviticus*, by Gordon Wenham. Wenham is a reliable scholar, and he provides insight into the biblical text. His discussion on clean/unclean, holy/common is very helpful, as is his explanation of holiness as more than mere “separation.” Probably the best commentary on Leviticus.

*Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of Leviticus*, Allen P. Ross. This is not a commentary. It does provide some biblical and historical context, but it's primarily a guide to the exposition of Leviticus. I don't recommend going to this, or any commentary, first, but it can be a helpful guide after you've done your own work.

\*\*\*\*\*

More articles in this series:

- “[4 Reasons You Should Preach through Genesis](#),” by Erik Raymond
- “[4 Reasons You Should Preach through Exodus](#),” by Bobby Jamieson
- “[6 Reasons You Should Preach through Numbers](#),” by CW Faulkner
- “[3 Reasons You Should Preach through Deuteronomy](#),” by Jeff Mooney
- “[3 Reasons You Should Preach through Joshua](#),” by Clift Barnes
- “[4 Reasons You Should Preach through Judges](#),” by Josh Vincent
- “[4 Reasons You Should Preach through Ruth](#),” by Jonathan Rourke

## SUGGESTIONS FOR A SERMON/TEACHING SERIES ON LEVITICUS

## **Q: IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT IS SIGNIFICANT ABOUT GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM?**

### God's Covenant with Abraham

#### **God's Covenant with Abraham**

We rarely use the word *covenant* these days, and when we do, it is often used interchangeably with *contract*. This presents quite a problem for us, because *covenant* is a critically important concept in Scripture, such as in this week's session **God's Covenant with Abraham** ([Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-9](#)), with a specific definition that distinguishes it from *contract*. So let's take a few minutes to try to understand the difference between covenants and contracts. We'll start with contracts.

Typically, a contract is an agreement between two or more parties where each party seeks a benefit the other can provide. In other words, contracts are centered on getting something from someone else. Generally, contracts have very specific terms and conditions. Each party agrees to complete certain actions and failure to do so violates the contract and offers the other party or parties the opportunity to escape from their obligations. OK. That was a mouthful. Let's look at an example or two.

- **A mortgage:** When we bought our house in Murfreesboro, we took out a mortgage to pay for it. If you have ever bought a house with a mortgage, you know how many papers you have to sign as part of the contract! In essence, the bank bought our house for us and allows us to live in it while we repay them on the schedule set forth in the contract. Each month, we are to pay a certain amount of money and as long as we do so, keep the home insured, pay property taxes, and so forth, we are allowed to live in it. We wanted a home. The bank wanted to make money. That is why we both entered into the contract. We both have obligations which makes the contract binding, but if we fail to meet those obligations, the other party can void the contract.
- **A health club membership:** When you join a health club, you generally sign a contract whereby you promise to pay your monthly dues, clean off the equipment after use, and so forth. In turn, the club promises to keep up the facilities and equipment, provide classes, and so forth. You entered the contract so that you can have a place to work out. The health club entered because it wants to make money.

So that is the gist of a contract. So far, so good. What then, is a covenant? Well, let's narrow the scope down a little more just to biblical covenants, and in fact, let's narrow it down even more just to what we could call divine covenants—or covenants initiated by God.

So what then is a divine covenant?

A divine covenant is a binding agreement or promise initiated by God between Him and one or more other parties. Now there are two forms of divine covenants: conditional and unconditional. A conditional covenant is as its name suggests: a covenant with conditions placed on the humans involved. Think of it as an “if, then” promise by God. If the person does A, then God will do B. Now here is what distinguishes this from a contract: as soon as the person does A, God will do B no matter what. There is no “opt out.”

An unconditional covenant is also as its name suggests: a covenant with no conditions placed on the promises made. There is no “if, then” aspect. God simply promises to do something. Because these divine covenants are initiated by God, they are backed by His character. That is why they are absolutely reliable. Furthermore, they are initiated by God for His glory and our good. Unlike contracts which are motivated by a self-directed desire by each party involved, divine covenants have an outward nature—God is making a promise that benefits the person or persons involved.

So let's look at a two divine covenants, one unconditional and one conditional, to understand covenant better.

- **Noahic Covenant** (Genesis 8-9): This is an unconditional covenant initiated by God and directed toward Noah, and ultimately all humanity. In this covenant, God simply promises to never flood the entire world again (a clear benefit for humanity). There are no conditions placed on Noah and/or humanity. There is no way out of this for God. He makes a binding promise and that is that.
- **Mosaic Covenant** (Exodus 19-24): This is a conditional covenant initiated by God and directed toward the Israelites. In this covenant, the people had to promise to obey the Law, and God shared a series of blessings based on their obedience and curses based on their disobedience. Notice that unlike the Noahic Covenant, God called for the people to accept the terms of the Mosaic Covenant.

So, let's finally talk about God's covenant with Abraham, or the Abrahamic Covenant. ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)) This covenant was initiated by God and some believe it was unconditional, while others believe it was conditional, based on Abram leaving his land. Either way, Abram left, so as soon as he did, the covenant became unconditional. God's promises in this covenant can be summarized by three words:

- **Land:** God promised Abraham that He would give him a new home, which we know as Palestine, or the promised land.
- **Seed:** God promised Abraham that He would give him a son and large family.
- **Blessing:** God promised Abraham that He would bless Abraham and all the peoples of the world through Abraham.

As we continue to study through Genesis, we will see that God fulfilled His covenant promises when He brought Abraham into Palestine, gave him Isaac, and blessed him mightily. But that was not the full extent of what God had in mind. He had much, much more in mind—He had the gospel in mind.

As we continue to journey through the Old Testament, we will discover that God amplifies this three-fold promise with three additional divine covenants:

- **The Palestinian Covenant** (Deuteronomy 30): This is where God clarified the extent of the promised land to Moses and Israel.
- **The Davidic Covenant** (2 Samuel 7): This is where God clarified that the seed God had in mind in Genesis 12 was not Isaac, but Jesus—the same Seed that God mentioned in [Genesis 3:15](#).

- **The New Covenant** (Jeremiah 31): This is where God clarified that His greatest blessing is giving a new heart as part of salvation.

As you can see, the Abrahamic Covenant was a major turning point in redemptive history. In this one divine covenant, God promised that He was forming a people (seed), which would be part of His kingdom (land), by salvation (blessing). And Jesus is at the core of this three-fold promise. That is why His first recorded words of ministry were "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." In other words, trust in Me (blessing), because I am your King (seed) who has arrived in His kingdom (land). Jesus was telling Israel that He was the fulfillment of all of the divine covenants—even the Mosaic and Noahic. The covenants were not about Abraham, Moses, David, or even Israel. They were about Jesus.

In many ways, understanding the Abrahamic Covenant unlocks the proper understanding of the bulk of the Bible. If you understand what God was promising in Genesis 12:1-3, you really can begin to understand what He does throughout the rest of the Old Testament and even the New Testament. You can understand the genealogies and the importance of the people moving in and out of Palestine better. So take your time and be sure that your kids realize how wonderful this covenant is.

### The Covenant of Abraham

The main thing that I want to show this morning is that God's 4,000 year old relation to Abraham is of immense importance for your life as a believer today. Everything written about Abraham "was written for your instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures you might have hope" (Romans 15:4). To accomplish this, I have asked three questions concerning the covenant God made with Abraham. 1) What were the promises made to him in this covenant? 2) What conditions had to be met if these promises were to be realized? 3) Who are the heirs of these promises today? I will try to answer these from Scripture and show that the answers should make you very happy to follow Christ in the obedience of faith.

### **The Promises Made to Abraham**

First, what promises did God make to Abraham? I find it helpful to group the promises into three categories. First, God promises a great posterity (this is why Abram's name was changed to Abraham in Genesis 17:5); it will be numerous, and will have a land all its own. Genesis 12:2, "I will make of you a great nation . . . and make your name great." Genesis 15:5, "Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them . . . So shall your descendants be" (cf. 13:16; 18:18). Genesis 13:14, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever." Genesis 15:18, "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates'" (cf. 12:7; 15:7; 17:8). That is the first group of promises: for a great posterity and a land to dwell in.

The second group of promises is more general and goes beyond posterity and land. In Genesis 15:6 it says, "Abram believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." God justifies Abram because of his faith, and justification is an act of God full of promise. Ever since God had chosen this ungodly Aramean and promised to make him a great nation (Genesis 12:1–3), he had remained childless. The promise seemed hopeless (Genesis 15:2). But God, who delights in doing the humanly impossible, says to him in Genesis 15:4, 5: "Your own son shall be your heir . . . Look toward heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them . . . So shall your descendants be." God is going to act for Abraham. Therefore, Abraham looks away from himself (in a grand reversal of Adam's sin) and trusts God to keep his word. That act of faith so honors the glory of God's trustworthiness and power and mercy that God responds with the incomparable gift of justification: he declares Abraham to stand righteous before him. Not that Abraham will never sin again. He will. But he has now been forgiven for all his sins, past and future, in the sense that God will not bring him into condemnation for them (cf. Romans 4:1–8).

But if there is now no condemnation for Abraham because of his free justification by faith, then we can see clearly that Genesis 15:6 is full of promise. "God reckoned his faith to him for righteousness" means that God is not against him, but for him for the rest of his life and to all eternity. The way God expresses this exhilarating truth to Abraham in Genesis 17:7 is by promising to be his God: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you . . . to be God to you and to your descendants after you." If God is your God, he works for you with all his power, and so Abraham's justification by faith is a promise that God is for him, he will be God to him and work for him with great mercy and faithfulness. This is true both in this fallen age and in the age to come.

For example, near the end of his life Abraham sent his servant back to the land of his birth to find a wife from his own people for his son Isaac. When God led the servant straight to Rebekah and she was gracious to him, the servant bows and worships the Lord. Then he says in Genesis 24:27, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master, Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master." In other words, when God reckoned Abraham's faith for righteousness, he forgave all his sins and engaged to pursue him with goodness and mercy all his days.

That is a great promise. But it is not all. If God is an eternal God and all his power is at the disposal of his love for Abraham, then surely this implies the promise of resurrection and eternal joy with God. The Sadducees in Jesus' day did not believe in the resurrection of anyone. One day they query Jesus about this and he answers in Matthew 22:31f., "As for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." The point of that quote of Exodus 3:15 ("I am the God of Abraham . . .") is that when the eternal, all-powerful creator is God to you, death cannot destroy your relation to him. Therefore, God's justification of Abraham by faith is full of promise: it means he is forgiven and freed from condemnation, and that God is his God and will work for him to bless him in this age and give him eternal life in the age to come. God is his shield and very great reward (Genesis 15:1). That is the second group of promises to Abraham.

The third group amounts to this: all this blessing promised to Abraham will be enjoyed someday by all the families of the earth. God's purpose is to bless the world with the blessings of Abraham. He is to be a conduit, not a cul-de-sac, of God's blessing. Genesis 12:2, 3, "I will bless you . . . so that you will be a blessing . . . and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (cf. 18:18; 22:18). Therefore, even though God has begun his redemptive, reclaiming

process with a single individual, he has in view the world. He has a plan, a clear purpose for the centuries, and it reaches even to us, as we will see in a moment.

## The Conditions of the Promises

But before that, the second question we need to answer is, What were the conditions of the promises to Abraham? There is a good deal of confusion over this matter of whether the Abrahamic covenant is conditional or not. But the confusion is not necessary and arises from a false assumption, namely, that if a covenant is conditional it cannot be certain of fulfillment. Or to put it another way, if a person must meet certain conditions in order to benefit from God's promises, then the fulfillment of those promises cannot be irrevocable and sure. But that is not true. It is a false assumption based squarely on the conviction that man is autonomous and self-determining. But if, as Ezekiel 36:27 says, God puts his Spirit in man and *causes* him to walk in his statutes (and thus fulfill the conditions of the covenant), then a promise can be *both* conditional and certain of fulfillment. If God commits himself to work so that Abraham fulfills the conditions of the covenant promises, then there is no inconsistency in saying that the promises are sure, steadfast, irrevocable, *and* conditional.

This is exactly what we find in Genesis. First, in Genesis 12:1–3 and 15:4–5 the promises are made without any conditions being mentioned. They appear to be absolute and certain of fulfillment. But in Genesis 22:16–18 we read that the fulfillment of the promises is conditional upon Abraham's obedience. He has just obeyed God in offering Isaac to him on the altar. The angel of the Lord stopped his hand and said, "By myself I have sworn," says the Lord, '*because you have done this* and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all of the nations bless themselves, *because you have obeyed my voice.*" The promises will be fulfilled *because* Abraham obeyed God. Therefore, the fulfillment of the promises was conditional upon Abraham's obedience.

Another crucial text in this regard is Genesis 18:19 where God says, "I have chosen Abraham, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, *so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.*" If the promises made to Abraham and his seed are to be fulfilled, then his household must keep the way of the Lord. The promises are conditional. But they are not uncertain. They were stated absolutely in Genesis 12:1–3 and 15:4, 5. And here in Genesis 18:19 the point is that God chose Abraham to charge his household in such a way that they will fulfill the conditions of the promises. The promises are both conditional and sure.

And no one should jump to the conclusion that this makes the covenant of Abraham a covenant of works. Works are deeds done in self-reliance to earn God's favor by showing oneself meritorious. But the obedience which Abraham had (though not perfect) was the inevitable outcome of his faith in God's gracious promise. He obeyed God and offered his only son Isaac on the altar not to earn God's favor, but because he was so confident in God's promise to give him posterity through Isaac (Genesis 21:12; Hebrews 11:17–19) in spite of everything.

Obedience is the necessary outcome of truly trusting in God's promises, and so obedience is made a condition of inheriting God's promises which are granted by grace and through faith. This means that the covenant of Abraham is just like the new covenant under which we live. For it too is conditional—not on works, but on the obedience of faith. John 3:36 says: "He who does

not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him"; and Hebrews 5:9, "Christ became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." The Covenant of Abraham and the New Covenant under which we live today are one covenant of grace, because in both gracious promises are made to sinners who receive them through faith—a faith which banks so completely on the wisdom and power and love of God that it inevitably obeys his commands.

## The Heirs of the Promises

And that brings us finally to the question: Who are the heirs of the promises made to Abraham and to his seed? Who are the beneficiaries of the blessing of Abraham? In Genesis 17:4 God says, "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations." This seems to say that the seed of Abraham will not be restricted to the Jewish nation. He will father descendants who belong to many nations (cf. Romans 4:17). This is probably the way Genesis 12:3 will be fulfilled: "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (cf. Galatians 3:8). In other words, it is the seed of Abraham that will inherit his blessing (Genesis 17:7); the seed will include many nations (Genesis 17:4); and therefore, many nations or families will be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3); many nations will be the heirs of his promises. When we turn to the New Testament, things that were only hinted at in the Old Testament become very clear. Paul is confronted with the agonizing situation that many of his Jewish kinsmen have rejected Christ and are accursed under God's condemnation for unbelief. Yet these are the seed, the physical descendants, of Abraham. How can this be? Has the word of promise to Israel fallen? He gives his answer in Romans 9:6–8: "It is not as though the word of God has fallen. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel; and not all are children of Abraham just because they are his descendants; 'but through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants."

Paul's answer is that God's promises to the descendants of Abraham have not failed, even though many Jews are unbelieving and therefore accursed, because the promises were never made to every physical descendant of Abraham. Just as Isaac, not Ishmael, was the child of promise, and Jacob, not Esau, was the child of promise, so also throughout Israel's history there has been a true remnant within Israel who are the heirs of the full covenant blessings. The rest are not the seed of Abraham because, even though they trace their physical descent to him, they do not share his faith and obedience. That is why John the Baptist said to the unrepentant Jews, "Do not say, 'We have Abraham as our father!'" (Matthew 3:9), and Jesus said to the Jews who rejected him, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did" (John 8:39). In other words, many Israelites (most Israelites) are not the seed of Abraham which will inherit the promises.

That did not make Paul happy. He loved his kinsmen, as we should. But Paul saw God's hand in it all: the unbelief of Israel meant the gateway into the covenant blessings was swung wide to the nations (Romans 11:12). And God granted to Paul to understand and make explicit what was hinted at in those chapters in Genesis. This is what Paul taught in Galatians 3: The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed!" So then, those who have faith are blessed with faithful Abraham (vv. 8–9) . . . In Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham comes upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith

(v. 14) . . . There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring (seed), heirs according to the promise (vv. 28, 29).

Who then are the heirs of the precious and very great promises made to Abraham and to his seed? You are. To whom can it be said: Your sins are forgiven; God is for you; with all his power, goodness, and mercy he will pursue you all your life, and you will rise from the dead; your name will be great; your assembly as the stars of the heavens; you will possess the gates of your enemies, and the land of Israel and all the earth will be your inheritance; and you will fill the new world with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord? To whom can all this be said? To you, the children of Abraham through faith in Christ. "For all things are yours . . . whether the world or life or death or the present or the future, all (the promises!) are yours, for you are Christ's and Christ (the seed of Abraham) is God's" (1 Corinthians 3:21–23). Amen.

## **Q: HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN REPEATED STORIES IN GENESIS?**

### Literary Analysis of Genesis Doublets: Parallel or Duplicate Accounts (Doublets)

Literary Analysis of Genesis Doublets: Parallel or Duplicate Accounts (Doublets)  
Doublets are seemingly identical duplicative narratives of the same event, which source critics believe is one story told by two or three different authors living during different periods of time. They believe that this explains the differences and contradictions of each account. Found mostly in Genesis, doublets can also be found elsewhere in the Pentateuch. The following are the most commonly cited doublets:

The Creation Narrative (Genesis 1-2) The Flood Narrative (Genesis 6-8) The Selling of Joseph (Genesis 37:25-28, 36) Abraham's Half-Truth: passing Sarah off as his sister (Genesis 12: 10-20; 20:1-18; 26:6-11) Today, largely as the result of a better understanding of Ancient Near Eastern Literary styles and culture, source critics no longer consider doublets as strong evidence of source documents; the alleged doublets were not a consequence of multiple authors, but instead a reflection of literary devices typical of that period. The following summarizes the problems that destructive critics face in light of Ancient Near Eastern Literary styles and culture.

1. Misunderstanding Ancient Near Eastern Literary styles: repetition. Ancient Hebrew used restatement as a literary style in which the essential elements of an account is repeated with some variation and introduces more specific information to emphasize or focus on the relevant elements of the account. In comparative Near Eastern manuscripts (such as the Gebel Barkla Stela or royal inscriptions from Urartu, etc.), this literary pattern is observed as the author (scribe) makes a general statement or praise about a ruler and then duplicates (repeats or restates) the account with more specific and important details. For example, in the beginning of the Gebel Barkla Stela, there are general terms describing royal supremacy, and immediately following is a restatement that specifically elaborates on the triumphs in Syria-Palestine. In another example, the royal inscriptions from Urartu have the initial paragraph attributing the defeat of certain lands to the god Haldi and then the same victories are repeated in detail as achieved by the king.

2. Misunderstanding Ancient Near Eastern Literary grammar: paratactic sentence structure. Ancient Hebrew sentence structure was usually paratactic, which meant that

whole sentences were connected with the conjunction "and." Unfamiliar with this fact, source critics saw this sentence structure as a method used by redactors to join fragments from diverse sources. A good example of a paratactic sentence is the literal translation of Genesis 1:1-4, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters and God said, "Let there be light" and there was light and God saw that the light was good and God separated the light from the darkness. With the use of "and", ancient Hebrew rarely used subordinate clauses or phrases when the sentence expressed several ideas. Thus, the relationships of the ideas were left to the reader. In modern Bibles, translators replaced the paratactic sentence structure with modern forms and expressed the relationships between ideas. For example: if there was contrast, "and" was replaced with "but", if there was a purpose, "and" was replaced with "in order to" or "so that", if there was a temporal relation, "and" was replaced with "when" or "while" or "then."

This article is from: [www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system\\_moses/dh11.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system_moses/dh11.aspx) Literary Analysis of Genesis Doublets: Parallel or Duplicate Accounts (Doublets) (page 2) Genesis 1:14 is a biblical example of how modern translations approach paratactic sentences. The bold font indicates the words supplied by translators: Then God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years; (Genesis 1:14)

3. Misunderstanding Ancient Near Eastern Literary style: parallelism. Ancient Hebrew used parallelism for both poetic and non-poetic purposes. This involved clauses that were paired to invite comparison and thus convey more descriptive information. Another form of Hebrew parallelism is found in the literary device called a chiasm. Based on the Greek letter X (chi) describing the x-shaped literary structure, a chiasm is an inverted parallel literary structure where the central idea is located where the inflection or turning point has occurred. Hence, the ideas of this structure take the following sequential form A-B-C-X-C'-B'-A' where X is the central or important message.

4. Misunderstanding Ancient Near Eastern Literary forms. Within Genesis, the Hebrew term tôledôt (or toledoth) is found twelve times and establishes a structural and directional unity that has been ignored by source critics. Based on the Hebrew root word for "giving birth," tôledôt means "generations," which, in other modern translations, may be seen as "account" or "story." The term tôledôt provides a structural unity to Genesis by serving as an introduction. It introduces the next section, often a genealogical list or historical account of the person named next to the term tôledôt. When examining the subjects associated with each tôledôt, they form a histo-theological division: five form the Primeval history or Covenants with Adam and Noah – human initiatives that caused failure, and five form the Ancestral history of Israel or Covenants with Abraham and his seed – God's initiatives that redeem man from his failures. This symmetry adds to the literary beauty of Genesis, but is lost by source critics. The term tôledôt provides directional unity to Genesis by delineating the scope of the passage. The first tôledôt begins with the widest scope: creation of the universe, and the last tôledôt ends with the smallest: the single human progenitor of Israel. Verses containing the tôledôt Primeval History / Covenants with Adam and Noah Genesis 2:4 Account of Heavens and Earth - Creation and Expulsion 4) This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that the LORD God made earth and heaven.

Genesis 5:1 Generations of Adam - Adam to Noah genealogy and Sons of God 1) This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. Genesis 6:9 Generations of Noah - Flood and Rebirth 9) These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God. Genesis 10:1 Generations of Shem, Ham, Japheth - Table of Nations and Tower of Babel 1) Now these are the records of the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah; and sons were born to them after the flood. This article is from: [www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system\\_moses/dh11.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system_moses/dh11.aspx) Literary

Analysis of Genesis Doublets: Parallel or Duplicate Accounts (Doublets) (page 3)  
Genesis 11:10 Generations of Shem - Shem to Terah genealogy 10) These are the records of the generations of Shem. Shem was one hundred years old, and became the father of Arpachshad two years after the flood; Ancestral History / Covenants with Abraham and His Seed Genesis 11:27 Generations of Terah – Abraham's story 27) Now these are the records of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot. Genesis 25:12 Generations of Ishmael – Ishmael's genealogy 12) Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham Genesis 25:19 Generations of Isaac – Jacob's story 19) Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; Genesis 36:1 Generations of Esau – Esau's genealogy

1) Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, Edom). Genesis 37:2 Generations of Jacob – Joseph's story

2) These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. The only instance where tôledôt was used as a conclusion instead of introduction Genesis 10:32 32) These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood. The only instance where tôledôt was used as a restatement of a prior tôledôt (Gen 36:1 – Details of Esau's genealogy) Genesis 36:9 9)

These then are the **records of the generations** of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir. Another literary form that source critics have not noticed is the systematic method by which the unchosen descendant of an ancestor is treated. The genealogy of the non-elect is typically given before the heir. For example, Cain is given before Seth (Gen 4:17-26), Japheth and Ham is given before Shem (Gen 10:1-4, 6-8, and 21-22), and Ishmael before Isaac (Gen 25:12-15, 19), and Esau before Jacob (Gen 36:1-10; 37:2). Genesis 4:17-26 - Cain before Seth 17) Cain had relations with his wife and she conceived, and gave birth to Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son. 18) Now to Enoch was born Irad, and Irad became the father of Mehujael, and Mehujael became the father of Methushael, and Methushael became the father of Lamech. 19) Lamech took to himself two wives: the name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other, Zillah. 20) Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. 21) His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. 22) As for Zillah, This article is from: [www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system\\_moses/dh11.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system_moses/dh11.aspx) Literary Analysis of Genesis Doublets: Parallel or Duplicate Accounts (Doublets) (page

4) she also gave birth to Tubal-cain, the forger of all implements of bronze and iron; and the sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah.

23) Lamech said to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, listen to my voice, you wives of Lamech, give heed to my speech, for I have killed a man for wounding me; and a boy for striking me;

24) if Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."

25) Adam had relations with his wife again; and she gave birth to a son, and named him Seth, for, she said, "God has appointed me another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him."

26) To Seth, to him also a son was born; and he called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the LORD. Genesis 10:1-4, 6-8, and 21-22 - Japheth and Ham before Shem

1) Now these are the records of the generations of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah; and sons were born to them after the flood.

2) The sons of Japheth were Gomer and Magog and Madai and Javan and Tubal and Meshech and Tiras.

3) The sons of Gomer were Ashkenaz and Riphath and Togarmah.

4) The sons of Javan were Elishah and Tarshish, Kittim and Dodanim.

6) The sons of Ham were Cush and Mizraim and Put and Canaan.

7) The sons of Cush were Seba and Havilah and Sabtah and Raamah and Sabteca; and the sons of Raamah were Sheba and Dedan.

8) Now Cush became the father of Nimrod; he became a mighty one on the earth.

21) Also to Shem, the father of all the children of Eber, and the older brother of Japheth, children were born.

22) The sons of Shem were Elam and Asshur and Arpachshad and Lud and Aram. Genesis 25:12-15, 19 - Ishmael before Isaac 12) Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham; 13) and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam 14) and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, 15) Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. 19) Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; Genesis 36:1-10; 37:2 - Esau before Jacob 1) Now these are the records of the generations of Esau (that is, Edom). 2) Esau took his wives from the daughters of Canaan: Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite, and Oholibamah the daughter of Anah and the granddaughter of Zibeon the Hivite; 3) also Basemath, Ishmael's daughter, the sister of Nebaioth. 4) Adah bore Eliphaz to Esau, and Basemath bore Reuel, 5) and Oholibamah bore Jeush and Jalam and Korah. These are the sons of Esau who were born to him in the land of Canaan. 6) Then Esau took his

wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. 7) For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. 8) So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom. 9) These then are the records of the generations of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir. 10) These are the names of Esau's sons: Eliphaz the son of Esau's wife Adah, Reuel the son of Esau's wife Basemath. 37:2) These are the records of the generations of Jacob. Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth, along with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father. This article is from: [www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system\\_moses/dh11.aspx](http://www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system_moses/dh11.aspx) Literary Analysis of Genesis Doublets: Parallel or Duplicate Accounts (Doublets) (page 5) Thus doublets are intentionally used for a literary purpose and do not reflect the identification of sources in the manner of the Documentary Hypothesis.

Doublets are seemingly identical duplicative na

[http://www.lukeburrage.com/blog/archives/592#:~:text=In%20Genesis%2C%20and%20he%20other.and%20story%20elements%20are%20repeated.&text=These%20repeated%20story%20elements%20tie,of%20Isaac%20\(Genesis%2022\).](http://www.lukeburrage.com/blog/archives/592#:~:text=In%20Genesis%2C%20and%20he%20other.and%20story%20elements%20are%20repeated.&text=These%20repeated%20story%20elements%20tie,of%20Isaac%20(Genesis%2022).)

#### Conclusion

Some repeated story elements may be intentional variations within the text by the authors of J and P. However, many repeats within the same source are flagged up by the authors themselves, trying to avoid confusion, rather than trying to be subtle with just wording or thematic similarities.

Other repeated story elements may be common to all fathers in Canaan. But if this was the case, why are so many repeated stories presented as notable events, rather than normal, everyday occurrences? The answer is that each event is extraordinary for people in 900 BCE, so much so that when they happened to each of the patriarchs they had to be included in the narrative.

The sheer number of unifying elements seems to hint at a single underlying identity and story shared by Abram, Isaac, and Jacob.

## **Q: HOW DO YOU HANDLE THE VIOLENCE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?**

7 Keys to Understanding Violence in the Old Testament

### **1) Jesus and the New Testament writers never complain about the violence in the Old Testament.**

That should flash at least a yellow, caution-light on our hasty dismissal of the Old Testament. Are WE more morally sensitive than Jesus and the New Testament writers? Did they see something in the Old Testament that we miss?

### **2) The land of Canaan was not inhabited by a uniform, indigenous population.**

Secular historians and the Bible itself tell us that the land of Canaan at the time of the Israelite settlement was not inhabited by a uniform, indigenous population. Canaan was a crossroads and a diverse culture of many different groups: You know, all the “-ites”-Canaanites, Amorites, Perizites, stalactites, stalagmites... If you'd asked a random inhabitant of Canaan “Whose land is this?” You'd have gotten different answers. It was a no-mans-land.

### **3) Israelites' ancestors lived in Canaan for centuries before their sojourn in Egypt.**

Genesis 12-50 tells us the Israelites' ancestors had actually lived in Canaan for centuries before their sojourn in Egypt. They were not outsiders trying to take a land from its original owners. In fact, the Pharaohs of Egypt would have seen no real difference between Canaanites and Israelites. They came from the same place, spoke the same language, had the same physical anthropology, i.e. they looked alike. So there is no parallel between the book of Joshua and, say, the European settlers in North America displacing the earlier inhabitants.

### **4) Canaan was an unstable and violent region.**

This a biggee. By Joshua's day, Canaan had long suffered under a harsh political system. Canaan in the time of Moses and Joshua had been ruled for centuries by Egypt. Egypt had been ruled by foreign kings known as the Hyksos, who possibly came from Syria-Palestine. A native Egyptian dynasty expelled these foreign kings, pursuing them into Canaan. To ensure they never came back, Egypt annexed Canaan and ruled it with two aims: first, never-ever would Canaan be a corridor for anyone attacking Egypt!

Second, Pharaoh exploited Canaan economically. He administered Canaan by appointing rulers in the top 30 or so towns. They managed the country like a giant agricultural plantation, a kind of “factory farm.” They focused on producing a small number of crops valued by the Egyptian upper classes, mainly olives and a type of grape that thrived only in Canaan.

This reality had serious consequences. The focus on massive production of a few crops not only risked depleting the land, it also destroyed the locally integrated, self-sustaining economies of small villages and towns throughout the hill country. These communities needed mix of farming and herding just to survive. The Egyptians also yanked the best of the work force out of these towns and villages to toil as forced labor, emptying the rural hill country of Canaan. Many people from Canaan, not just future Israelites, wound up slaves in Egypt. Settlement patterns in Canaan about 1300 B.C., just before the exodus and conquest, show the central hill country of Canaan was largely emptied out.

Under this kind of regime, Canaan was unstable and violent. The city rulers fought each other, hired mercenaries, sometimes cruelly treated the local populace. Bandits terrorized the highways. Men stripped of their land and living gathered around warlords, some of whom were good men, others just thugs or gangsters.

So, by the time Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan, the place was dark and bloody ground. It's just possible that, far from being seen as invaders, Joshua and the Israelites represented the arrival of order, justice, and even peace.

### **5) The Israelites were not a militarized nation.**

The Old Testament shows us that, even in the conquest stories, the Israelites were not a militarized nation. While other nations boasted of their weapons and crack troops, the Israelites were not a professional army. Likewise, the Israelites were not a huge group. The idea found in some textbooks that there were at least 2.5 million Israelites comes from a misunderstanding of the Hebrew terminology for numbers. Archaeologists tell us that likely weren't 2.5 million people living in all of Canaan and Syria combined!

The books of Deuteronomy, Joshua & Judges stress that, from a military perspective, the Israelites were out-numbered, out-maneuvered and out-gunned. After Joshua, they had no central authority. They were only a coalition of tribes, often divided, often untrue to their own religion. The Bible says they needed miraculous divine intervention just to survive. Hardly the profile of a nation of bloodthirsty, imperialists!

### **6) Israel did not have advanced weapons or military strategy.**

Warlike nations, and all of Israel's ancient neighbors, gloried in their superior weapons and firepower. Images of Pharaoh portray him holding his hapless enemies by the hair and smiting them with a mace or battle axe. Or, we see Pharaoh thundering along in his war chariot, horses' reins tied around his waist, unleashing arrows at cringing, fleeing foes. The Old Testament, in contrast, stresses that the Israelites were poorly armed, confronting fortified cities or huge chariot forces on foot. The Old Testament also emphasizes Israel's lack of metal workers. Again, not exactly a warrior nation.

### **7) The ancient Near East was a harsh and violent world.**

Finally, the world of Moses, Joshua, Gideon and David was a world of unspeakable violence perpetrated by massive, well-armed professional armies. The kings of Egypt, Asia Minor and Mesopotamia gloried in their brutality and savagery. In countless inscriptions throughout the history of the ancient Near East, the great kings boasted of boring through their enemies' bodies, ripping their entrails out, galloping their horses and chariots through the gore of enemy bodies, splashing through enemy blood as if crossing a river, impaling thousands of "rebels" on stakes around conquered cities, flaying the skin off of their defeated enemies in full view of their families, and hideously mutilating the dead. And you know, almost nobody in the ancient Near East found this shocking. Rather, most thought it glorious proof that the gods had favored the king. Compared to the graphic detail, intensity, and sheer mass of these ancient descriptions, the Old Testament looks rather tame, even modest.

Whatever problems we might have with the violence in the Old Testament, it was one who claimed to be the fulfillment of the entire Old Testament, Jesus, whose Hebrew name was Joshua, who appealed constantly to the OT witness. Schooled in the Old Testament, Jesus called his people to love their enemies and to be peacemakers, not in spite of his Old Testament heritage, but because of it.

That's something to think about.

#### Thinking Through Old Testament Violence

1. We can *reject* the depictions of God here as inconsistent with God as revealed in Jesus. This approach considers any violent descriptions of God as human projections onto God, which God puts up with (accommodation) until he can get his real message through to thick and thuggish humankind (progressive revelation). Greg Boyd, for example, employs a "Cruciform Hermeneutic" centred on the non-violent God revealed in Jesus Christ, which then requires many Old Testament texts to be reevaluated to address their sinful distortions of God's true character.

There is some truth to this kind of approach (it's called the "Old" Testament for a reason). We certainly do need to read these accounts in the light of Christ's ultimate revelation. For example, God's election of Israel seems narrowly nationalistic and exclusive, until we discover that their election was always ultimately part of God's plan to bring Jew and Gentile together in Christ. Overall, however, this approach is to be rejected because it does not do full justice to the complexity of the God who is revealed in Christ: the prince of peace is also the judge of the

world (John 5:27). The reason why Christians can embrace nonviolence *now* is precisely because God will soon judge the world in Jesus Christ.

2. We can *reinterpret* the descriptions of violence to make them less confronting. This approach looks closely at the context of what is commanded in order to show that the commands are not as genocidal as they at first appear.

The word translated “utterly destroy” or “annihilate” or “devote to destruction” is *herem*, sometimes translated as a “ban”. While physical violence may be involved, simply killing people is not the goal. The emphasis often seems to be on the inhabitants being forced to leave (“driven out”) rather than being systematically killed (Judges 1:33, as in Exodus 23:23-33 and 34:11-16). This explains the otherwise puzzling prohibitions on marrying the Canaanites: who are they marrying if everyone is dead?

Recent studies in comparative literature have even suggested that the extreme language of the biblical texts (“kill every living thing”) is not intended literally, but reflects a particular genre of war report which employs hyperbole to describe definitive victory. It is like saying that Hawthorn “decimated Collingwood”: it doesn’t literally mean they killed every tenth player. Judges is describing, using the vocabulary of the day, decisive victory in a war, not ethnic cleansing or genocide.

Some archaeological evidence backs this up, suggesting that the targets of violence were military forts rather than well populated civilian towns. This toned down interpretation of the commands might explain why there is little archaeological evidence that total destruction of the cities always took place. The conquest, as Tim Escott puts it:

... was a convincing subjugation of the promised land, involving the destruction of key military strongholds, armies, and leadership, along with the driving out of much of the population.

This clarifies that God is *not* commanding genocide, nor inciting violence for violence’s sake. Women and children may have been collateral damage in these battles, but they were probably not the targets.

The surrounding *biblical* context also suggests that mass killing is not the goal but a last resort. Some of God’s enemies choose to surrender and are saved: for example the men from Bethel (Judges 1:25), and Rahab in Jericho (Joshua 6:25). This option rules out the motive of genocide or ethnic cleansing. Keep in mind that the Israelites expect to receive exactly the same punishments themselves if they misbehave (e.g. Achan in Joshua 7).

We do need to read the events carefully in their context to be clear about what *is*, and *isn’t*, being described. However, this kind of clarification does not address the complaint that God is still commanding dispossession and, in at least some cases, killing.

3. We can assert God’s *right* to judge the world

This approach essentially bites the bullet: why *can’t* God use violence as part of his divine judgment? God gives life, and it is his to take away. “God has repaid me for what I have done”, says Adoni-bezek when his thumbs are cut off (Judges 1:7).

God is not violent in his character; he is not like the Canaanite gods who delight in human sacrifice. But God is just, and he does confront evil with righteous judgment and sometimes force. The wickedness of the Canaanites is a reason for their destruction (see Deuteronomy 9:5). They sacrifice their children in the fire to false gods (Deuteronomy 12:31). The Amorites are not destroyed until their iniquity reaches its peak (Genesis 15:16).

Meredith Kline points out that it is only God's grace that has held back his final judgment on earth, and so the killing of the Canaanites is merely a pulling back of mercy. Everyone is already getting better than they deserve.

This approach is simple, even if it is hard to swallow. It comes down to a basic presuppositional question: is God allowed to judge the world, give and take life, and determine the course of human wars? If not, then no explanation will satisfy.

I would affirm God's right to judge. However, on its own, asserting God's right to do what he does leaves us with more questions. Isn't God's desire also for *mercy* (Deuteronomy 4:31, Psalm 145:8, Ezekiel 33:11)? Why punish *these* seven nations and not the many others who were guilty of comparable sin?

#### 4. We can *re-contextualise* the violence within the story of the Bible

This approach sees the violence in the context of God's bigger plan and character, climaxing in the cross.

It's important to acknowledge our different reactions to violence. I'm shocked by it because I live such a blessedly sheltered life. The world of the text reflects the realities of life for most people who have ever lived: war, instability, and constant struggle for survival.

Our reactions can serve the book's message. *Judges* is *supposed* to be horrific. Things are not the way they are meant to be. *Judges* is the dark sequel to the optimism of *Joshua*—illustrating, as Daniel Block puts it, the “the Canaanisation of Israelite society during the period of the settlement”. The external threats becomes internal threats, as Israel becomes more and more like the surrounding nations. The actions of the judges are often very ethically mixed, and there are few if any heroes.

Israel's moral landslide illustrates precisely why God warned against coexisting with the Canaanites in the land. Total dismantling of the Canaanite civilisation was necessary to protect Israel against becoming corrupted by the infrastructure of toxic idolatry. Yet Israel failed (Judges 2:1–13). They covenanted with the people rather than driving them out. This tolerance of idolatrous practices including child sacrifice would eventually infiltrate Israel's worship (Jeremiah 7:18, Ezekiel 20:31).

**Israel's moral landslide illustrates precisely why God warned against coexisting with the Canaanites in the land. Total dismantling of the Canaanite civilisation was necessary to protect Israel against becoming corrupted by the infrastructure of toxic idolatry.**

The Israelites are never given a blank cheque for killing whomever they like, whenever they like. This is a pivotal moment in history, when judgment is being brought on the land, and God's plans to save the whole world are being enacted. This requires *herem* (e.g. Judges 1:17) in order to mitigate the risk of corruption of the pilot project Israel. It's a matter of national security,

but also the worldwide mission: if Israel is contaminated at this stage by false worship and idolatry then they cannot do their job as God's spiritual lifeboat for the world.

God's judgment of the Canaanites is one part of his plan to redeem humanity from within the mess of human history. It is not indiscriminate violence. Nor is it simply racially based—the Israelites will experience the same judgment as the Canaanites in 586 BC at the hands of the Babylonians when they fail God's covenant.

For me, reading the Old Testament through the lens of the cross reveals a God who is *anti*-violent, rather than *non*-violent. It is not in his nature to destroy, but to redeem. He is not bloodthirsty like the Canaanite gods, but nor will he sit by passively while evil takes over his world.

God does not delight in the death of the wicked, but he is not above getting his hands dirty to win back his world. When he uses force it is as a last resort, a measured response to restrain wickedness. He destroys only ever with tears in his eyes, and with a view to future salvation. Christians do well to remember that most of us, as gentiles, belong on the Canaanite side of the story in Judges. We are living proof of the grand scope and glorious mercy of God's rescue mission.

### **Thinking Through Old Testament Violence**

How do we work through a book as horrifically violent as Judges? Just as in Michael Rosen's classic children's story, I would say: "we can't go over it, we can't go under it, oh no! we have to go through it!".

I would suggest that as Christians we cannot *simply reject* the witness of scripture in the Old Testament. Jesus treated the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God, and so must we (Matthew 5:17). It may be necessary to *re-interpret* the texts in context to understand exactly what is and isn't being commanded. We affirm that God is *right* in judging the world. Ultimately we need to *re-contextualise* the violence in light of the cross of Christ.

## **Q: TELL US YOUR VIEW OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN ISAIAH 53.**

### The Suffering Servant and Isaiah 53: A Conversation with Darrell Bock

What biblical passages and traditions is Isaiah 53 drawing on? How does it connect to the rest of the Old Testament?

Isaiah 53 is unique in the Old Testament in portraying an individual who suffers for sin by making reference to a guilt offering (Isa. 53:10; see Lev. 5:14-6:7 [=5:14-26]) and who does so after being rejected by his own people ("esteemed him stricken" [Isa. 53:3-4]), much like a leper was to be separated from his people (see the reference to the deformity he was perceived to have; cf. Isa. 52:14, 53:2). Isaiah 53 draws on texts that picture sacrifice for sin, the move to ritual purity, and the image of a leper rejected. The passage also, along with Psalm 118:26, pictures a move from rejection to exaltation that the New Testament uses to describe how Jesus fulfilled God's plan. Most people know about Isaiah 53, but I think Psalm 118 in this role is not as appreciated.

Did Isaiah consciously anticipate the Messiah?

His text anticipates a decisive delivering figure of the end who suffers and then is exalted. We call such a figure messianic, even though Isaiah does not use that specific term, because the role and timing now fits. In context, Isaiah's remarks look ultimately to the decisive deliverance of God's salvation of his people, even though there are elements of his picture of the Servant in other texts ([Isaiah 42:1-4; 19:1-6; 50:4-9; 61:1-3](#)) that portray a prophetic figure ([Isa. 61](#)) or that point to the role of Israel as the Servant ([Isa. 49](#)).

At the end of Isaiah, the individual servant takes on the role that Israel as a nation failed to achieve. Nonetheless, the Servant in [Isaiah 53](#) cannot be the people or the remnant, because he is said to be cut off from the people ([Isa 53:8](#)) and is said to die for our sins and iniquities ([Isa 53:5, 11](#)). This cannot be the nation, because how can the Servant be cut off from himself? In addition, he is a righteous sufferer. That cannot be the nation, as Isaiah has portrayed the nation as being in sin (just look at [Isaiah 58](#)).

Christian readers today directly link the servant to Jesus on the cross. Who did Isaiah and his first readers have in mind?

Isaiah describes a suffering figure who dies for the sins of those who reject him and then is exalted by God. No specific name for this person is given other than to call him the Servant of God. His role is simply described. Jesus fits the portrait. Outside of Jesus himself, the New Testament says this in several texts ([Rom. 15:21](#); [1 Pet. 2:21-25](#); [Matt. 8:17](#); [Acts 8:32-33](#)). There are even more allusions to the passage. In Paul alone, one can mention allusions in [Romans 15:21](#); [1 Corinthians 2:9](#); [Romans 10:16](#); [Romans 4:25](#); [1 Corinthians 5:7](#); [15:3](#); and [Romans 5:19](#).

Did Jesus understand himself to be fulfilling Isaiah 53? If so, what's the biblical evidence? Yes, Jesus described his mission as involving his being a ransom for many in [Mark 10:45](#). At the Last Supper, Jesus mentions dying for many, using the language of this text. He also speaks of being reckoned with criminals as the Isaiah text describes ([Isaiah 53:11-12](#); [Mark 14:22-25](#); [Matthew 26:26-29](#); [Luke 22:37](#)). So the idea of being the Servant comes from him. Jesus also cited [Isaiah 61:1-2](#) in [Luke 4:18-19](#), which is a text most tie to Isaiah's servant imagery. Jesus declared that he fulfilled the mission of this text of bringing the gospel to those in need of it.

You contribute a chapter on "[Isaiah 53](#) in the Book of Acts." What is the function of [Isaiah 53](#) in Acts?

It shows Jesus died an unjust death as Isaiah predicted. He also died without fighting the charges. This actually fits how [Luke 23](#) and the Passion narrative portrays Jesus' death. Six times in [Luke 23](#) Jesus is said to be innocent of any crime worthy of death. Yet the injustice is that despite Pilate's recognition of this, Jesus is put to death. I think this dimension of the use of [Isaiah 53](#) often goes unnoticed and is underappreciated. The injustice of Jesus' death is prevalent also in the preaching of Acts, as Jesus was put to death although God had attested to his position ([Acts 2:24-26](#); [10:38](#), [40-42](#)).

What are some common evangelical misunderstandings about [Isaiah 53](#)?

We do not appreciate how much of this chapter Jesus fulfills. We might see a verse or two, but the entire passage summarizes Jesus' death and the reaction that produced it. All this comes some 700 years before Jesus was born! That makes [Isaiah 53](#) quite an unusual text. That is why we wrote about it.

Evangelicals are also slow to see how the Servant moves from a picture of Israel to the picture of an individual as one moves through the various Servant passages. That movement is important to understand in light of Jewish claims that the text is about the nation, citing Isaiah 49:3. Failure to see this movement from nation to individual blocks a good conversation about who the servant is as we move through these texts and the picture narrows to an individual who is said to restore Israel. This is a reason several chapters in the book discuss Jewish views of this text, revealing how Judaism sees this text and how to address the interpretive issues Jewish people who know Isaiah often raise.

### Who Is the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?

“The Suffering Servant” is a famous passage from Isaiah 53, which Christians claim is a messianic prophecy about Jesus. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus quotes from this passage and suggests it’s about him:

“It is written: “And he was numbered with the transgressors”; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment.” —Luke 22:37

The gospel writers and other New Testament authors quoted from this passage several times, explaining that Jesus fulfilled the various prophecies contained within it.

But some people claim this passage wasn’t a prophecy at all, and the Suffering Servant is actually the author of Isaiah. Or perhaps it’s the prophet, Jeremiah. Or a specific leper, whom the Babylonian exiles had seen die. In other words, it was about a real person who existed at the time the Book of Isaiah was written.

But there’s a problem with these alternative answers, and if you look at the whole passage about the Suffering Servant, it becomes clear why this cannot be about anyone else but Jesus Christ.

## **Q: HOW ARE THE MINOR PROPHETS STILL APPLICABLE FOR OUR SPIRITUAL LIVES TODAY?**

### The Minor Prophets: God Still Speaks | Christian Bible Studies

The Minor Prophets form the last 12 books of the Old Testament. Theologian James Montgomery Boice comments on how the Minor Prophets dramatize the character of God as few other books do: "They highlight God's sovereignty ... holiness ... [and] love .... In the Minor Prophets, we will hear the voice of God speaking to us in a fresh way ... as individuals and as a spiritual fellowship in the Church."

### Session One

#### **Hosea**

*The world's greatest love story*

Hosea may be the strangest story of "one who speaks for God." Israel's desperate situation is encapsulated for the nation in the marriage of Hosea and Gomer. Hosea is told to go and buy

his wife back from the state of prostitution she has entered. This becomes a parable of Israel's faithless relationship with God. Yet God is willing to love her back to a position of being faithful. God is not silent! He still speaks to us today. This study from the Book of Hosea looks at God's passionate love for his people.

## Session Two

### **Joel**

#### *A wake-up call*

We know very little about Joel as a person, but he was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom in the days of King Uzziah—days of unparalleled prosperity for Israel and Judah. The Book of Joel also speaks of a natural disaster that would foreshadow the ultimate Day of the Lord.

## Session Three

### **Amos**

#### *How God sees us today*

In his commentary *The Minor Prophets*, James Montgomery Boice writes, "The Book of Amos is one of the most readable, relevant, and moving portions of the Word of God. But in much of church history (until very recent times) little or no attention has been paid to it. Why? It is because the book speaks powerfully against social injustices and religious formalism, and many who would otherwise read the book have been implicated in such sins and are condemned by it." This study explores the issues of social justice, spiritual poverty, and hypocrisy addressed in the Book of Amos.

## Session Four

### **Obadiah**

#### *How God deals with pride*

In the introduction to this study series on the Minor Prophets we asked, "When did you last read Obadiah?" Sometimes we think, What message could we possibly find for today in a book like Obadiah? The Book of Obadiah has only 21 verses, and the theme of the book is the denunciation of Edom. In this study, we'll see why that matters to us.

## Session Five

## **Jonah**

### *One man's struggle with God*

This is a story about the mercy of God to a people who did not deserve his mercy. It's about someone's struggle to understand how God could care for and love people who did not know him. On a human level, we may want to limit God's grace to those whom we think really deserve it. But God's love is wider than that. It is universal, and even includes people we may not like. The book also teaches us about God's sovereignty and our obedience. When we try to go in the opposite direction from God's way, then God may go to extraordinary lengths to get our attention.

## Session Six

### **Micah**

### *What God expects of us*

Micah 5:2 is perhaps one of the few verses we know from the Book of Micah. It appears in the prophecies of the Christmas story as told by Matthew (Matt. 2:6). However, there is a lot more to Micah than just this one verse. This study will look at Micah's message to Israel about God's judgment, hope, and repentance.

## Session Seven

### **Nahum**

### *What hurts the heart of God?*

Judah and its capitol, Jerusalem, were now threatened by Assyria, who had a reputation for terrible cruelty in war. About 700 B.C., Nineveh had been made the capitol city in the Assyrian empire. While Jonah had pronounced its destruction, the people had repented and the judgment on the city was suspended. However, eventually Nineveh returned to its wicked ways and brutality. The focal point of the message of Nahum is God's judgment on Nineveh.

## Session Eight

### **Habakkuk**

### *Dear God, I have a question...*

"If you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving," wrote author and pastor Frederick Buechner. If you have ever thought or asked, "Why does God do this?" or, "That is not fair," then you must read the Book of Habakkuk. This prophet goes to God with his doubts and faith

struggles. For a book that was written in Judah more than 2,500 years ago, Habakkuk has a contemporary message that addresses modern problems.

## Session Nine

### **Zephaniah**

*How God works in our lives*

What's that old campfire song that goes, "[Next] verse same as the first, a little bit louder and a whole lot worse"? Maybe it's part of the Minor Prophet training manual. Zephaniah summarizes the preceding prophets and keeps bringing the message of the Day of the Lord.

## Session Ten

### **Haggai**

*How to finish the job when enthusiasm fades*

Next to Obadiah, Haggai is the shortest book in the Old Testament, but its brevity does not mean that its message should be ignored. Haggai clearly shows what happens when we disobey God, and what can happen when we turn back to an attitude of obedience.

## Session Eleven

### **Zechariah**

*Being God's people in today's world*

James Montgomery Boice says that Zechariah is one of the most difficult Old Testament books to study. Yet Zechariah's message and ministry should encourage anyone who is trying to do a work for Christ in any age.

## Session Twelve

### **Malachi**

*Giving God nothing less than our best*

After the prophet Malachi speaks, there is no word from God. For 400 years. The silence would be deafening. The next time Israel would hear from God? "Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," John the Baptist proclaims (John 1:29). This is the final book in the Old Testament, and it is also the last study in this series on the Minor Prophets. One of the interesting themes that we find woven into the book is a series of statements made by God, and

each one is responded to by a question that begins "How ... ?" These express a challenge to God's statements, almost demanding that he give an account of himself and his activity.

<https://usmissions.ag.org/sharedcontent/influence2/How-to-Preach-from-the-Minor-Prophets?D=%7B4B4FD4E1-B62F-46BB-B5DF-6939D64C2F9D%7D>

### **Finding Their Place**

The Minor Prophets make up nearly one-fifth of the entire Bible, and still they occupy a place in biblical history that is kind of murky. The stories of Genesis and Exodus are well known. Tales of David and the early kingdom are quite popular. The Gospels are widely studied, as are the New Testament epistles. But what about this slice of prophecy at the end of the Old Testament? Most churchgoers will admit they know little about them.

To begin clarifying them, find the place the Minor Prophets take up in Scripture and biblical history. At first, that may seem simple enough. The 12 books are right in the middle of your copy of the Bible, after all. But it can get complicated.

Which comes first, Zechariah or Zephaniah? Does Habakkuk come before or after Hosea? I will admit that years ago I learned a jingle to remember the order of these books, a song I still sing in my head today to keep my place in the Minor Prophets.

More important than their canonical order is their place in history. Jonah is likely the first book written, occurring during the crucial period just before the exile. Jonah is also unique among the Minor Prophets since it's a story rather than a collection of oracles. But it is similar in theme to the other books, hinting at justice and repentance, for instance.

These books are not only well written, with deep theological insights, but they also offer hope for a bright future.

Locating the rest of the Minor Prophets historically can be either quite simple or nearly impossible. Amos and Hosea ministered in the northern kingdom of Israel prior to the exile, just like Jonah. And Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah ministered in the southern kingdom of Judah. Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi are the lone post-exilic prophets, contemporaneous with Nehemiah and Ezra.

But what of Obadiah and Joel? Trying to find dates for these books is pretty difficult. Although some date them as the earliest of the 12, they may have been written as late as Malachi, traditionally the final Minor Prophet.

This may not seem important, but laying out how the Bible unfolds from start to finish and the stops along the way will help your audience understand the context of what they're reading. And that translates into spiritual growth for all your listeners.

### **Teach Biblical Literacy**

Teaching from the Minor Prophets is a great way to encourage biblical literacy. As you unpack any of these books, take a look at where they sit historically and point that out to your audience.

It takes a lot less time than you may think, but it can have a huge impact on their understanding. Think about using graphics such as maps or timelines to help.

Biblical literacy is declining in America. This is not just a history lesson, though. Leverage the content to explain the developing history of Israel throughout the Old Testament, especially the exile and return. And then relate these movements to spiritual equivalents in the New Testament.

### **Focus on Themes**

Another way to go deep in the Minor Prophets is to focus on the major themes of each book. While teaching the intricacies of the historical setting and oracles can be tedious, finding a theme and elevating it can help your audience focus.

Each book has at least one major theme, and many of them share the same ones. Passages like Amos 5:24 and Micah 6:8 teach us about the justice of God that is required of each believer. Zechariah 1:3 calls God's people to repentance. Joel 2 foresees the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Find a theme, and go all in.

### **Prophecy Lesson**

Another way to use the Minor Prophets is as a platform to explain prophecy. In a New Testament context, prophecy is a word of God delivered to His congregation. That reflects the understanding in Old Testament days as well.

While many of the Minor Prophets speak of a future time of judgment and blessing, that's not all prophecy is. There may be a predictive aspect, but there is also a proclamation being made. Avoid focusing too much on what is to come one day, and center the messages on how to respond now.

### **Find Christ Between the Lines**

Finally, look for how and where Jesus shows up. It is a standard approach to biblical interpretation to find Christ within all of the Bible, and the Minor Prophets are no exception. In Hosea, we are Christ's bride, and He is our Husband. In Joel, Jesus bears the name upon which we call and are saved. In Amos, He baptizes in fire and judgment. In Obadiah, the Lord is a refugee for those returning to Him. And on it goes.

These books are not only well written, with deep theological insights, but they also offer hope for a bright future. The outlook may be dim at times, but God always offers a way out. No matter how you plan on preaching from the Minor Prophets, make sure you end on a note of salvation from our Lord.

### ***Q: JAMES 2:24 SAYS, “A MAN IS JUSTIFIED BY WORKS AND NOT BY FAITH ALONE.” EXPLAIN.***

What Does It Mean that We're “Justified By Works”? (James 2)

## Two Piercing Questions

James signals the beginning of a new section with a vocative (“my brothers”) and two piercing questions (“What good is it . . . if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”). These questions function rhetorically as strong and memorable denials. They are akin to the declarative statements, “To say you have faith but not works is of no benefit. That kind of faith cannot save anyone.”

Readers should pay careful attention to the exact wording. James does not say that the person in question indeed has faith but not works. Instead, the person “says” he has faith (a deceived self-declaration). Furthermore, the ESV has rightly translated the sense of the article that appears in front of the word *pistis* (“faith”) in Greek. The question is not, “Shall faith be able to save him?” (so the DouayRheims translation), but rather, “Can *that* faith save him?” (ESV). The faith under discussion is not genuine saving faith but the inadequate self-declared faith from the first half of verse 14.

James next provides an illustration of the self-declared, inadequate, non-saving faith introduced in verse 14. The Greek language has several ways of introducing conditional sentences, and by the use of *ean* (“if”) in verse 15, James signals to his readers that he is describing a situation for hypothetical consideration (like the English introduction, “Let us imagine . . .”).

Despite James’s frequent generic use of *adelphos* (“brother”), *anthrōpos* “man,” and even *anēr* (normally “male,” but see 1:8), here he unexpectedly mentions both genders explicitly (“a brother or sister”; 2:15). Perhaps respecting the stricter segregation of the sexes of his ancient culture, James describes vividly a need that should be met with equal alacrity by both male and female readers.

Analogous to James’s vivid description of the rich man’s appearance (2:2), here he identifies the poor Christian brother or sister by his or her inadequate clothing and need for daily sustenance. The Greek word translated in 2:15 as “poorly clothed” is *gymnos*, which usually means “naked” but can also refer to the sparse coverings of the destitute (e.g., Matt. 25:36; LXX Job 31:19; Tob. 1:17).

*Genuine faith organically bears such fruit produced by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of those who have trusted in Christ for salvation.*

## Meeting Spiritual Needs

In verse 16, James continues to develop the plot of this hypothetical minidrama: “[Imagine] . . . one of you says to them . . .” James here skillfully weaves in a member of the ancient Christian community he is addressing. From a distance, this imagined interchange between the Christian of average means and the poor Christian seems warm and religiously appropriate. It recalls the spiritual greetings of the OT saints (e.g., *Ruth* 2:4). Certainly it is not wrong to wish someone the Lord’s blessing of peace or to wish for the Lord to provide him with the clothing, food, and shelter he needs (note the divine passive construction).<sup>1</sup>

But it *is* wrong, says James, to wish such blessings upon people when you yourself are able to help meet those material needs but do nothing beyond wagging your tongue in their direction. James speaks of “things needed for the body” ([James 2:16](#)), which reminds us that all humans have both a spirit/soul and a body. Humans have basic bodily needs (food, clothing, shelter), and a fundamental test of love is whether we give of our resources to help those in desperate need—especially a “brother or sister” (v. 15). The rhetorical question, “What good is that?” (v. 16b), repeats the exact Greek words that began verse 14 and makes unmistakably clear that this sad story is a visible example of empty, useless, non-saving faith.

## Dead Faith

James summarizes starkly in verse 17: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” It is important to note that the formula is not “faith + works = salvation.” James does not say that works need to be added to faith in order for one to be saved. Instead, his explicit language is that faith either “has” or “does not have” works (v. 17). Faith is inherently either dead or alive. If it is alive, it contains works organically in itself and thus overflows with them in the visible world. The alternative is a dead faith that does not contain such works. James’s contrast is between living and dead faith, not between a living faith that has works and a living faith that does not have works. Faith is like a seed. If a living seed is planted, it will produce a living plant. If a dead seed is planted, it will produce nothing.

In lively homiletic style, James introduces a potential objection in verse 18: “But someone will say, . . .” An interchange between an imaginary interlocutor and an author/speaker is called a *diatribe*. The diatribe style was common in ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric and is found also in Paul’s writings (e.g., [Rom. 9:19](#)). The interlocutor objects, “You have faith and I have works.” In this objection, the pronouns “you” and “I” are employed nonspecifically—i.e., as equivalent to “one person” or “another person.” In other words, the objector raises the question of whether “faith” and “works” are not just two separate, equally valid gifts. We might paraphrase his objection, “Why are you insisting that everyone has to be the same? Some people have faith; others have works!”

James’s verbal riposte skewers his opponent’s flawed perspective. He writes, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” ([James 2:18](#)). How can a dead faith with no works be demonstrated? A self-deceived declaration of having faith (v. 14) is certainly not admissible evidence!

The explicit language of “show” (Gk. *deiknymi*), used twice in verse 18b, again highlights that works are not being added to faith. Genuine saving faith “has” (Gk. *echō*; v. 17) works, and if such works are present, they will “show up” to be observed by others. Genuine saving faith is demonstrable through outward behavior. One is reminded of Jesus’ warning against false prophets:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. ([Matt. 7:15–20](#))

Although some scholars attempt to pit James and Paul against one another, in Galatians Paul presents a similar formula for genuine faith. Saving faith inevitably produces the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23). That is to say, genuine faith organically bears such fruit produced by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of those who have trusted in Christ for salvation. Likewise in Galatians, Paul says, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only *faith working through love*” (Gal. 5:6). “Faith working through love” seems to be a Pauline equivalent to James’s idea of “faith having works” (James 2:14).

## God Is One

In 2:19, James continues to respond to his self-deceived opponent. James writes, “You believe that God is one.” “God is one” is a literal translation of the famous Jewish confession known as the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4), which should likely be understood as an affirmation of monotheism. The fact that James chooses this well-known Jewish statement of faith is further evidence that the Christian congregation to which James writes is made up largely of persons of Jewish ethnicity (cf. James 1:1).

### Does James 2:24 Deny Justification by Faith Alone?

This question is not critical only today, but it was in the eye of the storm we call the Protestant Reformation that swept through and divided the Christian church in the sixteenth century. Martin Luther declared his position: Justification is by faith alone, our works add nothing to our justification whatsoever, and we have no merit to offer God that in any way enhances our justification. This created the worst schism in the history of Christendom.

In refusing to accept Luther’s view, the Roman Catholic Church excommunicated him, then responded to the outbreak of the Protestant movement with a major church council, the Council of Trent, which was part of the so-called Counter-Reformation and took place in the middle of the sixteenth century. The sixth session of Trent, at which the canons and decrees on justification and faith were spelled out, specifically appealed to James 2:24 to rebuke the Protestants who said that they were justified by faith alone: “You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.” How could James say it any more clearly? It would seem that that text would blow Luther out of the water forever.

Of course, Martin Luther was very much aware that this verse was in the book of James. Luther was reading Romans, where Paul makes it very clear that it’s not through the works of the law that any man is justified and that we are justified by faith and only through faith. What do we have here? Some scholars say we have an irreconcilable conflict between Paul and James, that James was written after

Paul, and James tried to correct Paul. Others say that Paul wrote Romans after James and he was trying to correct James.

I'm convinced that we don't really have a conflict here. What James is saying is this: If a person says he has faith, but he gives no outward evidence of that faith through righteous works, his faith will not justify him. Martin Luther, John Calvin, or John Knox would absolutely agree with James. We are not saved by a profession of faith or by a claim to faith. That faith has to be genuine before the merit of Christ will be imputed to anybody. You can't just say you have faith. True faith will absolutely and necessarily yield the fruits of obedience and the works of righteousness. Luther was saying that those works don't add to that person's justification at the judgment seat of God. But they do justify his claim to faith before the eyes of man. James is saying, not that a man is justified before God by his works, but that his claim to faith is shown to be genuine as he demonstrates the evidence of that claim of faith through his works.

## **Q: 1 TIM 3:15 CALLS THE CHURCH THE “PILLAR AND BUTTRESS OF THE TRUTH.” EXPLAIN.**

### The Church: A Pillar and Buttress of the Truth

**I am writing these things to you so that you may know how one ought to behave in the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.**• - 1 Timothy 3:14-15

**Definition:** A Pillar supports the roof and walls of a structure and a buttress supports a pillar, allowing it to stand stronger and higher. Therefore the Church is called to stand strong by supporting the truth of the gospel and sound doctrine.

**Key Thought:** The function of both a pillar and a buttress is to hold something other than itself up.

### **Pillar**

By all accounts, when Paul wrote this letter to his son in the faith, Timothy was the pastor of the Church in Ephesus. Paul's use of imagery would not be lost either on him or his congregation. Ephesus was the home of the great Temple of Diana (or Artemis), known as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

William Barclay describes this Temple as follows:

“One of its features was its pillars. It contained one hundred and twenty-seven pillars, every one of them the gift of a king. All were made of marble, and some were studded with jewels and overlaid with gold.”• (The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 89).

Knowing this background, Paul's obvious intention in describing the Church as a pillar is two fold. Firstly, He wishes to express the Church's immense dignity and value in the sight of God. Though often scorned by men, the Church is exceedingly precious and beautiful to Him. Secondly, the term "pillar" denotes the Church's function; that of holding up the truth of God to the world around her.

## **Buttress**

From the Ligonier Website:

Other translations use the word "foundation" in place of buttress, suggesting that the truth finds its grounding in the church, which is the Roman Catholic position. Yet Paul cannot be saying that the church establishes truth, as elsewhere he says the Word of God â€" the apostolic and prophetic writings â€" is the churchâ€™s foundation, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:19â€“20). As the second-century church father Irenaeus reminds us, â€œthe â€" pillar and groundâ€™ of the church is the gospel and the spirit of lifeâ€• (ACCNT, vol. 9, p. 178).

Buttress is a more appropriate term here because the apostle is emphasizing the way in which the church supports the truth. As the church faithfully obeys Scripture it lives out the truth and supports its claim that the gospel brings real change. When the church presents the gospel accurately it holds forth the truth to the world much as statues were displayed on pillars in the ancient world. The church is no afterthought but is established by the Fatherâ€™s plan and Jesusâ€™ work and used by the Holy Spirit to persuade the world of the love of God in Christ.

The NASB translates the final phrase of this verse as "the pillar and support of the truth." Concerning this, Dr. James White writes:

"The description of the Church as the "pillar and support of the truth" is thoroughly biblical and proper. There is, of course, a vast difference between recognizing and confessing the Church as the pillar and support of the truth, and confessing the Church to be the final arbiter of truth itself. A pillar holds something else up, and in this case, it is the truth of God. The Church as the body of Christ, presents and upholds the truth, but she remains subservient to it. The Church remains the bride of Christ, and as such, she listens obediently and intently to the words of her Lord Jesus Christ, and those words are found in Scripture itself." (The Roman Catholic Controversy, p. 58)

The great Reformer of Geneva, John Calvin, had a clear grasp of this issue:

"This, then, is the difference. Our opponents (speaking of the Roman Catholic Church) locate the authority of the Church outside God's Word, that is, outside of Scripture and Scripture alone. But we insist that it be attached to the Word and to not allow it to be separated from it. And what wonder if Christ's bride and pupil be subject to her spouse and teacher so that she pays constant and careful attention to His words. For this is the arrangement of a well-governed house. The wife obeys the husband's authority. This is the plan of a well-ordered school, that there the teaching of the schoolmaster alone should be heard. For this reason the Church should not be wise of itself, should not devise anything of itself but should set the limit of its own wisdom where Christ has made an end of speaking. In this way, the Church will distrust all the devisings of its own reason. But in those things where it rests upon God's Word, the Church will not waiver with any distrust or doubting but will repose in great assurance and firm constancy." (Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV:8:13)

God has given the Church immense dignity and has made her beautiful in His sight. As Paul stated elsewhere, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5: 25-27)

The Church is immensely precious to God, yet this is only half the story. She also has a distinct role to play in this world: holding up the truth of the word of God and the wonderful Gospel of Grace. That is her function, the very reason she exists in this world. When a so called "Church" fails to do this, or distorts the message of the Gospel, she can no longer be thought of as "the Church" at all. As Martin Luther made clear, "Justification by faith alone is the article upon which the Church stands or falls."

### The Pillar of the Truth by Steve Timmis

At first reading, 1 Timothy 3:15 seems somewhat disconcerting. In it, Paul is explaining to Timothy why he is writing to him. It concerns the church: "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth."

Did you catch what he wrote? "The church ... a pillar and buttress of the truth." As sound evangelicals, we know that Paul has to have that backwards, don't we? Surely, the gospel is that which gives solidity and shape to the church? Isn't the church built on the gospel and the product of the gospel?

Yes, undoubtedly yes. But that's not the point Paul is making in this context. He wants Timothy to get the church in Ephesus back on gospel tracks because she has departed from the gospel. The Pastoral Epistles are not simply manuals for church order. They are an urgent call to arms. Timothy needs to go to war because the gospel is at stake in this city and region.

But critical to this strategy is the church herself. The church, formed by the gospel, is for the gospel, and by her life and witness, she commends the gospel and is the primary apologetic for the gospel before the world. John Stott, in his commentary on 1 Timothy and Titus, put it well when he wrote, "The church depends on the truth for its existence; the truth depends on the church for its defence and proclamation."

In essence, Paul's letter to Timothy shows us just how important the gospel is for the church, but equally how important the church is for the gospel. Which, given the comment by Jesus in Matthew 5, isn't at all disconcerting. Just as Israel under the old covenant commended Yahweh to the surrounding nations by her covenant life, so the church of the new covenant commends Christ by her covenant life.

So here are the two takeaways:

### **ENSURE THAT THE GOSPEL IS AT THE HEART OF YOUR CHURCH**

Nothing else gives shape or stability to the church. Nothing else will sustain or nurture her. Nothing else gives her life or purpose. The church is all about Christ, and she is created by the gospel for Christ. Out of a deep love for Him, her ambition and passion will be His honor, reputation, and glory. The gospel isn't merely the way into the church; it is the means by which we remain the church and thrive as the church. Without the gospel of Christ, there is no church.

## **ENSURE THAT THE CHURCH IS AT THE HEART OF YOUR GOSPEL**

Unless we are convinced biblically and theologically about the centrality of the church in God's purposes, we won't be committed to living out that identity together for the fame and glory of Jesus. But consider how the church puts the gospel on display by means of three cardinal gospel truths:

### ***JUSTIFICATION***

The church is the community of the justified. Unlike those who do not know Christ, we don't need to justify ourselves by our relational performance. We relate to one another as brothers and sisters without fear or favor because Christ is our justification. Those relationships display that to a watching world.

### ***FORGIVENESS***

As the forgiven, we become the forgivers. People understand the doctrine more when they see it displayed in real time, up close and personal, in messy, disordered lives.

### ***RECONCILIATION***

It is in being reconciled to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit that we become a reconciled community. It is precisely because we are no longer strangers to God that we are no longer strangers to one another. When people witness our reconciliation, they see a tangible expression of what God has done for sinners in Christ.

### ***SHOWING THE GLORY OF THE GOSPEL***

When the church puts the gospel on display in this way, we draw people's attention to the gospel. Like a diamond lying in the corner of a room, we glimpse it out of the corner of our eye even when we're not looking for it. It catches our attention. So it is with the people of God. As we live out our shared life together in the public square and marketplace, at street level, others glimpse the glory of God even when they are not looking for it. That glimmer excites inquiry, and they begin to look for the reason for our hope.

In Jesus, truth was embodied. He did not merely speak the truth; He was the truth. He did not come to simply tell the world about God; He came as God. So it is with His people. We speak the truth of the gospel with our lips. We show the glory of the gospel by the manner in which we live life-on-life together on mission as His church.

## ***Q: THE BOOK OF JAMES DOES NOT MENTION ANYTHING ABOUT JESUS' ATONING DEATH AND RESURRECTION. IN WHAT SENSE CAN YOU SAY THAT JAMES TEACHES THE GOSPEL?***

### **What Can Studying the Book of James Teach Us About Faith?**

The Book of James is filled with practical wisdom for Christians, calling us to live out genuine faith through good works. In our own ability, we cannot stand in the face of adversity. Without faith we could never find the strength to trust God. We would never be able to see above the trials we meet and to keep our eyes focused on the King while counting our trials as joy. This is the essence of James. We don't work to be saved; we work because we are saved.

The Book of James is also a wonderful companion piece to Jesus' teachings as recorded in the four Gospels. James has a strong ethical emphasis that's consistent with the moral teachings

Jesus gave to His disciples. James also mirrors the sometimes harsh denunciations Jesus spoke against religious hypocrisy. Like Jesus' teachings, the Book of James is a source of both exhortation and comfort, reproof and encouragement. James is known for being extremely practical, yet it contains some of the most profound theological truths in the New Testament.

## **Message and Purpose**

As a general epistle, James was addressed to a broad audience (Jewish Christians) rather than a specific audience (for example, Christians at Ephesus only). There's an obvious concern to address internal and external difficulties that Jewish Christian congregations faced. Externally, they were facing trials (see 1:2), particularly oppression of various sorts exerted by wealthy landowners. It doesn't appear that the oppression was religious in nature. Internally, it appears that dissension was caused by a lack of self-control (see 1:13-17); uncontrolled speech; and false teachings that led to a misunderstanding of true religion (see 1:19-27; 2:1-4; 3:1-8), favoritism toward the wealthy (see 2:1-13), and selfish ambition that opened the door to murder and criticism (see 4:1-12).

James addressed these issues primarily through the application of principles defined by the Old Testament wisdom tradition. The solutions he named reflected the wisdom from above that comes from "the Father of lights" (1:17), who generously gives wisdom to those who ask for it. Wisdom is required for proper speech in worship and for determining who ought to teach (see 1:19-27; 3:1-8). Wisdom is also needed to avoid internal conflicts that create dissension within congregations (see 3:13-18; 4:1-12). The theme of faith in action is also important (see 1:19-27; 2:14-26); James demonstrated that faith that doesn't express itself in good works is useless. Another theme of the epistle is ethics, especially social justice (see 2:1-13; 4:1-12; 5:1-12).

## **Structure**

The Book of James is a letter (an epistle), though only the greeting conforms to the ancient Greek form exemplified in Paul's letters, especially Galatians.

The Book of James has also been compared to Old Testament wisdom literature. Although James contains wisdom elements, such as comparing the wisdom of the world with the wisdom that comes from God, it also contains exhortations and prophetic elements that aren't common to wisdom literature.

## **Author**

James is named as the author in 1:1. A number of New Testament personalities were named James, but only three are candidates for the authorship of this book. James the son of Zebedee died in AD 44, too early to have been the author. No tradition identifies James the son of Alphaeus (see Mark 3:18) as the author. This leaves James the brother of Jesus, also called James the Just (see Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 2:9,12), as the most likely candidate.

Scripture identifies James as the brother of Jesus in Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; and Galatians 1:19. Though he wasn't a follower of Christ during His earthly ministry (see John 7:3-5), a post-resurrection appearance convinced James that Jesus is indeed the Christ (see Acts 1:14; 1 Cor.

15:7). James later led the Jerusalem church (see Gal. 2:9,12), exercising great influence there (see Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 2:9,12).

## Background

James was probably written between AD 48 and 52, though nothing in the epistle suggests a more precise date. James's death in AD 62 or 66 means the epistle was written before this time. Similarities to Gospel traditions and Pauline themes are suggestive. If Mark was written around AD 65 and time is allowed for the events of Acts 15 and 21 to have occurred between Paul's first and second missionary journeys, a date between AD 48 and 52 seems most likely. James led the Jerusalem church. The reference to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1) suggests the letter was written to Jewish Christians living outside Israel. The reference to a synagogue in 2:2 also suggests that his audience was Jewish Christians. References to their circumstances (for example, oppression by wealthy landowners, 5:1-6) could refer to congregations anywhere in the Roman Empire.

### Epistle of James

The **Epistle of James**, the **Letter of James**, or simply **James** (Ancient Greek: Ἰάκωβος, romanized: *Iakōbos*), is one of the 21 epistles (didactic letters) in the New Testament. The author identifies himself as "James, a servant [or slave] of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" who is writing to "the twelve tribes scattered abroad". The epistle is traditionally attributed to James the brother of Jesus (James the Just),<sup>[1][2]</sup> and the audience is generally considered to be Jewish Christians, who were dispersed outside Israel.<sup>[3][4]</sup>

Framing his letter within an overall theme of patient perseverance during trials and temptations, James writes to encourage his readers to live consistently with what they have learned in Christ. He wants his readers to mature in their faith in Christ by living what they say they believe. He condemns various sins, including pride, hypocrisy, favouritism, and slander. He encourages and implores believers to humbly live by godly, rather than worldly wisdom and to pray in all situations.

For the most part, until the late 20th century, the epistle of James was relegated to benign disregard – though it was shunned by many early theologians and scholars due to its advocacy of Torah observance and good works.<sup>[5]</sup> Famously, Luther disliked the epistle due to its lack of Christology and its focus on Torah observance,<sup>[6]</sup> and sidelined it to an appendix.<sup>[7]</sup>

The epistle aims at a wide Jewish audience.<sup>[8]</sup> During the last decades, the epistle of James has attracted increasing scholarly interest due to a surge in the quest for the historical James,<sup>[9]</sup> his role within the Jesus movement, his beliefs, and his relationships and views. This James revival is also associated with the growing awareness about the Jewish grounding of the epistle and of the early Jesus movement.<sup>[10]</sup> According to Baukham, as Christian scholarship and theology have moved to a more comfortable embrace of the Jewish grounding of the early Jesus movement,<sup>[11]</sup> and of the diversity of early belief in Jesus, interest in the earliest layers of the tradition has been on the rise.

## Genre[edit]

James is considered New Testament wisdom literature: "like Proverbs and Sirach, it consists largely of moral exhortations and precepts of a traditional and eclectic nature."<sup>[37]</sup>

The content of James is directly parallel, in many instances, to sayings of Jesus found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, i.e., those attributed to the hypothetical Q source. Compare, e.g., "Do not swear at all, either by heaven...or by the earth....Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:34, 37) and "...do not swear either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation" (James 5:12). According to James Tabor, the epistle of James contains "no fewer than thirty direct references, echoes, and allusions to the teachings of Jesus found in the Q source."<sup>[38]</sup>

## Justification[edit]

*Main articles: [Justification \(theology\)](#), [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](#), and [Sola fide](#)*

The epistle contains the following famous passage concerning salvation and justification:

14 What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.<sup>[49]</sup>

That passage has been cited in Christian theological debates, especially regarding the doctrine of justification. Gaius Marius Victorinus (4th century) associated James's teaching on works with the heretical Symmachian sect, followers of Symmachus the Ebionite, and openly questioned whether James' teachings were heretical. This passage has also been contrasted with the teachings of Paul the Apostle on justification. Some scholars even believe that the passage is a response to Paul.<sup>[50]</sup> One issue in the debate is the meaning of the Greek word δικαιόω (dikaióō) 'render righteous or such as he ought to be',<sup>[51]</sup> with some among the participants taking the view that James is responding to a misunderstanding of Paul.<sup>[52]</sup>

Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have historically argued that the passage disproves the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).<sup>[53][54]</sup> The early (and many modern) Protestants resolve the apparent conflict between James and Paul regarding faith and works in alternate ways from the Catholics and Orthodox:<sup>[55]</sup>

Paul was dealing with one kind of error while James was dealing with a different error. The errorists Paul was dealing with were people who said that works of the law were needed to be added to faith in order to help earn God's favor. Paul countered this error by pointing out that

salvation was by faith alone apart from deeds of the law (Galatians 2:16; Romans 3:21-22). Paul also taught that saving faith is not dead but alive, showing thanks to God in deeds of love (Galatians 5:6 ['...since in Christ Jesus it is not being circumcised or being uncircumcised that can effect anything - only faith working through love.']). James was dealing with errorists who said that if they had faith they didn't need to show love by a life of faith (James 2:14-17). James countered this error by teaching that faith is alive, showing itself to be so by deeds of love (James 2:18,26). James and Paul both teach that salvation is by faith alone and also that faith is never alone but shows itself to be alive by deeds of love that express a believer's thanks to God for the free gift of salvation by faith in Jesus.<sup>[56]</sup>

According to Ben Witherington III, differences exist between the Apostle Paul and James, but both used the law of Moses, the teachings of Jesus and other Jewish and non-Jewish sources, and "Paul was not anti-law any more than James was a legalist".<sup>[22]:157-158</sup>

## Theology and Sacraments

**You will be asked these five questions:**

### **Q: DO YOU SUBSCRIBE TO THE ESSENTIALS OF THE FAITH OF THE EPC WITHOUT ANY RESERVATIONS?**

All Scripture is self-attesting, and being Truth requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life. The infallible Word of God—the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments — is a complete and unified witness to God's redemptive acts culminating in the incarnation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks. On this sure foundation, we affirm these additional essentials of our faith.

1. We believe in one God, the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, infinitely perfect and eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To Him be all honor, glory, and praise forever!
2. Jesus Christ, the living Word, became flesh through His miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit and His virgin birth. He who is true God became true man united in one Person forever. He died on the cross a sacrifice for our sins according to the Scriptures. On the third day He arose bodily from the dead, ascended into heaven where, at the right hand of the Majesty on High, He now is our High Priest and Mediator.
3. The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior, indwelling our hearts. He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth, and seals us for the day of redemption.

4. Being estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in His sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.

5. The true Church is composed of all persons who through saving faith in Jesus Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit are united together in the body of Christ. The Church finds her visible yet imperfect expression in local congregations where the Word of God is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered in their integrity, where scriptural discipline is practiced, and where loving fellowship is maintained. For her perfecting she awaits the return of her Lord.

6. Jesus Christ will come again to the earth personally, visibly, and bodily—to judge the living and the dead, and to consummate history and the eternal plan of God. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20).

7. The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the gospel throughout the 2 world and to make disciples of all nations. Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to "Him who loved us and gave Himself for us." He calls us to a life of self-denying love and service. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). The Essentials are set forth in greater detail in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

### **Q: IS JESUS THE ONLY WAY OF SALVATION?**

### **Q: WHAT EXCEPTIONS DO YOU HAVE TO THE WCF AND CATECHISMS?**

### **Q: DO YOU AFFIRM THE VIEW OF SCRIPTURE FOUND IN CHAPTER 1 OF THE WCF?**

Chapter 1 Holy Scripture 1. Our natural understanding and the works of creation and providence so clearly show God's goodness, wisdom, and power that human beings have no excuse for not believing in him.<sup>1</sup> However, these means alone cannot provide that knowledge of God and of his will which is necessary for salvation.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it pleased the Lord at different times and in various ways to reveal himself and to declare that this revelation contains his will for his church.<sup>3</sup> Afterwards it pleased God to put this entire revelation into writing so that the truth might be better preserved and transmitted and that the church, confronted with the corruption of the flesh and the evil purposes of Satan and the world, might be more securely established and comforted.<sup>4</sup> Since God no longer reveals himself to his people in those earlier ways,<sup>5</sup> Holy Scripture is absolutely essential.<sup>6</sup> 1. Rom 2.14-15, 1.19-20, Ps 19.1-4, Rom 1.32, 2.1. 2. 1 Cor 1.21, 2.13-14, 2.9-12, Acts 4.12, Rom 10.13-14. 3. Heb 1.1-2, Gal 1.11-12, Dt 4.12-14. 4. Prv 22.19-21, Lk 1.3-4, Rom 15.4, Mt 4.4,7,10, Is 8.19-20, Lk 24.27, 2 Tm 3.16, 2 Pt 3.15-16. 5. Heb 1.1-2, see General Note. 6. 2 Tm 3.15-16, 2 Pt 1.10, Lk 16.29-31, Heb 2.1-3.

2. What we call Holy Scripture or the written word of God now includes all the books of the Old and New Testaments which are: The Old Testament: Genesis 2 Chronicles Daniel Exodus Ezra Hosea Leviticus Nehemiah Joel Numbers Esther Amos Deuteronomy Job Obadiah Joshua Psalms Jonah Judges Proverbs Micah Ruth Ecclesiastes Nahum 1 Samuel Song of Solomon Habakkuk 2 Samuel Isaiah Zephaniah 1 Kings Jeremiah Haggai 2 Kings Lamentations Zechariah 1 Chronicles Ezekiel Malachi The New Testament: Matthew Ephesians Hebrews Mark Philippians James Luke Colossians 1 Peter John 1 Thessalonians 2 Peter Acts 2 Thessalonians 1 John Romans 1 Timothy 2 John 1 Corinthians 2 Timothy 3 John 2 Corinthians Titus Jude Galatians Philemon Revelation Holy Scripture 4 All of these books are inspired by God and are the rule of faith and life.7 7. Lk 16.29,31, Eph 2.20, Rv 22.18-19, 2 Tm 3.16, Mt 11.27.

3. The books usually called the Apocrypha are not divinely inspired and are not part of the canon of Scripture. They therefore have no authority in the church of God and are not to be valued or used as anything other than human writings.8 8. Lk 24.27,44, Rom 3.2, 2 Pt 1.21. The Canon of Scripture is not established by explicit passages, but by the testimony of Jesus and his apostles; of ancient manuscripts and versions; of ancient Christian writers and church councils, and by the internal evidence exhibited in the separate books.

4. The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church but completely on God, its author, who is himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God.9 9. 2 Pt 1.19,21, 2 Tm 3.16, 1 Jn 5.9, 1 Thes 2.13, Gal 1.11-12.

5. We may be influenced by the testimony of the church to value the Bible highly and reverently, and Scripture itself shows in so many ways that it is God's word; for example, in its spiritual subject matter, in the effectiveness of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, its unified aim from beginning to end (to give all glory to God), the full revelation it makes of the only way of man's salvation, its many other incomparably outstanding features, and its complete perfection. However, we are completely persuaded and assured of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible only by the inward working of the Holy Spirit, who testifies by and with the word in our hearts.10 10. 1 Tm 3.15, 1 Jn 2.20,27, Jn 16.13-14, 1 Cor 2.10-12, Isa 59.21, 1 Cor 2.6-9.

6. The whole purpose of God about everything pertaining to his own glory and to man's salvation, faith, and life is either explicitly stated in the Bible or may be deduced as inevitably and logically following from it.11 Nothing is at any time to be added to the Bible, either from new revelations of the Spirit or from traditions of men.12 Nevertheless we do recognize that the inward illumination of the Spirit of God is necessary for a saving understanding of the things which are revealed in the word.13 We also recognize that some provisions for the worship of God and the government of the church are similar to secular activities and organizations; these are to be directed according to our natural understanding and our Christian discretion and should conform to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.14 11. Mk 7.5-7. 12. 2 Tm 3.15-17, Gal 1.8-9, 2 Thes 2.2. This statement is an inference from the sufficiency of the Scriptures. 13. Jn 6.45, 1 Cor 2.9-10, 12. 14. 1 Cor 11.13-14, 14.26,40.

7. The meanings of all the passages in the Bible are not equally obvious, nor is any individual passage equally clear to everyone.15 However, everything which we have to know, believe, and observe in order to be saved is so clearly presented and revealed somewhere in the Bible that the uneducated as well as the educated can sufficiently understand it by the proper use of the

ordinary means of grace.<sup>16</sup> 15. 2 Pt 3.16, Jn 6.60, 16.17. 16. Ps 119.105, 130, Acts 17.11-12. Holy Scripture 5

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (the native language of the ancient people of God) and the New Testament in Greek (the language most widely known internationally at the time the New Testament was written) were directly inspired by God<sup>17</sup> and have been kept uncontaminated throughout time by his special care and providence. They are therefore authentic and are to be the church's ultimate source of appeal in every religious controversy.<sup>18</sup> The original languages of the Bible, however, are not understood by all of God's people. But all of God's people have a right to an interest in the Bible and God himself commands them to read it thoroughly with awe and reverence for him.<sup>19</sup> Consequently the Bible should be translated into the native language of every people to whom it is introduced. Then, the word of God will live fully in everyone; everyone will be able to worship God in an acceptable way; and all believers may have hope through the endurance and the encouragement of the Bible.<sup>20</sup> 17. See note under Section 3 above. 18. Mt 5.18, Is 8.20, Acts 15.14-18, Jn 5.9,46. 19. Jn 5.39, 2 Tm 3.14-15, 2 Pt 1.19, Acts 17.11. 20. 1 Cor 14.6, 9, 11-12, 24, 27-28, Col 3.16, Rom 15.4, Mt 28.19-20.

9. The infallible standard for the interpretation of the Bible is the Bible itself. And so any question about the true and complete sense of a passage in the Bible (which is a unified whole) can be answered by referring to other passages which speak more plainly.<sup>21</sup> 21. 2 Pt 1.20-21, Acts 15.15, Jn 5.46, Mt 4.5-7, 12.1-7. 10. The Holy Spirit speaking in the Bible is the supreme judge of all religious controversies, all decisions of religious councils, all the opinions of ancient writers, all human teachings, and every private opinion.<sup>22</sup> We are to be satisfied with the judgment of him who is and can be the only judge. 22. Mt 22.29,31, Eph 2.20, Acts 28.25, Lk 10.26, Gal 1.10, 1 Jn 4.1-6.

## **Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON INFALLIBILITY AND INERRANCY?**

Infallible - cannot err;

Inerrant - does not err

**Other sample questions:**

**Explain your view of Theonomy and whether you hold to this view.**

Theonomy: What Have We Learned?

### **Introduction**

In New Zealand the debate over theonomy has seen both of the above. When the issue first arose, there was polarization and misunderstanding. But as the denomination settled down to make a thorough study of the matter the air cleared and there was a greater measure of clarity and unity.

The German philosopher Hegel spoke scathingly of our ability to learn from the past when he said, "The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history." Unfortunately, that is too often true. Many of us are not familiar enough with the past to learn the lessons of history. We are usually so busy with the present and so concerned about the future that we

don't have the time (or should we say, we don't make the time) to look back at what has happened.

Yet there are important lessons to be gained from a study of history. This is why I have entitled this essay: "Theonomy: What Have We Learned?" For it is my hope and prayer that as Churches we may have learned and grown through our discussion of this issue, not only about the Scriptures, but also about how to handle points of disagreement. This has certainly been so for me, and I know for many others in the Church.

This chapter traces the general origins of the theonomy movement, how these ideas came to New Zealand and a general definition of "theonomy." I then examine some of the issues this raises: Biblical, theological and confessional. A key element of theonomy is the application of Biblical law by the civil magistrate. In view of this we also need to look at the relationship between the Church and the State. I conclude with some general observations.

### **Background**

The father of the theonomy movement is Rousas John Rushdoony. He was raised in a minister's family, his father serving in the Presbyterian Church in Armenia. The family fled to the United States during World War I to escape from the Turks who had turned on the Armenians. Rousas Rushdoony was born in the US and as a child read the Old Testament constantly. Following in his father's footsteps he too became a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He led mission work among the Chinese-Americans and the American Indians. Very influential on his thinking were the writings of Cornelius Van Til, as was reflected in the publication of *By What Standard*, a defense of Van Til's philosophy.

About this time he led some of the members of his Church out of the Presbyterian Church into the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He stepped up his lecturing around the country and also began to write more. Later he left the pastoral ministry to spend more time on these areas. In October 1965 he sent out the first issue of the "Chalcedon Report," a newsletter which was designed to promote the Christian Reconstruction of society according to Biblical law. In 1970 he left the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. [1]

Rushdoony's thinking greatly influenced two men who have become leading proponents of theonomy. One was Gary North who completed a doctorate in economics and has written prolifically on a Christian approach to that subject. The other was Greg Bahnsen, who studied at Westminster Theological Seminary and then completed a doctorate in philosophy. In 1976 Bahnsen took up a position lecturing in apologetics and ethics at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. He rewrote and expanded his Westminster Masters thesis into his main work, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, which was published in 1977. While teaching at the Reformed Theological Seminary Bahnsen strongly influenced the thinking of a number of students. They included David Chilton and James Jordan, both of whom later became part of the Chalcedon organization.

Bahnsen's tenure at the Reformed Theological Seminary was marked by controversy over his theonomic views. Some sided with him as ardent supporters, others opposed him. During 1978 this debate became intense among both students and faculty. In view of this tension the Seminary Board offered Bahnsen a year's paid leave, at the end of which his contract expired. No grounds were cited for this decision.[2]

### **Theonomy in New Zealand**

Among the students studying at the Reformed Theological Seminary at this time were Richard Flinn, Bruce Hoyt, Jack Sawyer and Dick VanderVecht. A native New Zealander with a Baptist and Navigator background, Richard Flinn was attending the Reformed Theological Seminary to gain a theological training for the ministry. While there he "converted" to a Calvinist and paedo-Baptist position. On returning to New Zealand he sought entry into the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, served a vicariate in Tokoroa/Kerepehi and was then appointed as a Home Missionary on the North Shore in 1979. The Church was instituted in April of 1980.

Bruce Hoyt was a pastor in an Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in Tennessee, and was then brought to New Zealand in 1981 by the Reformed Church of the North Shore. He was subsequently called by the Silverstream Congregation to work as a home missionary in Masterton.

Dick VanderVecht completed his study at the Reformed Theological Seminary and was then called by the Reformed Church of Penguin, Tasmania, Australia. After serving there six years he was called to be the pastor of the Reformed Church of Avondale in 1983.

Jack Sawyer left the Reformed Theological Seminary following Bahnsen's departure, and continued his study at Westminster Seminary. He was called to serve the Reformed Church of Silverstream in 1984 following the departure of Rev. G. I. Williamson. So these four men, who had some familiarity with the theonomy debate in America, found themselves in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand.

In his ministry on the North Shore Richard Flinn devoted himself to preaching, church planting and the promotion of the Reformed faith. He did all this with great energy, zeal and ability. Through his study at the Reformed Theological Seminary and his own reading he had become a convinced adherent of the theonomic position. In the course of his ministry he presented his views on this matter in an articulate and forceful manner through sermons, writings and lectures in camps and conferences. Many in the North Shore congregation became sympathetic to his views.

Two of his major goals were to challenge thoughtful Christians to think more deeply and to apply the Christian faith to all of life. The North Shore congregation sought to pursue these goals by means of an extensive tape library (Issacharian Tapes), by importing and selling serious Christian books (Issacharian Books) and through a monthly newsletter entitled the Issacharian Report.<sup>[3]</sup> Prominent among the many topics covered in these Issacharian Ministries were the ideas of theonomy.

Bruce Hoyt and Jack Sawyer also held to some of the basic tenets of theonomy, but it was primarily Richard Flinn's speaking ministry and the various Issacharian ventures of the North Shore that disseminated the theonomy viewpoint through the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. As it had done in the USA the issue began to generate a great deal of discussion and some controversy in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. Many in the Church felt threatened and uncomfortable with these new ideas. However, debate centered in the Auckland presbytery where the most enthusiastic exponents of theonomy were.

By 1983 there was so much tension over this issue in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand that the Synod meeting that year decided that the matter should be looked at more closely. Synod agreed "that a committee be instituted to study the ethical teaching commonly known as theonomy in order to: (a) attempt to define what it is and, (b) determine whether such views are consistent with Scripture and Confessions."<sup>[4]</sup>

This committee did not meet in the inter-synodical period and so could not present a report to the next Synod. Instead the Synod meeting in 1986 in Mangere received three papers by the

members of the committee (i.e. Rev. Richard Flinn, Mr. Martin Kuitert, Rev. Hone Phillips) giving their own personal views on the issue. Synod decided “to receive the information as an interim study and to appoint a committee with a similar mandate to carry on the work.”[5]

That committee was made up of Rev. John Haverland (Bucklands Beach, Convener and Reporter), Rev. Dick VanderVecht (Avondale Reporter), Rev. Richard Flinn (North Shore), Mr. Martin Kuitert (Avondale). Due to various circumstances Richard Flinn and Martin Kuitert could not continue on the committee. Their places were taken by Rev. Michael Flinn (Pukekohe) and Rev. William Wiersma (Hamilton). Rev. John Steenhof (North Shore) also served on the committee for a brief time. This meant that the committee included most of the ministers in the Auckland Presbytery (allowing for the coming and goings that took place during the inter-synodical period). This allowed for a good representation of viewpoint, a broad basis for discussion and so a greater possibility of achieving a consensus in the Church. Rev. Neil Benfell (Wellington) and Rev. Dirk Van Garderen (Bishopdale) served as correspondence members in the Wellington and Christchurch Presbyteries respectively.

The whole process of preparing the report proved to be very time consuming. A lot of time was spent in discussion. Yet those involved found the time well spent. The discussion and study deepened their own grasp of the Scriptures and also drew them closer together as pastors. The clarity and understanding that came out of these meetings took much of the heat out of the debate and brought about a greater unity both within the committee and in the wider Church. When the report was presented to the 1989 Synod meeting in Silverstream, Synod decided to “endorse the hermeneutical principles and conclusions of the report, to publish the report separately from the Acts of Synod and circulate it to the Churches for information and as pastoral guidance on this issue, and to dismiss the committee with heartfelt thanks for their work.”[6]

### **What Is Theonomy?[7]**

The term theonomy is difficult to define because it means so many things to so many different people. The word simply means God’s law (theos = God, nomos = law). All Reformed believers could be described as being theonomists in a broad sense in that all Reformed believers believe that God’s law is authoritative for all of life.

Yet in the debate outlined above, the word has taken on a narrower reference. In this technical sense theonomy holds that God’s word is authoritative over all areas of life, that within Scripture we should presume continuity between Old and New Testament principles and regulations until God’s revelation tells us otherwise, and that therefore the Old Testament law offers us a mode for sociopolitical reconstruction in our day, and that this law is to be enforced by the civil magistrate where and how the stipulations of God so designate.[8] One of the key features of this definition is the presumed continuity of all of Old Testament law unless the New Testament specifically abrogates that law. The other significant emphasis is that the Old Testament law provides us with a model for social and political structures today. This conviction prompts theonomists to seek the reconstruction of the family, church and state. They seek to bring these structures into conformity to God’s law. In the US this goal is promoted through various organizations such as the Chalcedon Foundation, the Institute for Christian Economics and Geneva Ministries. The Reconstruction Movement includes such men as Rousas J. Rushdoony, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, David Chilton, James Jordan, George Grant and Ray Sutton. Yet we should not assume that those holding to theonomy and pursuing the reconstruction of society form a unified body. Theonomists are not agreed on the precise interpretation of Old Testament law, nor on some other matters (notably ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Church). These often significant differences of interpretation amongst the proponents of theonomy make the movement difficult to define and evaluate.

## Misunderstandings and Misconceptions

A real difficulty in understanding the whole movement arises from the tendency of some theonomists to overstate their case in order to make a point. The movement has also been accused of a “censorious mind-set”<sup>[9]</sup> and some proponents have certainly used extreme and even harsh language.

On the other side of the fence some opponents of theonomy have been too quick to jump to conclusions about what theonomy does or does not mean. For instance, some have thought that a concern for the detail of the law would lead to a works righteousness, a conclusion that does not necessarily follow. In others the fear of new ideas has prompted a knee-jerk reaction rather than a carefully thought-out response. And for still others the lack of a considered alternative to the theonomy position made them feel vulnerable and therefore defensive. In an attempt to clear away misunderstandings and misconceptions, the study committee discussed and defined areas of agreement with respect to the law. These may be summarized as follows:

1. We are saved by grace through faith and not by works of the law.
2. There is no conflict between law and love.
3. There is no conflict between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law.
4. All believers should be concerned to know and obey the law of God.
5. All believers should have a concern to study the details of God’s law, both in the Old and New Testament.
6. All believers should seek to apply God’s law in their own lives and in society.
7. The ceremonial and sacrificial laws were fulfilled in Christ and no longer need to be practiced by the New Testament believer.

## Continuities and Discontinuities

Having said this, we now turn our attention to the question that lies at the heart of the theonomy debate: the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Much of the discussion in relation to theonomy centers on the continuities and discontinuities between the Testaments. Reformed theology has always assumed a continuity between the Old and New Covenants. This is the heart of covenant theology over against a dispensational understanding of the Bible. The real issue in relation to theonomy is how this works out in terms of Old Testament law. Bahnsen argues for “the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail.” Yet this puts his case too strongly. This type of overstatement has muddled the waters and hampered a proper understanding of the issues. A close reading of his book reveals that many of the details of the law do not carry through. His statement, therefore, needs careful qualification. In defining the way the Old Testament law carries through we should “presume continuity between the ethical principles of the Old Testament and those of the New.”<sup>[10]</sup> The key word here is the word principles. While the principles continue through, many of the details do not. The Committee spent a lot of time trying to define just which details did not continue and eventually agreed that most of the aspects of the Old Covenant which are not authoritative for today could be covered under the following:

1. **Localized Imperative.** These are the commands God gave to Israel for specified use in a concrete situation. For instance: the command to go to war and gain the land of Canaan by the sword.
2. **Cultural Details.** Cultural details are mentioned in many of God’s laws so as to illustrate the moral principle it required. What is of permanent authority is the principle and not the

cultural detail used to illustrate it. This means that we are not bound to the literal wording of the Old Testament case laws.

3. **Administrative Details.** Certain administrative details are not normative for today. For instance: the type of government, the method of tax collection, the location of the capital.
4. **Typology.** These Old Testament types were fulfilled by being replaced with the realities they typified. The laws God gave Israel included ceremonies and symbols that prefigured the graces, actions, suffering and benefits of Christ, as well as containing various moral instructions. These ceremonial laws are now abrogated under the New Testament, “so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion.”[11]
5. **Geographical Changes.** Israel as a nation was promised the land of Canaan, and they lived as a political body within the borders of their land. However, the people of God in the Church inherit the whole world as it is redeemed by Christ. This means that laws relating to the political and geographical organization and administration of Israel are no longer applicable to the Church. For instance: the division of the land according to tribal and family groups; cities of refuge; the levirate institution.

The committee felt comfortable affirming the continuity of the principles of Old Testament law while laying aside the details described above. Yet they were conscious that to interpret the Old Testament law, distill the principles out of all the detail and then make a modern day application is not a simple matter. Much careful exegetical and interpretative work needs to take place if we are to understand the central principles of God’s law and their application to our situation.

### **Theonomy and the Confessions**

Of the four Confessions and Catechisms of the Church it is the Westminster Confession that deals most explicitly with the issue of Old Testament law. Chapter XIX makes various statements about the law of God, distinguishing between the moral law which was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai in ten commandments (Art ii) and the ceremonial laws which God gave to the people of Israel, all of which are now abrogated under the New Testament (Art iii). Article iv goes on to say: “To them also [i.e. Israel], as a body politick, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people, not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require.”

Here the Westminster Confession is upholding the continuity of the general principle of Old Testament law (the general equity). Yet it also recognizes that there are significant discontinuities in that “sundry judicial laws” have “expired together with the state of that people.” These specific judicial details no longer bind the New Testament believer.

In adopting the report on theonomy the Reformed Churches of New Zealand agreed that to speak of the continuity of the principles of Old Testament law was entirely scriptural and that this was in harmony with the confessions of the Churches. However, this does not endorse the views of all theonomists as being in harmony with the confessions. As stated earlier, there are significant differences of interpretation and emphasis among those espousing theonomy. Not all would agree with the formulation arrived at in the report, nor do all agree with the formulation of the Westminster assembly. For instance, R. J. Rushdoony accused the Westminster Confession of Faith in Chap XIX, Art iv, of being “nonsense.”[12]

In view of this divergence of viewpoint among theonomists, the committee concluded that it was “not possible to make a blanket endorsement or denial of theonomy with respect to the confessions.”[13] We believed the conclusions reached in the report to be in harmony with both

Scripture and Confessions, yet we could not say this of all the various shades of theonomic opinion.

### **Theonomy, Church and State**

One of the important issues in a discussion of theonomy concerns the relationship between church and state and the responsibility of the civil magistrate with respect to God's law. Bahnsen regards Old Testament Israel as a theocracy in the sense that Israel was a country under the moral rule of God. He contends that all nations today should be under the moral rule of God except that in the New Testament this has become the moral rule of Christ—a Christocracy. He speaks of "the Older Testament Theocracy becoming in the New Testament a Christocracy with international boundaries."<sup>[14]</sup>

He then argues that the magistrate today "is required by God's abiding law to enforce justice and righteousness in social affairs."<sup>[15]</sup> In line with his general thesis he says: "Every detail of God's law has abiding validity from the time of Christ's advent to the time of his return.... Just as the magistrate of the Old Testament has divine imperatives which he was responsible to carry out, so also magistrates in the era of the New Testament are under obligation to those commands in the Book of the Law which apply to civil affairs and social penology.... Because the penal sanctions of God's law are imperatives delivered with divine authority and approval the follower of Christ should teach that the civil magistrate is yet under moral obligation to enforce the law of God in its social aspect."<sup>[16]</sup>

In light of the complexity of this subject it is important to review the major views that have been held in history regarding the relationship between the Church and the State.

Historically the Roman Catholic Church has held that the State should be subordinate to the Church. This view, which was dominant throughout the Middle Ages, maintained that the Church was the supreme power and that the civil ruler is the servant of the Church. The Church, and especially the Pope as head of the Church, should have authority and control in civil matters.

The Erastian view holds that the Church ought to be subordinate to the State. The Church is regarded as being part of the State with ministers of the Church being officials of the State. Under this view the Church has no right to bar people from the Lord's Table nor any right to excommunicate anyone. This view began to be influential following the establishment of a state religion by the Emperor Constantine. It gained ground in England and Scotland following the Reformation and is held today by Anglicans in Britain and the Lutherans in Scandinavia.

Those holding the Voluntary view believe that the Church and State should be entirely separate. Civil rulers should not use their influence or power to interfere in religious matters, nor should they use their position to promote the cause of the Church or kingdom of Christ. This was the view of the Anabaptists after the Reformation. It is advocated today under the concept of pluralism; i.e. we live in a pluralistic world with many different opinions. The State should not promote any one view or religion. This view of the relationship of Church and State has until recently dominated the evangelical Church in the West.

None of these views do justice to the biblical teaching regarding the relationship between the Church and State. In placing the State under the power of the Church the Roman Catholic view does not give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but rather takes away from the civil authorities what rightfully belongs to them. In subordinating the Church to the state the Erastian view does not give to God what is God's. The Voluntary view denies the sovereignty of God over the affairs of all people in the world.

Historically Reformed and Presbyterian people have argued that the Church and State are essentially different and rightfully independent authorities. They should be kept distinct and separate from each other. Yet “it is both possible and right for the Church and State to meet in amicable alliance, for the purpose of friendly cooperation.”[17] Most Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have held that civil rulers have an obligation “to aim at the promotion of the honor of God, the welfare of true religion, and the prosperity of the church of Christ.”[18] This is the view of the Reformed Confessions.[19]

This view “gives to God what is God’s in the Church, and to Caesar what is Caesar’s in the State, while also acknowledging the supreme sovereignty of God over all the affairs of men and the obligation of all men to keep his law.”[20]

Comparing Bahnsen’s views with the historic Reformed view it is clear that there is a basic agreement about the relationship between Church and State. “The debate does not center around whether or not the magistrate should apply God’s law, but to what extent God’s law applies in its detail.”[21]

The committee believed it was both beyond their mandate and their ability to offer a definitive solution to a problem that has exercised the minds of able Reformed theologians and thinkers through the centuries. Instead they formulated statements regarding the Church, the State and God’s law which they could all agree with. The areas of agreement are as follows:

1. That the Church and State are separate and distinct authorities both instituted by God.
2. That the authority of the Church is spiritual (i.e. the keys of the kingdom, cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q. 84 and 85), being confined to the exercise of spiritual discipline. The ultimate exercise of that discipline is excommunication.
3. That the authority of the State is physical (i.e. the power of the sword, Rom. 13:4). The State may use physical means to enforce obedience to the law. Its ultimate exercise of that authority is the use of capital punishment. The sphere of its authority is that of justice. It must punish social violations of God’s law. The State is not an agent of evangelism and must not use its power to that end.
4. That civil authorities are set up by God and are responsible to Him. To oppose them is to oppose God (Rom. 13:2). They have a duty to rule according to the law of God. God’s law is the ultimate standard for all mankind.
5. That all societies should honor God and obey His law, and that we ought to pray and work towards this as salt and light in society, irrespective of how far we expect to see this realized before the return of Christ.
6. That the means the Church must use in promoting godliness and righteousness in the nation is the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Only through the working of the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ will people begin to live according to His laws (Rom. 8:1-14). The Church should speak prophetically to our nation about injustices and evils in society. Christians should seek to persuade men and women in society from Scripture by reason and argument of the value and good sense of God’s laws.

These statements did not answer all the questions regarding the relationship between Church and State and the application of God’s law to our present society. Yet it was hoped that these statements would draw the Church together on this issue and give us sufficient common ground as a Church to interact with the world and the State concerning God’s law.

### **What Have We Learned?**

As pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the study of history can be extremely valuable. There are lessons to be learned from what has happened in the past.

Having looked at the theonomy issue in New Zealand, one of the first observations we could make is that there is nothing new under the sun. Long ago the writer of Ecclesiastes reminded us of this (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Through all the centuries of Church history and theological debate Christians have discussed the relationship between the Testaments, the respective roles of the Church and State, and the application of God's law to society at large. In the 17th century in particular the English Puritans invested a great deal of time and energy unto discussions on God's law. Our own study in New Zealand in the 20th century is but a small and humble contribution to the ongoing work of the Church in coming to understand God's word and its application to the contemporary world.

We also need to say that even after all this discussion the last word has not been said. As we came to the conclusion of our report we had to confess that areas of disagreement still remained. The two principal matters were those of the penal sanctions of the Old Testament law and eschatology (between the amillennial and postmillennial positions).

Perhaps it is a good thing to have points of theology that need further discussion. It will keep us from pride—from the conceit that we have mastered everything. It should also keep us from complacency—from sitting back as though there was nothing more to think about. Differences of opinion will force us to continue to study and search the Scriptures.

This theological debate reinforced some lessons in basic principles of communication. In any conversation, including theological discussion, there are the dangers of jumping to conclusions; of being defensive; and of labeling our opponents and so dismissing them. No one was completely free of these errors in the discussions on theonomy. Yet thankfully, as we continued to reflect on the issues we were able to sit down together in meaningful conversations, listening carefully, making every effort to understand what the other person was saying.

A further lesson to be learned concerns the sufficiency of the Scriptures. In the Bible God has given us all we need for doctrine and life. This is one of the great foundation stones of Reformed belief: *Sola Scriptura*—the Scriptures alone. The Reformed Churches of New Zealand have expressed that belief in their motto: “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). It is our conviction that in the Scriptures God has revealed all we need to know in order to live with Him and with each other in this world.

A final lesson concerns these Scriptures and the way we read them. The Reformation established the principle that all believers ought to be able to read the Bible for themselves and be able to understand its basic message. However this does not mean that Christians are to interpret the Bible in isolation from each other. No, it is “together with all the saints” that we are to grasp the full extent of its message about the love of Christ. This is why God has put us together in the Church and linked us together as Churches—so that together we may explore the meaning of God's word and its relevance to our lives, our society and our world. The Church's discussion regarding theonomy is part of this exploration. It is a discussion that needs to go on as we sit together around an open Bible with listening ears, alert minds and hearts of faith.

## Theonomy

## What Is "Theonomy"?

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Dr. Van Til taught us that "There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy" (*Christian-Theistic Ethics*, p. 134). Every ethical decision assumes some final authority or standard, and that will either be self-law ("autonomy") or God's law ("theonomy"). While unbelievers consider themselves the ultimate authority in determining moral right or wrong, believers acknowledge that God alone has that position and prerogative.

The position which has come to be labeled "theonomy" today thus holds that the word of the Lord is the sole, supreme, and unchallengeable standard for the actions and attitudes of all men in all areas of life. Our obligation to keep God's commands cannot be judged by any extrascriptural standard, such as whether its specific requirements (when properly interpreted) are congenial to past traditions or modern feelings and practices.

### **Jesus My Savior**

When any of us come to Christ for salvation, it is with a sense of our sin and misery before God. Our very need of the Savior arises from a conviction of sin, brought home to our hearts by the Holy Spirit showing our guilt for violating God's commandments. As Paul wrote, "I had not known sin except through the law" (Rom. 7:7). The law defines what sin is (1 John 3:4). As such the law cannot be our personal vehicle for gaining favor with God. It rather aims at Christ as our only righteousness, tutoring us that justification must be by faith in Him (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:24).

So theonomy teaches that since the fall it has always been unlawful to use the law of God in hopes of establishing one's own personal merit and justification, in contrast or complement to salvation by way of promise and faith. As Paul said, it was "through the law" that he learned to "die to the law" as a way of self-salvation (Gal. 2:9). Commitment to obedience is but the lifestyle of faith, a token of gratitude for God's redeeming grace. "By grace you have been saved through faith... not of works.... We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God previously prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

In *What is Faith?* J. Gresham Machen urged that "a new and more powerful proclamation of that law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour.... A low view of laws always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace. Pray God that the high view may again prevail" (pp. 141-142).

### **Jesus My Lord**

After coming to Christ in faith and repentance we all naturally ask how a Christian should live. A. A. Hodge answers: "While Christ fulfilled the law *for us*, the Holy Spirit fulfills the law *in us*, by sanctifying us into complete conformity to it" (*The Confession of Faith*, p. 251). Paul wrote in Romans 8:4-9 that unregenerate men are enemies of God who cannot submit to His law, but those who walk by the Holy Spirit subject themselves to that law. Paul himself endorses that we should "delight in the law after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22).

The Christian confesses that Jesus is the Lord, thus looking to the directives of Jesus to guide his life. Jesus said "if you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Moreover, we will strive to teach others to observe whatever He has commanded us (Matt. 28:18-20). Such healthy and necessary moral standards are surely not burdensome to the believer who bows to Christ as the Lord (1 John 5:3).

As our Lord, moreover, Jesus teaches us that man is to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We have no right to edit God's commandments for ourselves, deciding to follow those which agree with our preconceived ideas and rejecting the others. James teaches that we are not to become "judges of the law," but rather doers of that law (4:11-12); to break even one point of it is to be guilty of breaking it all (2:10). The whole law is our duty, except where

the Lawgiver and Lord reveals otherwise. God forbids us to diminish His commands on our own authority (Deut. 4:2). "Every scripture" (even the Old Testament) is profitable, said Paul, for "instruction in righteousness" so that we would be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Accordingly theonomy views God's laws directing moral behavior to be a reflection of His unchanging character; such laws are not arbitrary, but objectively, universally, and absolutely binding. It is God's law that "you are to be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16, citing Leviticus). The law may not be criticized or challenged by us. It is "holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). This moral law was revealed to Israel in oracles and ordinances, but even the Gentiles show the work of the law upon their hearts and know its ordinances from the natural order and inward conscience (Rom. 1:32; 2:14-15). Who, then, is under the authority of God's law? Paul answers "all the world" (Rom. 3:19).

### **Covenant Theology**

The law revealed by Moses and subsequent Old Testament authors was given within a covenantal administration of God's grace which included not only moral instruction, but gloriously and mercifully "promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come" (Westminster Confession of Faith VII.5). God's revelation itself teaches us that New Covenant believers, who have the law powerfully written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31ff.; Heb. 8:8-12), no longer follow the foreshadows and administrative details of the old covenant. They are obsolete (Heb. 8:13), having been imposed only until the time when the Messiah would come (Heb. 9:10; Col. 2:17). Thus, for example, on the basis of God's own instruction, we no longer resort to animal sacrifices at the temple and a Levitical priest (Heb. 7-10); the cultic dietary laws have been set aside, for God has cleansed the unclean meats (representing the Gentiles) from which Israel was to be separate or holy (Acts 10).

Theonomy teaches, then, that in regard to the Old Testament law, the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory, power, and finality. The New Covenant also supersedes the Old Covenant shadows, thereby changing the application of sacrificial, purity, and "separation" principles, redefining the people of God (e.g., Matt. 21:43), and also altering the significance of the promised land (e.g., Rom. 4:13; 1 Peter 1:4).

What is crucial to notice here is that theonomic ethics comes to these conclusions on the basis of Biblical instruction. Men have no right to alter or spurn Old Testament laws on their own say-so, social traditions, or preconceived ideas about what is morally appropriate or inappropriate in the Mosaic law. They have no right to include more in the discontinuity between old and new covenants than can be warranted from divine revelation.

Theonomy thus teaches that we should presume that Old Testament laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation. Theonomy's methodology stands squarely against that of dispensational theology which maintains that all of the Old Testament commandments should be deemed -- in advance of exegesis -- to be abrogated, unless they are repeated in the New Testament.

On this issue the words of our Lord are definitive and clear in Matthew 5:17-19. Jesus declared that he did not come not abrogate the Old Testament Law and Prophets, but to give them their full measure. John Murray wrote that Jesus' "fulfillment" of the law "refers to the function of validating and confirming the law and the prophets" (*Principles of Conduct*, p. 150). With respect to the Old Testament's moral standards, Jesus went on to insist that until the end of the physical

cosmos, not the slightest stroke of the law will pass away. "Therefore whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus confirmed the validity of the law, *even down to its least commandment*, and censures anyone who dares to teach otherwise (without authorization from the Lawgiver Himself). New Testament Christians must operate on the presumption of continuity with the Old Testament moral code.

### **King of Kings**

That general continuity which we presume with respect to the moral standards of the Old Testament applies to political ethics. John Murray called it a fatal error "if it is thought that the Christian revelation, the Bible, does not come to the civil authority with a demand for obedience to its direction and precept as stringent and inescapable as it does to the individual, to the family, and to the church"

In addition to being the Head of the church, Christ has been made King over all other earthly kings (1 Tim. 6:15), the "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5); to Him by right they owe allegiance and obedience. He has been invested with all authority in heaven as well as on earth (Matt. 28:18), and it is to be our prayer that God's will be done on earth just as perfectly as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10). Jehovah has established His Son as King upon His holy hill, and thus the kings and judges of the earth are now required to submit reverently to Him and serve the Lord (Ps. 2:6-12).

So theonomy teaches that civil rulers are morally obligated to enforce those laws of Christ, found throughout the Scriptures, which are addressed to magistrates (as well as to *refrain* from coercion in areas where God has not prescribed their intervention). As Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-10, magistrates -- even the secular rulers of Rome -- are obligated to conduct their offices as "ministers of God," avenging *God's wrath* (compare 13:4 with 12:19) against criminal evil-doers. They will give an account on the Final Day of their service before the King of kings, their Creator and Judge. Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God's transcendent, absolute, revealed law as a standard by which to judge all social codes and political policies. The Scottish theologian, William Symington, well said: "It is the duty of nations, as subjects of Christ, to take his law as their rule. They are apt to think enough that they take, as their standard of legislation and administration, human reason, natural conscience, public opinion or political expediency. None of these, however, nor indeed all of them together, can supply a sufficient guide in affairs of state" (*Messiah the Prince*, p. 234).

The Apostle Paul affirmed that one of the uses of the Old Testament law which we know to be good is the restraint of criminal behavior (1 Tim. 1:8-10). Jesus endorsed the penal sanctions of the Old Testament law, condemning those who would make them void by their own human traditions (Matt. 15:3-4). Paul likewise upheld the penal standards of the Mosaic judicial law (Acts 25:11). The author of Hebrews leaves us no doubt about the inspired New Testament perspective on the Mosaic penalties, saying "every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward" (2:2). God requires that judges not punish too harshly or too leniently, but assign a penalty proportionate to the crime (cf. "an eye for an eye..."). To uphold genuine justice in their punishments, magistrates need the direction of God's law. In observing the law which God revealed to Israel, all nations should respond "what great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law?" (Deut. 4:8).

Although Israel as a political body has expired -- and along with it its judicial law as a constitution -- the *general equity* of those judicial laws is *still required* (Westminster Confession XIX.4). Similarly, when a public library goes out of business (and your library card thus expires), the truth of what was written in its books is not abolished or changed. Political codes today ought to

incorporate the moral requirements which were culturally illustrated in the God-given, judicial laws of Old Testament Israel. George Gillespie, widely regarded as the most authoritative theologian at the Westminster Assembly, wrote: "the will of God concerning civil justice and punishments is no where so fully and clearly revealed as in the judicial law of Moses.... He who was punishable by death under the judicial law is punishable by death still" ("Wholesome Severity Reconciled...", 1645).

Those who do not favor taking God's law as the ultimate standard for civil morality and public justice will be forced to substitute some other criterion. The civil magistrate cannot function without some standard of good and evil. If that standard is not the revealed law of God, then in some form or expression it will have to be a law of men -- the standard of self-law or autonomy. Men must choose in their civil affairs to be governed by God's law (theonomy), to be ruled by tyrants, or acquiesce to increasing social degeneracy.

**Q: EXPLAIN YOUR VIEW OF DISPENSATIONALISM AND WHETHER YOU HOLD TO THIS VIEW.**

Dispensationalism considers biblical history as divided into three to eight - but most commonly seven - periods or dispensations in which God's plan is administered in a certain way. Classical dispensationalists profess a definite distinction between Israel and the Christian church. Classical dispensationalists embrace the concept of a pre-tribulation rapture and thousand-year reign of Christ prior to his reign in the new heavens and new earth.

**Q: EXPLAIN YOUR VIEW OF "OPENNESS OF GOD" THEOLOGY. DO YOU HOLD TO THIS VIEW?**

Openness Theology and Divine Omnipotence by John Frame

**DEFINITION**

Openness theology, a modern theological movement that is essentially a resurgence of the Socinian heresy condemned by the church in the 16th century, denies the orthodox doctrine of God's omniscience, the belief that God knows all things exhaustively before they happen.

**SUMMARY**

Scripture teaches God's omniscience, that is, that God knows himself and all things in creation exhaustively and from eternity past. This is a function of God's *lordship* over all things. God's knowledge of all things extends to the past, present, and future, encompassing even the actions of free agents. This does not destroy the freedom of humanity, but instead defines it more carefully as a *compatibilist* freedom rather than a *libertarian* freedom. Humans are not free to do anything without constraint but are constrained by their desires, circumstances, natures, and, ultimately, God. Openness theology denies all of this; where Arminian theology only denies that we have compatibilist freedom in favor of libertarian freedom, Openness theology denies that God even knows what we will do. Openness theologians argue that it is logically inconsistent to say that God knows in advance what someone would freely do in a libertarian sense. Openness

theology is not new but is essentially a relabeled Socianism, a heresy that was condemned in the 16th century.

Scripture affirms that God's knowledge of himself and of the world is exhaustive:

Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure. (Ps. 147:5)

(Peter) said to (Jesus), "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21:17)

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:12–13)

For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. (1 John 3:20)

God knows all about the starry heavens (Gen. 15:5; Ps. 147:4; Isa. 40:26; Jer. 33:22) and the tiniest details of the natural world (Pss. 50:10–11; 56:8; Matt. 10:30). God's knowledge is absolute knowledge, and so it elicits religious praise (Ps. 139:17–18; Isa. 40:28; Rom. 11:33–36). Wicked people often think that God will not notice what they do, but they will find that God does know, and that he will certainly condemn their sin (Ps. 10:11; 11:4; 73:11; 94:7; Isa. 29:15, 40:27; 47:10; Jer. 16:17–18; Ezek. 8:12). To the righteous, however, God's knowledge is a blessing of the covenant (Exod. 2:23–25; 3:7–9; 1 Kgs. 18:27; 2 Chron. 16:9; Pss. 33:18–20; 34:15–16; 38:9; 145:20; Matt. 6:32). He knows what is happening to them, he hears their prayer, and he will certainly answer.

God knows everything because he is the *Lord* of all. He made the heavens and the earth, and he knows his own plan for its history (Eph. 1:11). He has *control* over all things (Rom. 11:36), his judgments of truth have ultimate *authority* (John 17:17), and he is *present* everywhere to observe what is happening (Ps. 139). The theological term *omniscience* refers to God's exhaustive knowledge of himself and of the creation.

### **God's Knowledge of the Future**

His omniscience includes knowledge of the past, present, and future. His knowledge of the past and present is clear from the texts cited above. Scripture is equally clear in teaching God's knowledge of the future. Note, for example, this part of the definition of prophecy in Deuteronomy 18:21–22:

And if you say in your heart, 'How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?' – when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.

In this passage, part of the work of the prophet (appointed by God to bring his word to the people) is to foretell the future. If he claims to foretell the future, and that prophecy fails, then the people may conclude that he is a false prophet. The assumption behind this provision is that God knows the future, and therefore any true prophet will predict the future accurately.

Knowledge of the future is not only the test of a true prophet. It is also the test of a true God. In the contest between Yahweh, Israel's lord, and the false gods of the ancient Near East, a major issue is which God knows the future. This is a frequent theme in Isaiah 40–49, a passage that focuses on the sovereignty of Yahweh over against the absurd pretensions of the false gods:

Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, that we may consider them, that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be dismayed and terrified. (Isa. 41:– 23)

True prophets announce the future: not only momentous events like the coming of the Messiah (Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–9), but also very concrete and specific events of the near future (1 Sam. 10:1–11). These passages indicate that God has a knowledge in advance, even of free human decisions. That is also true of prophecies that indicate the broad structure of human history. An example is God's promise to Abraham:

Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (Gen. 15:13–16)

This general prediction presupposes an indefinite number of more specific future facts: that Abraham will have many descendants, that they will migrate to lands with unfriendly rulers, that the rulers of the nations will afflict them, that these afflictions will end after four hundred years, and so on. These events result from many free human decisions: by the rulers, by Abraham's offspring, by the Amorites, and so on. This prophecy of great redemptive-historical events is also a prediction of many free actions by many people. The biblical picture here is that God knows the future exhaustively, meticulously, in every detail.

The prophetic prediction of free human actions is found in many other passages (see Gen. 27:27–29, 39–40; 49:11; Num. 23–24; Deut. 32:1–43; 33:1–29; 1 Sam. 23:11; 1 Kings 13:1–4; 2 Kings 8:12). God knows everything we will say or do, before we say or do it (Ps 139:4, 16). He knew the prophet Jeremiah before his conception (Jer. 1:5). That implies that he knew in advance who would marry whom in Israel, and all the various combinations of sperm and egg that would lead to the conception of this one individual. Many free human decisions led to Jeremiah's conception, and the lord knew them all.

In the New Testament, Jesus teaches that his Father knows the day and hour of his return (Mark 13:32). But that day will not come until after other events have taken place—events that depend on free human decisions (13:1–30). Jesus also predicted that Judas would betray him (John 6:64; 13:18–19), though Judas certainly made his wicked decision freely and responsibly.

## **Openness Theology**

The view of divine omniscience summarized above has been the traditional view of orthodox Christianity—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. But some within the church have questioned it. Among these were Lelio (1525-62) and Fausto (1539-1604) Socinus. Robert Strimple describes their view as follows, contrasting it with Arminianism:

Arminianism denies that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass but wishes nevertheless to affirm God's foreknowledge of whatever comes to pass. Against the Arminians, the Socinians insisted that logically the Calvinists were quite correct in insisting that the only real basis for believing that God *knows* what you are going to do next is to believe that he has *foreordained* what you are going to do next. How else could God know ahead of time what your decision will be? Like the Arminians, however, the Socinians insisted that it was a contradiction of human freedom to believe in the sovereign foreordination of God. So they went "all the way" (logically) and denied not only that God had foreordained the free decisions of free agents but also that God foreknows what those decisions will be (see "What Does God Know?" in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, 140-41).

In the later part of the twentieth century, a movement sprung up, associated with Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, Gregory Boyd, John Sanders and others, called by such names as "open theism," "free will theism," and "openness theology." Strimple compares their teaching to that of the Socinians:

(The Socinian doctrine) is precisely the teaching of the "free will theism" of Pinnock, Rice, and other like-minded "new model evangelicals." They want their doctrine of God to sound very "new," very modern, by dressing it up with references to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in physics and to the insights of process theology (although they reject process theology as a whole...). But it is just the old Socinian heresy rejected by the church centuries ago.

As Strimple suggests, openness theology sees itself primarily as a defense of human free will. There are various understandings of human freedom in theological discussion. One view, called "compatibilism," asserts that we are free whenever we can do what we want to do. To be free is to act according to what you desire. On this view, it doesn't matter whether your decision is caused or necessitated. The term "compatibilism," in fact, indicates that freedom is compatible with causes and constraints. As long as you can choose to do what you want to do, your choice is free.

The other meaning of freedom commonly discussed in theology is "libertarian" freedom. On a libertarian basis, your decisions are free only insofar as they are not caused or constrained by anything at all. If your choice is made necessary—by your own desire, your nature, your inclinations, someone else's power over you, or even God—your decision is not free. Libertarian freedom is sometimes called "incompatibilism," because it is incompatible with any kind of causation.

Now in ordinary life, our usual concept of freedom is compatibilist. As long as we can do what we want to do, we believe that we are free. It would never occur to us to think that being compelled by our own desires removes our freedom (except, perhaps, in cases where our desires are obsessive). That is also the concept of freedom taught in Calvinist theology and, as this author believes, in Scripture. In Scripture, we can be free even when our actions are determined by our own desires, our nature (significantly, our heart: Matt. 15:18–20; Luke 6:45), our circumstances, or by God. God's sovereign determinations are, of course, all important. According to the Bible, God controls everything that happens (Rom. 11:36; Eph. 1:11), but that fact does not detract from our freedom and responsibility. God hardened Pharaoh's heart to oppress the Israelites (Rom. 9:17–18), but that divine judgment did not take away Pharaoh's freedom and responsibility.

Openness theology, however, denies that compatibilist freedom is "real" freedom. It insists that libertarian freedom, freedom from all causation, is the only freedom worthy of the name, and therefore the only possible basis of moral responsibility. Arminian theology also champions

libertarian freedom. But Arminianism tries to combine libertarian freedom with a strong view of God's omniscience. In particular, Arminians, like Calvinists, believe that God knows the future exhaustively.

But open theists, like the Socinians, point out that if God knows the future in all its details, then the future is certain. And if the future is certain, then there can be no libertarian freedom. All of our actions are constrained, if God knows them in advance. So openness theology takes a step beyond Arminianism. It not only affirms libertarian freedom as Arminianism does, but it denies that God knows in advance all the details of the future. In open theism, the (libertarian) free actions of human beings are inherently unknowable, because nothing makes them happen, not even God. So God cannot be omniscient in the traditional orthodox sense. He is ignorant of what any free agent will do in the future.

This is a startling view in a Christian context. Open theists try to relieve some of the sharpness of it by emphasizing that God, like human pundits, has the ability to project present trends in the future, so as to make a good guess as to what will happen next week, or years from now. But it is hard to imagine how such celestial punditry could explain the detailed predictions of biblical prophets, centuries before their fulfillment. And it is hard to imagine how we can fully trust a God who is ignorant of the course of our lives. A God who is ignorant of the world he has made is certainly less than the *Lord* of the Bible.

### **The 'Openness of God' and the Future of Evangelical Theology Al Mohler**

Theology will be front and center at this week's meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia. This is not a year for business as usual, for the society will be confronting charges brought against two of its members. Given the nature of the charges, one or both of these individuals may be removed from membership in the society. Why? The answer to that question points to one of the most significant controversies facing contemporary evangelicals.

The theologians in question, Clark Pinnock and John Sanders, are both proponents of a theological movement known as "Open Theism." In sum, open theists argue for a new model of understanding God's knowledge--a model that insists that true human freedom requires that God cannot know human decisions in advance.

Actually, open theists deny God's omniscience in matters that go beyond human decisions. The worldview promoted by open theists is based in a high degree of confidence that God will be able to direct the future in a general way, but open theists deny that God can possess infallible and comprehensive knowledge of the future. In essence, God is waiting with the rest of us to know how any number of issues will turn out.

Promoted by Pinnock and Sanders, along with other popular theologians such as Gregory Boyd, the open theists present a more user-friendly deity, less offensive to many moderns. This new model of God, based in something like what Clark Pinnock calls "creative love theism," redefines the God of the Bible and denies the classical understanding of God's sovereignty, knowledge, and power.

Bruce Ware, a careful critic of open theism, summarizes the movement in this way: "This movement takes its name from the fact that its adherents view much of the future as 'open' rather than closed, even to God. Much of the future, that is, is yet undecided, and hence it is unknown to God. God knows all that can be known, open theists assure us. But future free

choices and actions, because they haven't happened yet, do not exist, and so God (even God) cannot know them."

As Ware explains, "God cannot know what does not exist, they claim, and since the future does not now exist, God cannot know it." Most importantly, open theists argue that God cannot know what free creatures will choose or do in the future. Thus, "God learns moment-by-moment what we do, when we do it, and His plans must constantly be adjusted to what actually happens, in so far as this is different than what He anticipated."

In two important books, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* and *Their God is Too Small* [both from Crossway Books], Ware provides a responsible and careful analysis of the open theists' arguments. Ware takes these thinkers seriously, and judges their argument by the Bible. In so doing, he concludes that the open view of God "poses a challenge to the evangelical church that is unparalleled in this generation."

The doctrine of God is the central organizing principle of Christian theology, and it establishes the foundation of all other theological principles. Evangelical Christians believe in the unity of truth. Therefore a shift in the doctrine of God--much less of this consequence--necessarily implies shifts and transformations in all other doctrines.

The open theists point to biblical passages that speak of God repenting or changing His mind. Rather than interpreting those passages in keeping with the explicit statements of Scripture that God knows the future perfectly, the open theists turn the theological system on its head, and interpret the clear teaching of Scripture through the narratives--rather than the other way round.

**They also counsel that their "open" view of God is more helpful than classical Christian theism.** After all, they advise, it allows God "off the hook" when things do not go as we had hoped.

In a now notorious example, Greg Boyd tells of a woman whose plans for missionary service were ruined by the adultery of her husband and subsequent divorce. This woman, Boyd relates, went to her pastor for counsel, asking him how God could have led her to have married this young man, only to see the marriage end in adultery and disaster. This pastor [presumably Boyd himself?] assured the woman that God shared her surprise and disappointment in how the young man turned out.

Most evangelicals would be shocked to meet this updated model of God face to face. Nevertheless, subtle shifts in evangelical conviction have been undermining Christianity's biblical concept of God.

Belief in God's absolute knowledge has united theologians in the evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox traditions. Denials of divine omniscience have been limited to heretical movements like the Socinians. Even where Calvinists and Arminians have differed on the relationship between the divine will and foreknowledge, they have stood united in affirming God's absolute, comprehensive, and unconditional knowledge of the future.

Several years ago, a major study of religious belief revealed just how radically our culture has compromised the doctrine of God. Sociologists asked the question, "Do you believe in a God that can change the course of events on earth?" One answer, which became the title of the study, was "No, just the ordinary one." That is to say, modern men and women seem to feel no

need to believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth--just an "ordinary God" who is an innocent bystander observing human events.

Measured against the biblical revelation, this is not God at all. The God of the Bible is not a bystander in human events. Throughout the Scriptures, God speaks of His own unlimited power, sovereign will, and perfect knowledge.

This model of divine sovereignty is explicitly denied by the open theists. As Clark Pinnock explains, "God is sovereign according to the Bible in the sense of having the power to exist in himself and the power to call forth the universe out of nothing by his Word. But God's sovereignty does not have to mean what some theists and atheists claim, namely, the power to determine each detail in the history of the world."

The obvious question to ask at this point is this: Just which details does God choose to determine? Pinnock's "creative love theism" is, regardless of his intentions, a way of taking theism out of theology. This God is so redefined that He bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible.

Pinnock and his colleagues argue that evangelicals must transform our understanding of God into a model that is more "culturally compelling." Where does this end? The culture gets to define our model of God?

Open theism does not stand alone. Acceptance of this model will require a complete transformation of evangelical conviction. A redefinition of the doctrine of God leads immediately to the redefinition of the Gospel. A reformulation of our understanding of God's knowledge leads inescapably to a reformulation of how God relates to the world.

Indeed, some have gone so far as to call for an "evangelical mega-shift," that would completely transform evangelical conviction for a new generation. Even granting the open theist the highest motivations, the result of their theological transformation would be unmitigated disaster for the church.

The late B.B. Warfield remarked that God could be removed altogether from some systematic theologies without any material impact on the other doctrines in the system. My fear is that this indictment can be generalized of much contemporary evangelical theology. As the culture draws to a close, evangelicals are not arguing over the denominational issues that marked the debate of the twentieth century's early years. The issues are now far more serious.

Sadly, evangelicals are now debating the central doctrine of Christian theism. The question is whether evangelicals will affirm and worship the sovereign and purposeful God of the Bible, or shift their allegiance to the limited God of the modern mega-shift.

At stake is not only the future of the Evangelical Theological Society, but of evangelical theology itself. Regardless of how the votes go in Atlanta, this issue is likely to remain on the front burner of evangelical attention for years to come.

The debate over open theism is another reminder that theology is too important to be left to the theologians. Open theism must be a matter of concern for the whole church. This much is certain--God is not waiting to see how this vote turns out.

**Q: 1 SAM 15:11 SAYS THAT GOD REGRETTED MAKING SAUL KING.  
EXPLAIN.**

**Does God Have Regret? DeYoung**

Israel wasn't supposed to want a king, but they asked anyway. So God gave them what they wanted—an impressive human king, just like the other nations had. His name was Saul, and he didn't last long. He disobeyed the divine command, infuriating the prophet-judge Samuel and upsetting the Lord God.

The word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." (1 Samuel 15:10-11)

In 1 Samuel 15:35, we see a similar statement:

And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

Strong words. And surprising too. What does it mean for God to say "I regret"? Can God change his mind? Can we thwart God's plans? Is God ignorant about the future? Is God just like us in that he makes honest mistakes and sometimes look back at his decisions and says, "Golly, I wish I could do that one over again"? It seems like our God makes mistakes and is forced to change course.

And yet, we know this is not the right way to understand God's regret because of what we read a few verses earlier in 1 Samuel 15:

And Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." (28-29)

We must keep in mind one of the great principles of biblical interpretation: the author was not completely stupid. We have no reason (other than our own biases) to think verse 29 was inserted by a later scribe and no reason to think verse 29 cannot cohere with verses 11 and 35. Clearly, if we are going to be wise, consistent students of Scripture we have to allow that in some sense God can regret, while in another sense God would not be God if he did regret. The author of 1 Samuel—not to the mention the Author behind 1 Samuel—is trying to teach us something about God. On the one hand, our God is not static, monotonous, and lifeless. As a personal, relational Being, God's activity in the world is subject to change and allows for all the dynamism we have in our personal relationships. There was always bound to be conflict in covenantal history *between* God and human beings, but this does not mean there is conflict *within* God's inner being (see Horton, The Christian Faith, 240-241). As God's ways appear to us, there will be change and variation, but as God is in his character and essence there can be no variation of shadow due to change (James 1:17; cf. Mal.3:6; Heb. 13:8; 2 Tim. 2:13). When God reflects on the disobedience of Saul, he uses a word that makes sense to us: the word "regret." But this doesn't mean God was ignorant about Saul's sin or caught off guard by his rebellion. As John Piper points out, God is quite capable of lamenting a state of affairs he himself foreknew and brought about. In other words, God's regret is not analogous in every way

to our regret. This seems to be the point verse 29 is explicitly making. God can look back at Saul and say "I'm grieved that he sinned; it's time to find another king" while still maintaining, "I never change my mind."

It is the nature of our covenantal relationship with God to know God as one who responds and reacts, which ought to appear to us all the more amazing because it is the nature of our covenant keeping God never to lie, repent, or change his mind (Num. 23:19).

### **Did God regret setting up Saul to be king in Israel? 1 Samuel 15:11**

#### **Question**

Saul sinned and God was displeased. But how could God grieve (1 Sam. 15:11) over his own selection of Saul as King (1 Sam. 8:17-21) when he cannot repent? (1 Sam. 15:29)

#### **Answer**

1 Samuel 15:11 I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions. Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the LORD all that night.

1 Samuel 15:35 Until the day Samuel died, he did not go to see Saul again, though Samuel mourned for him. And the LORD was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel.

1 Samuel 15:29 He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind.

Sin grieves God (Gen. 6:6). Saul sinned. He had failed to destroy the Amalekites the way God had instructed (see If God is Love - 1 Samuel 15:2-3). Because Saul rejected the word of the Lord, God announced he was removing him from being king (1 Sam. 15:23). Saul attempted to defend his actions with excuses and not repentance - 2 Cor. 7:10), but to no avail. God's decision was final. Then the text that follows states that God "regretted" setting up Saul as king.

The meaning of verse 29 is that Saul's rejection was final and nothing could change God's mind. 1 Samuel 15:29 is consistent with Numbers 23:19 which states, "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" In other words, God's repenting is not like man's repenting (Isa. 55:8-9). God's repenting is not based upon ignorance. God's repenting is based upon foreseeing the future he ordained; he knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10; 1 Samuel 8:19; 9:17; 10:20-21, 24 see Was Saul chosen by God, by the people, or by casting a lot?). The past, present, and future lie continuously before God (Psa. 139:1-6). "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18, KJV; cf. Isa 45:21). His plan and purpose are not mere whims (Psa. 33:11; Isa. 14:24). God does not learn. He never grows in knowledge or wisdom. He never grows or develops in any respect. He cannot improve upon his own perfection. He never differs from himself. God is God (Exod. 3:14), the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Rom. 11:33).

The repenting of God is wholly different from that of man (1 Sam. 15:29) - a turning of his heart in a new direction, but not one that was unforeseen (1 Sam. 8:7-21). God was not surprised by some turn of events in Saul's life. "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases" (Prov. 21:1). The change in God's direction is not him saying, "Oops! I made a boo-boo." It was because the turn of events, which he foreordained and foreknew (Rom. 9:16-21), now justified taking a different attitude more fitting to the situation (i.e. in this case, God does not bless disobedience, but rather judges it). Of course, though they are not always known and/or understood by us, God's reasons are always justified.

## **Q: HOW DO YOU RECONCILE GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR FREE WILL?**

### God's Sovereignty and Our Responsibility

God is sovereign in creation, providence, redemption, and judgment. That is a central assertion of Christian belief and especially in Reformed theology. God is King and Lord of all. To put this another way: nothing happens without God's willing it to happen, willing it to happen before it happens, and willing it to happen in the way that it happens. Put this way, it seems to say something that is expressly Reformed in doctrine. But at its heart, it is saying nothing different from the assertion of the Nicene Creed: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty." To say that God is sovereign is to express His almighty in every area.

God is sovereign in creation. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Apart from God, there was nothing. And then there was

something: matter, space, time, energy. And these came into being ex nihilo—out of nothing. The will to create was entirely God's. The execution was entirely His. There was no metaphysical “necessity” to create; it was a free action of God.

God is sovereign in providence. Traditional theism insists that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent—all powerful, all knowing, and everywhere present. Each assertion is a variant of divine sovereignty. His power, knowledge, and presence ensure that His goals are met, that His designs are fulfilled, and that His superintendence of all events is (to God, at least) essentially “risk free.”

God's power is not absolute in the sense that God can do anything (*potestas absoluta*); rather, God's power ensures that He can do all that is logically possible for Him to will to do. “He cannot deny himself,” for example (2 Tim. 2:13).

Some people object to the idea that God knows all events in advance of their happening. Such a view, some insist, deprives mankind of its essential freedom. Open theists or free-will theists, for example, insist that the future (at least in its specific details) is in some fashion “open.” Even God does not know all that is to come. He may make predictions like some cosmic poker player, but He cannot know absolutely. This explains, open theists suggest, why God appears to change His mind: God is adjusting His plan based on the new information of unforeseeable events (see Gen. 6:6–7; 1 Sam. 15:11). Reformed theology, on the other hand, insists that no event happens that is a surprise to God. To us it is luck or chance, but to God it is part of His decree. “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (Prov. 16:33). Language of God changing His mind in Scripture is an accommodation to us and our way of speaking, not a description of a true change in God's mind.

God is sovereign in redemption, a fact that explains why we thank God for our salvation and pray to Him for the salvation of our spiritually lost friends. If the power to save lies in man's free will, if it truly lies in their unaided ability to save themselves, why would we implore God to “quicken,” “save,” or “regenerate” them? The fact that we consistently thank God for the salvation of individuals means (whether we admit it or not) that belief in absolute free will is inconsistent.

God is sovereign in judgment. Few passages of Scripture reflect the sovereignty of God in election and reprobation with greater force than Romans 9:21: “Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?” On the face of it, this might appear unfair and arbitrary—as though God were playing some vindictive child's game with the petals of a flower: “He loves me; He loves me not. He loves me; He loves me not.” In response, some people have insisted that God has the right to do whatever He pleases and it is none of our business to find fault with Him—a point that Paul himself anticipates (Rom. 9:20). Others have taken the view that if God were to grant us what we deserve, we would all be damned. Election is therefore a gracious (and not just a sovereign) act. Both are true. But in any

case, our salvation displays God's glory: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36)

## HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

The assertion of divine sovereignty is not without further questions that should be addressed.

First, there is the question of evangelism. If God is sovereign in all matters of providence, what is the point of exerting human effort in evangelism and missions? God's will is sure to be fulfilled whether we evangelize or not. But we dare not reason this way. Apart from the fact that God commands us to evangelize—"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19)—such reasoning ignores the fact that God fulfills His sovereign plan through human means and instrumentality. Nowhere in the Bible are we encouraged to be passive and inert. Paul commands his Philippian readers to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12–13).

Second, there is the question of ethics. We are held responsible for our actions and behavior. We are culpable in transgression and praiseworthy in obedience.

Third, in relation to civic power and authority, there is the question of God's sovereignty in the determination of rulers and government. God has raised up civil governments to be systems of equity and good and peace, for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of them who do well (Rom. 13:3; 1 Peter 2:14). But this is also true of evil powers and corrupt regimes that violate the very principles of government itself; these are also under the sovereign government of Almighty God.

Fourth, in the question of both the origin and continued existence of evil, the sovereignty of God meets its most acute problem. That God does not prevent evil from existing seems to call into question His omnipotence or His benevolence. Some non-Christian religions try to solve this problem by positing that evil is imaginary (Christian Science) or an illusion (Hinduism). Augustine and many medieval thinkers believed part of the mystery could be solved by identifying evil as a privation of the good, suggesting that evil is something without existence in and of itself. Evil is a matter of ontology (being). Reformed thought on this issue is summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith:

*God, from all eternity, did, by  
the most wise and holy  
counsel of His own will, freely,  
and unchangeably ordain  
whatsoever comes to pass:  
yet so, as thereby neither is  
God the author of sin, nor is  
violence offered to the will of  
the creatures; nor is the*

*liberty or contingency of  
second causes taken away,  
but rather established. (3:1)*

### **How does God's sovereignty work together with free will?**

**Question:** "How does God's sovereignty work together with free will?"

**Answer:** It is impossible for us to fully understand the dynamics of a holy God molding and shaping the will of man. Scripture is clear that God knows the future (Matthew 6:8; Psalm 139:1-4) and has total sovereign control over all things (Colossians 1:16-17; Daniel 4:35). The Bible also says that we must choose God or be eternally separated from Him. We are held responsible for our actions (Romans 3:19; 6:23; 9:19-21). How these facts work together is impossible for a finite mind to comprehend (Romans 11:33-36).

People can take one of two extremes in regard to this question. Some emphasize the sovereignty of God to the point that human beings are little more than robots simply doing what they have been sovereignly programmed to do. Others emphasize free will to the point of God not having complete control and/or knowledge of all things. Neither of these positions is biblical. The truth is that God does not violate our wills by choosing us and redeeming us. Rather, He changes our hearts so that our wills choose Him. "We love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19), and "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16).

What are we to do then? First, we are to trust in the Lord, knowing that He is in control (Proverbs 3:5-6). God's sovereignty is supposed to be a comfort to us, not an issue to be concerned about or debate over. Second, we are to live our lives making wise decisions in accordance with God's Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17; James 1:5). There will be no excuses before God for why we chose to disobey Him. We will have no one to blame but ourselves for our sin. Last but not least, we are to worship the Lord, praising Him that He is so wonderful, infinite, powerful, full of grace and mercy—and sovereign.

**Recommended Resource:** Chosen But Free, revised edition: A Balanced View of God's Sovereignty and Free Will by Norm Geisler and The Potter's Freedom by James White

### **Is God Sovereign over My Free Will? Piper**

The definition of free will that creates controversies with those like me who believe in the sovereignty of God over the human will — not just a general statement about the sovereignty of God, but God's sovereignty over the human will — that definition is this: *man's will is free if he has the power of ultimate self-determination.*

"No one can come to Jesus, no one can believe, unless God grants him the faith."

What I mean by ultimate self-determination is that no power outside of man himself has ultimate or decisive control over what a man chooses, at least not when he is acting as a moral agent who must give an account to God. This excludes other people, influences, and God himself. None of them would have decisive control over a person's choices.

God and man and nature may have some influence, but this influence cannot be decisive. They may have a kind of causality, but not ultimate causality or decisive causality. Otherwise, the man would not be free on this definition that I am unfolding.

Wesleyans and Arminians insist that for a person to believe on Christ and be saved, divine influence is necessary. They call it *preventive grace* — grace that has come before our faith and thus influences us toward Christ.

But this influence on the Wesleyan and Arminian understanding cannot be decisive. The final, decisive, ultimate cause of our believing Christ is not the Holy Spirit. It is not divine grace. It is our own input.

God may get the process of conversion started, but the decisive influence is provided by ourselves. This is what is meant by free will on this definition. It is ultimate or decisive self-determination.

### **Judas and God**

Now if that is what Tyson means in his question, I can't answer his question because I don't think such a thing exists anywhere in the universe, except in the will of God. Only God has free will in the sense of ultimate self-determination. Here are a few of the reasons why I think that, because I don't know whether Tyson agrees with that or not.

Jesus talked about why Judas did not believe on him: "(Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father'" John 6:64–65.

In other words, no one can come to Jesus, that is, no one can believe, unless God grants him the faith. Judas did not come to Jesus decisively, fully, savingly because it was not granted to him, as Jesus said, *by the Father*.

Jesus takes that truth and generalizes it to all of us and says in this very verse: "No one" — not just Judas — "can come to me unless it is granted" — unless the decisive coming is granted — "by the Father." No one has the power of ultimate self-determination to get themselves to God. God gives or withholds the power to come. Nudges to come will not save anybody. What is given by God is the coming.

### **Flip of a Coin**

Another reason I don't think ultimate self-determination exists in human beings is 2 Timothy 2:24–25, where Paul says that the Lord's servant should correct "his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth."

"We make choices. We have a will. Our will is active. We are genuine moral agents."

Repentance is the flip side of the coin of faith. Faith is on one side of the coin and faith embraces Christ. Repentance turns from embracing other false reliances. The gift of repentance is the gift of the coin. It is the gift of rejecting self-reliance and embracing Christ. It is a gift of salvation. Without the gift of God to cause us to repent and believe, none of us would be saved.

## New Birthrights

Another reason is that John says in 1 John 5:1, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." Self-willed faith does not bring about the new birth. Just the opposite. The new birth brings about faith. Faith is, therefore, not the result of human self-determination but of the new birth.

One more reason (among many, many more) is Proverbs 21:1: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." No king anywhere on earth has the power of ultimate self-determination. So I don't think such a thing exists, except in God. God is ultimately self-determining, but man is not ultimately and decisively self-determining.

## Free People

Nevertheless — and I think this gets at what Tyson is asking about. We are responsible, accountable, for our preferences and our choices.

"We do not have ultimate self-determination, but we will all give an account to God for our choices."

If God is sovereign over the human will, are we responsible? Yes, we are. The Bible says so over and over again that we are. Our choices are our choices. They are true choices. We have a will. Our will is active. We are genuine moral agents.

We will, as Jesus says, "give account for every careless word" (Matthew 12:36). Indeed, we will give an account, according to Romans 14:12, of all of our preferences and choices and behaviors. Each of us will give an account of himself to God. Human beings do not have ultimate self-determination, and we will all give an account to God for our preferences and our choices.

So instead of speaking of the will as free or not, I prefer to speak of people as free or not because that is the way the Bible does. "For freedom Christ has set us free," Paul says in Galatians 5:1. Christians are free from the bondage to sin and from the oppressive demand of having to perform our own salvation.

Maybe the best way to end would be to quote this great liberation from Romans 6:17–18: "Thanks be to God." That is so important. And that is the way we should live as believers, with a heart brimming like this. "Thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

<https://www.compellingtruth.org/sovereignty-free-will.html>

Before any explanation of the way God's sovereignty works alongside man's free will can be attempted, it is important to define these terms. A basic biblical description of God's sovereignty is His kingship, His rule, and the fact that He has the final authority in everything. Sovereignty means that from the highest king to the smallest atom, everything bows, ultimately, to His power (Romans 14:11, 11:36). Free will, as regards the choice we make to accept or reject salvation, is not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, but the phrase "free will" is popularly used to describe the concept of man's ability to make choices as he goes through his life and his responsibility to make the right choices.

That said, it is not possible for man's ability to choose to somehow trump or overrule God's sovereignty. Our choices cannot be made outside of His will. Many questions arise in our minds when looking at these two realities side by side. How should we look at evangelism? Are we truly free to choose if His will is sovereign over ours? And how is it fair that we are held responsible for our actions if our salvation is according to His will?

It is true that man's salvation is determined, and effected, by God (Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:2). God chose to save His elect before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), and those elect people are consistently referred to as the "chosen" of God (Romans 8:33, 11:5; Ephesians 1:11; Colossians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:2, 2:9). The word "elect" is also used continually throughout Scripture (Matthew 24:22, 31; Mark 13:20, 27; Romans 11:7; 1 Timothy 5:21; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1). The Bible repeatedly confirms that believers are both predestined (Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:5, 11) and elected (Romans 9:11, 11:28; 2 Peter 1:10) to salvation.

It is also true that man is responsible to repent and believe in Christ (John 3:16; Romans 10:9-10). The experience of every Christian confirms that repentance from sin and belief in the blood of Christ to cover our sins is something we must do, willingly, to be saved. Does this mean that our wills are free? That is a more difficult question. The Scripture seems to indicate that the first step in salvation is not taken by us, but by God. Our hearts are changed by Him, making us new creatures, with a new desire for Him, and a new trajectory in life (2 Corinthians 5:17). Ephesians 2:1-5 and Romans 5:6-10 tell us that Christ died for us when we were "dead in trespasses" and still sinners and still His enemies. It is true that our hearts must respond to His love and to His call. But it is also true that the heart that responds to His call is by necessity a changed heart.

It is not possible for a finite creature (man) to grasp the intricacies of God's infinite will (Romans 11:33-36). People have been discussing free will and sovereignty for ages and will continue to do so. It's good to think about it, to read the Bible, and to ask for wisdom to understand it. Yet, in the meantime, we must not forget that He has given us commands to follow. We are to take the gospel to the whole world (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). We are to turn away from sin and follow

Him, forsaking this world. We are to love Him and love our neighbors, our brothers, and our enemies in emulation of Christ.

## **Q: HOW DOES ONE DEAD IN SIN BECOME ALIVE IN CHRIST?**

### **'Passed from Death to Life' in the Bible**

'Passed from Death to Life' in the Bible

John 5:24

"I assure you: Anyone who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not come under judgment but has passed from death to life.

1 John 3:14

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

### **What does "passed from death to life" mean in 1 John 3:14?**

In 1 John 3:14, we read this:

*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.*

Is John saying that in order to receive eternal life, you need to love other Christians? Lots of other pastors and Bible scholars teach 1 John 3:14 in just this way, but is that really what John meant?

If so, then how can eternal life be received "by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone"?

If eternal life is *also* earned by making sure we love other people, then eternal life is partially earned by good works, and is no longer by grace alone through faith alone.

**So what is the meaning of 1 John 3:14?**

### **The Theme of Fellowship in 1 John**

To understand 1 John 3:14, it is first of all important to understand why 1 John was written. **The first letter of John is written so that the readers may live a life of fellowship with God and with one another (1 John 1:3).**

With this as his primary theme, John provides instructions throughout his letter about how to have fellowship with God and with one another.

Note that fellowship is not the same thing as a relationship (see *Fellowship*). You can be related to someone while not having any fellowship with them. Children are often estranged from parents, so that while they are still related, they never gather together to enjoy each other's company.

The same thing can happen to those who are related to God and to one another through Jesus Christ. We can be spiritually related while failing to be in daily fellowship.

**John writes his letter to make sure that those who read it maintain their fellowship with God and with one another.**

With this theme in mind, John paints many contrasts in his letter, comparing the life out of fellowship with darkness and death, while describing life within fellowship as light and life (cf. 1 John 1:5-7; 2:8-10; 3:14-16; 5:11-13).

And while eternal life is mentioned in this letter (cf. 1 John 2:25; 3:15; 5:11), this is not because John is equating eternal life and fellowship, but because ongoing fellowship with God and one another is based on the unchanging fact of eternal life from God.

**While you can have relationship without fellowship, you cannot truly have fellowship without relationship.**

John knows his readers have the relationship with God and writes so that they might maintain their fellowship as well (cf. 1 John 2:12-14). To live out of fellowship is not to lose our eternal life, but to live away from light and love and in the realm of death and darkness.

### **1 John 3:14 is about fellowship with God and others**

**So when John writes in 1 John 3:14 that we know we have passed from death to life because we love our brethren, he is not talking about how we know we have eternal life, but how we know we are in fellowship with God and one another.**

One way to know you are in fellowship with God is because you are in fellowship with other believers, that is, because you love one another.

The opposite is also true. Anyone who does not love his brother "abides in death." The word "abide" means "remain, or to continually dwell" (see *Abide*), and so the one who hates his brother is not living in the fellowship that God wants and desires for us, but is instead continuing to live in the realm of death, from which Jesus rescued and delivered us.

### **1 John 3:14 is about escaping the realm of death in which we live, and experiencing true life**

As seen in my studies on the word "Death," the world is controlled by death. We engage in rivalry and accusation which leads to the death of others, and we kill others in the attempt to

avoid our own death. We also believe that the death of our enemies will bring peace, but violence against our enemies only results in an increase of their violence against us.

Jesus came to rescue and deliver us from this never-ending cycle of escalating violence, but if we Christians continue to hate our brothers and live in rivalry against them, we have not escaped the control of death but continue to dwell in it and be ruled by it.

**So, John invites his readers to love one another instead of hate, and in this way, escape the realm of death.**

The context provides further evidence that physical violence against other human beings is what John has in mind when he writes about death. He is not talking about spiritual death or the loss of eternal life, or even that the one who hates his brother proves that he really wasn't a Christian in the first place.

The context has nothing to do with such ideas.

Instead, John directs the reader to the first death in Scripture, when Cain murdered his brother Abel (1 John 3:12). John also goes on to describe death as "murder" (1 John 3:15). While John does go on to say that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him (1 John 3:15), he does not mean that no murderer can be a Christian, or that no Christian can murder someone. He means that when a Christian hates someone or murders someone (for this does happen), it is because they are continuing to follow the ways of this world, rather than the ways of God (see the discussion of 1 John 3:14-15 under Abide).

### **The meaning of 1 John 3:14**

1 John 3:14 is not about gaining or keeping eternal life, or proving that you have it. Instead, it is about living in the way of life that God wants for His people, rather than the way of death that this world is accustomed to.

## **Q: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE EVANGELICAL?**

### **What is an Evangelical?**

Evangelicals take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The term "evangelical" comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning "the good news" or the "gospel." Thus, the evangelical faith focuses on the "good news" of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ.

Evangelicals are a vibrant and diverse group, including believers found in many churches, denominations and nations. Our community brings together Reformed, Holiness, Anabaptist, Pentecostal, Charismatic and other traditions. As noted in the statement "Evangelicals — Shared Faith in Broad Diversity," our core theological convictions provide unity in the midst of our diversity. The NAE Statement of Faith offers a standard for these evangelical convictions.

Historian David Bebbington also provides a helpful summary of evangelical distinctives, identifying four primary characteristics of evangelicalism:

- Conversionism: the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a life long process of following Jesus
- Activism: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts
- Biblicism: a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority
- Crucicentrism: a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making possible the redemption of humanity

These distinctives and theological convictions define us — not political, social or cultural trends. In fact, many evangelicals rarely use the term “evangelical” to describe themselves, focusing simply on the core convictions of the triune God, the Bible, faith, Jesus, salvation, evangelism and discipleship.

## Defining Evangelicals in Research

Evangelicals are a common subject of research, but often the outcomes of that research vary due to differences in the methods used to identify evangelicals. In response to that challenge the NAE and LifeWay Research developed a tool to provide a consistent standard for identification of evangelical belief.

The NAE/LifeWay Research method includes four statements to which respondents must strongly agree to be categorized as evangelical:

- The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
- It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
- Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
- Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.

## Evangelicals - Evangelicals V. Mainline Protestants | The Jesus Factor | FRONTLINE

The easiest way to explain the differences between evangelicals and mainline Protestants is to start with evangelicals, because evangelicals have a clearer set of beliefs that distinguish them than mainline Protestants do.

The term evangelical comes from the word "evangel" which is a word form in Greek from the New Testament that refers to the good news of Jesus Christ -- that Jesus came to save humanity -- and evangelicals have a particular take on the good news. That makes them distinctive from other Christians. It could be summarized, I think, with four cardinal beliefs that evangelicals tend to hold, at least officially.

One belief is that the Bible is inerrant. It was without error in all of its claims about the nature of the world and the nature of God. A second belief is that the only way to salvation is through belief in Jesus Christ. A third belief, and one that is most well known, is the idea that individuals must accept salvation for themselves. They must become converted. Sometimes that's referred to as a born-again experience, sometimes a little different language. Then the fourth cardinal belief of evangelicals is the need to proselytize, or in their case, to spread the evangel, to evangelize.

Now different members of the evangelical community have slightly different takes on those four cardinal beliefs. But what distinguishes the evangelicals from other Protestants and other Christians is these four central beliefs that set them apart.

Mainline Protestants have a different perspective. They have a more modernist theology. So, for instance, they would read the Bible, not as the inerrant word of God, but as a historical document, which has God's word in it and a lot of very important truths, but that needs to be interpreted in every age by individuals of that time and that place.

Mainline Protestants tend to also believe that Jesus is the way to salvation. But many mainline Protestants would believe that perhaps there are other ways to salvation as well. People in other religious traditions, even outside of Christianity, may have access to God's grace and to salvation as well, on their own terms, and through their own means.

Mainline Protestants are much less concerned with personal conversion. Although they do talk about spiritual transformation, they'll often discuss a spiritual journey from one's youth to old age, leading on into eternity. So there is a sense of transformation, but

there isn't that emphasis on conversion -- on that one moment or series of moments in which one's life is dramatically changed.

Finally, mainline Protestants are somewhat less concerned with proselytizing than evangelicals. Certainly proselytizing is something they believe in. They believe in sharing their beliefs with others, but not for the purposes of conversion necessarily. The idea of spreading the word in the mainline tradition is much broader than simply preaching the good news. It also involves economic development. It involves personal assistance, charity, a whole number of other activities.

But on many points, evangelicals and mainliners are sometimes hard to tell apart, because there are people in the evangelical tradition who are somewhat more modernist and tend towards the mainline. We often refer to them as liberal evangelicals. But then there are also people in the mainline churches who have a more traditional, or conservative perspective. They're sometimes referred to as evangelical mainline Protestants.

So this is a little bit confusing here, because the two communities are not as completely distinct as some might argue. But there are clear distinctions at the core of each tradition, which allows us to recognize them as different approaches to Protestantism.

Why are mainline Protestant churches going along at a sort of steady pace and even declining, and evangelical churches are definitely seeing an increase?

The churches that are known as evangelical today are descended from the mainline Protestant churches of the 19th century. When a distinction is made between evangelical and mainline churches, it's not a hard and fast distinction. There are many, many evangelical mainline Protestants.

But the mainline churches are traditional. They are less entrepreneurial, less flexible in relationship to cultural [issues], and have, for reasons of belief and practice and organization, not fared nearly as well in the postwar world as have more self-consciously, self-identified evangelical churches.

National Association of Evangelicals.

Read the  
full interview  
+

**... When you speak of mainline Protestants and what their beliefs are about the Bible, is it basically the difference between believing that the Bible is an interesting set of stories, versus a set of laws, a set of truth? ...**

That may be a layman's definition. But I think there's one way to understand the evangelical view of the Bible. It is viewed as the objective authoritative word of God, as opposed to the mainline Protestant view called neo-orthodoxy which holds, you see, that the Bible becomes the word of God in a kind of existential encounter with it.

So that's the distinction. It doesn't just become the word of God when you have an experience with God or an experience with the Word. It is objectively, authoritatively the word of God. That's what distinguishes evangelicals from, say, mainline Protestants. ...

**Let's talk about the old churches versus the new.**

People have wondered, why are conservative churches growing? The answer is, they offer moral certitudes in a world without any certainties, it seems. They offer moral absolutes to people who are looking for moral guidance, and a way to live in a crazy, mixed up world. Then they combine it with contemporary music and worship. It's appealing, and they're growing. There's a mega-church formed every two weeks in America. Meanwhile, mainline Protestantism, sometimes called the sidelines, is dying.

**What Does "Evangelical" Really Mean? 10 Things to Know**

## **Q: TELL US WHAT IT MEANS THAT THE CHURCH IS MISSIONAL.**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missional\\_living#:~:text=%22Missional%20church%20is%20a%20community,authentic%20organizing%20principle%20is%20mission.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Missional_living#:~:text=%22Missional%20church%20is%20a%20community,authentic%20organizing%20principle%20is%20mission.)

### What in the World is the Missional Church?

In this issue of 9News, Eric Simmons does a great job of describing the missional life. Ryan Townsend and Andy Johnson both refer to the topic in their articles. The pastors' and theologians' forum on the corporate witness of the church touches on some of the underlying principles of the missional church. Yet in case you've been asleep like me, it's worth poking our heads up and asking, what in the world in the missional church?

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DISCUSSION**

The term wasn't coined by Darrell Guder, but this Princeton Seminary professor suggests that the book *Missional Church*, which he co-wrote and edited in 1998, "must be held accountable, it appears, for the rapid spread of the term *missional* in many circles of discussion dealing with the situation of the church in North America." [1]

Guder and the members of his "Gospel and Our Culture" (GOC) team, however, will quickly trace the missional church story back to conversations begun in missiological and ecumenical circles in the 1950s and earlier, about the same time that Donald McGavran's Church Growth theories were arousing interest among evangelicals in North America.

At a conference of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in 1952, Wilhelm Anderson, building on the work of Karl Barth, proposed that both church and mission should be taken up into the *missio Dei*—the mission of God. Missions is not just a function of the church. And the church is not just the outcome of missions. Rather, both are grounded in a Triune God on mission. The Father sent the Son; the Father and Son sent the Spirit; and now the Spirit sends the church. The church has a missionary—we now say missional—nature. Johannes Blauw captured the basic premise in the title of his 1962 book: *The Missionary Nature of the Church*. Ecumenicals embraced this way of speaking more fully with the merger of the IMC and the World Council of Churches in 1961, followed by Roman Catholics and Vatican II's pronouncement that "the Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit." [2] Signaling this shift in thinking among many, the World Council of Churches in 1969 dropped the "s" from its journal *International Review of Missions* to become *International Review of Mission*. [3] The Anglican missionary to India Lesslie Newbigin, who was also writing on the church and *missio Dei* in the fifties and sixties, returned from India to Britain in the seventies and found not only a post-Christian society, but a church that failed to distinguish itself from society. Moving into the eighties and nineties, Newbigin increasingly called for a critical reevaluation of the church and its relationship to Western pluralistic and postmodern culture.

Ever since this process of critical revaluation began, Newbigin and others have generally cast the history of the church and the missionary enterprise over the last several centuries as the story of the church's capitulation to modernity. David Bosch's fascinating and thick *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (1991) provides, as best as I can tell, the script from which ecumenicals, emergents, and traditional mainliners all read. Bosch sees liberals and fundamentalists as two sides of the Enlightenment coin. Both privatize Christianity.

Both reduce the church to “a place where things happen,” like preaching, distributing the ordinances, and practicing discipline. (The church is not a place, it’s a people.) Both blur their culture with their Christianity, so that missions and “gospel” proclamation become, at best, the Western white man’s condescension to the pitiable, unenlightened native and, at worst, colonial imperialism. Both idolize reason, dichotomize facts and values, and idealize their objective version of reality. Here’s one example of many:

The *subject-object dichotomy* [one attribute of Enlightenment thinking] meant that, in admittedly very opposite ways, the Bible and, in fact, the Christian faith as such, became objectified. Liberals sovereignly placed themselves above the biblical text, extracting ethical codes from it, while fundamentalists tended to turn the Bible into a fetish and apply it mechanically to every context, particularly as regards the “Great Commission.” [4]

As Bosch, Guder, Newbigin, and the rest look out at the world of church and missions, they see a “crisis,” the kind that always precedes a Kuhnian paradigm shift. The symptoms of the crisis may be the stuff of polls: diminishing numbers, the loss of younger generations, biblical illiteracy, and so on. But the real crisis is spiritual and theological, stemming from the church’s failure to understand the postmodern context in which it now dwells. If the church wants to be relevant; if it wants to succeed in its mission, it must give attention to contextualization. It must learn to understand, communicate, and demonstrate the beauty of the gospel afresh. One GOC author writes,

What exactly is the gospel, then? Identifying the gospel is both simple and challenging. No culture-free expression of the gospel exists, nor could it. The church’s message, the gospel, is inevitably articulated in linguistic and cultural forms particular to its own place and time. Thus a rehearsing of the gospel can be vulnerable to the “gospels” that we may tend to read back into the New Testament renderings of it. [5]

The church, then, is tasked with sometimes affirming, sometimes critiquing the philosophies of the day. It thinks and breathes within those philosophies, but it is not of them. The church must explain and display the kingdom of heaven today, now, here. Yet it must do so as a “pilgrim people.” In other words, the church, like its Savior, must “embody,” “enflesh,” “incarnate” the good news that God’s redemptive reign of peace, justice, and healing now extends to all the world through his Spirit and his body, the church.

## DEFINING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

To repeat, the basic premise of the missional church is that “missions” is not simply one of the functions or programs of a church. It constitutes the very essence or nature of the church. Drop the “s.” God is a God on mission. And God has sent the church on mission. “As the Father has sent me,” Jesus said, “even so I am sending you” (John 20:21).

This is a larger claim than saying that every individual member of a church is a missionary, though this is what the missional church has become in some recent conservative descriptions of it. Rather, the church itself is a *sign* that the kingdom of God has begun on earth, and a *foretaste* of the consummated reign to come. It is also an *agent* and *instrument* of God’s reign, bearing the authority of the keys (Matt. 16:19) and the authority of forgiveness (John 20:19-23). [6]

It’s not the case, at least according to the writers we’ve been following, that you can have a non-missional church on one block and a missional church on the next block. Rather, the church *is*

missional (it *is* what it does, says Craig Van Gelder). The Spirit creates the church as the body of Christ in the world, and the church then “incarnates” or “enfleshes” the continuing work of bringing the justice and peace of Christ into all the cultures of the world. [7]

It doesn’t exist to draw people to itself and merely perpetuate its own institutional life, as was professedly the case throughout the history of “Christendom.” Rather, the church exists to proclaim the kingdom of God among men and women. By the same token, the unbiblical and church-centered language of “expanding” or “building” the kingdom of God is dropped, and the more biblical, God-centered language of “seeking,” “receiving,” or “entering” God’s kingdom is adopted.

Conversion is not just a profession of faith in Christ. Salvation is not only the rescue of the individual’s soul from the threat of God’s retribution. The gospel is not merely the news of what God has done in Christ to pardon individual sinners. [8] Rather, the gospel, salvation, and conversion are construed much more “holistically” or “comprehensively,” with ethical implications for every dimension of life and the message of reconciliation, justice, peace, healing, liberation, and love for the entire world: “and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20, NRSV).

## THE CONSERVATIVE TAKE-OVER

I have no idea when exactly conservative evangelicals co-opted the term “missional.” [9] My guess is that conservative writers and pastors in the emerging church movement like Mark Driscoll, after tromping through some of the same fields as their liberal counterparts, reached down, pulled up the missional plant by the roots, and then transplanted it into conservative soil. Take an hour to troll the blogs of liberal-leaning Emergent websites, and you find the authors discussed above recommended prominently. Flip to the endnotes of books by conservative authors, and you will find the same authors quoted liberally.

Ed Stetzer, for instance, frequently cites Newbigin, Bosch, and the GOC gang in his book *Planting Missional Churches*. Yet where a GOC writer will say something like “missional communities are cultivated through participation in particular social or ecclesial practices,” [10] Stetzer will ask, “What does the Bible require for church?” [11] It’s probably unfair to say that conservatives like Stetzer want to build on a biblical foundation, whereas the ecumenicals don’t. It’s probably kinder to simply say that Stetzer sees *the Bible* as authoritative for the church’s mission, where as someone like Newbigin, drawing on the fiduciary epistemology of Michael Polanyi, will say that Jesus is the authority for its mission. What does this mean? It means that Newbigin does not want to give the Bible unqualified approval as Jesus’ inerrant word, so he pits Jesus and his word against one another.

In addition to beginning with a different doctrine of Scripture, conservative writers begin with a different understanding of the gospel than the ecumenicals. Both will explain the gospel in terms of the advancing kingdom of God as well as in terms of Christ’s work on the cross. Yet where conservatives unashamedly embrace Christ’s work of substitution as the center of the gospel, ecumenicals downplay, if not altogether jettison, the latter explanation. [12] Like I said, the soil is different.

Still, the plant is similar. Stetzer criticizes the Reformers as defining the church as a place where things happen. This degenerated during the Enlightenment, so that the church became a vendor of religious goods and services, epitomized in today’s technique-driven seeker churches. Both

explanations, Stetzer says, miss what the church fundamentally is: a people sent on mission. “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17).

Now that Christendom has come to an end, the church must recognize that it's no longer chaplain to the culture. Christians are as foreign in the post-modern West as they are in unevangelized lands overseas. They must therefore exegete their Bibles and their cultures both. Here's Stetzer approvingly quoting Van Gelder:

We need to exegete . . . culture in the same way the missionaries have been so good at doing with diverse tribal cultures of previously unreached people. We need to exegete . . . the themes of the Rolling Stones . . . Dennis Rodman, Madonna, (and) David Letterman. . . . We need to comprehend that the Spirit of the Living God is at work in these cultural expressions, preparing the hearts of men and women to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. [13]

(Keep in mind, the two authors mean something slightly different by “the gospel of Jesus Christ,” even though one is quoting the other to make his point. [14])

Stetzer rejects the “attractional” and “extractional” church, which attempts to *attract* non-Christians with traditions or technique and to *extract* them from their cultures. Churches should focus instead on being “missional” (moving outward) and “incarnational” (moving deeper into the culture). As Mark Driscoll puts it, churches should help new believers remain within “their tribes,” whether that tribe is punk rock, a ghetto block, or yuppie stock, just so long as they don’t sin. Stetzer supports the work of church reform. As one notable example of reform, he points to the work of J. D. Greear, who helped to transform Homestead Heights Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, into a missional church called The Summit. (Click [here](#) to read Greear’s answer to our pastors’ and theologians’ forum question on the corporate witness of the church.)

Yet in general, missional church thinking tends to veer toward church planting, and it's not difficult to see why. Picture a missionary entering a foreign land, like Adoniram Judson traveling to Burma in the nineteenth century. How does he begin a church? He moves into the culture. He learns the language. He makes friends on Burmese terms. He explains the gospel in a way they can understand. Years might pass before someone converts, but when an individual does, Judson does not pull him or her out of Burmese culture. He equips them to be fishers of men inside of Burma. And so, gradually, the church is built.

This, I take it, is the missional church-planting mission.

Now, Western Christian, apply this lesson in New York, Los Angeles, Florence, or Stockholm. Learn the languages of nihilism, cynicism, or spiritualism. Befriend the natives and equip them to reach others.

Futhermore, there's no model or template to follow. Megachurches and house churches should both be missional. So should emerging hip and rural plain. Stetzer writes,

Indigenous churches look different from culture to culture. You expect a biblically faithful, indigenous church to look different in Senegal from an indigenous church in Singapore. You also expect an indigenous church in high-tech and blue-state Seattle to look different from one in apple-pie Sellersburg, Indiana. [15]

## IRONIES, ISSUES, AND INSTRUCTIONS

At the very least, I hope I have accomplished the primary purpose of this article—describing what the so-called missional church is. Different writers have different emphases. The theologians sound a little different than the practitioners. The group I have been generically calling the ecumenicals sound a little different than the evangelicals. But common themes run throughout the discussion.

Let me conclude by observing three ironies, five issues, and four areas of good instruction.

### **Three Ironies**

- 1) If I may be permitted to brush in very broad strokes, I find it ironic that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the ecumenicals have proposed **a more biblically faithful ecclesiology** than all the evangelicals enamored with Church Growth. Missional church theology is not perfect, but it attempts to be biblical. The pragmatism of Church Growth, at its worst, sets the Bible aside.
- 2) At the same time, I find it ironic that some ecumenicals simultaneously **lose missions** from the mission, and the evangel from evangelism. Consider, for instance, how the GOC team characterizes “preaching” the gospel. Preaching in the New Testament, the reader is told, means “to announce” or “to proclaim publicly.” This is not so much done on Sunday morning, as it is done in the community at large—publicly. Does that mean the GOC team envisions preachers standing on park benches and bus stops proclaiming the gospel of sin and forgiveness? No, it means bringing the reign of God to bear in every aspect of public life: For a more benevolent government, that may mean legislation that benefits the poor or the marginalized. For a bank, it might mean granting loans in formerly redlined neighborhoods. For a public school, it might mean instituting peer mediation among students. [16] This, apparently, is “preaching” the “gospel.”
- 3) I find it ironic that evangelicals have **co-opted the storyline** of the ecumenicals—complete with plot and characters (though I don’t find it ironic that they have been putting it to better use). I do wish, however, that the evangelicals would take greater care in transplanting some of these ideas, as the failure to do so leads to the following issues.

### **Five Issues**

- 1) I take issue with the **historical revisionism** that characterizes both ecumenicals and evangelicals. It’s striking how almost every one of these authors begins by retelling the history of modernism and postmodernism (one finds the same thing in emerging church literature. Think of Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*). Why do they all do this? Because, like Bill Clinton’s political advisor James Carville demonstrated so clearly in Clinton’s 1992 campaign against George H. W. Bush, he who establishes the terms of the debate wins the debate. At Clinton campaign headquarters, Carville famously hung the sign, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Clinton convinced the country that the election was about the economy, and not about the first Iraqi War. This helped him win the election, because Americans were feeling an economic squeeze at the time.
- The crisis in our churches today, each one of these authors tells us, is about the transition from modernism to postmodernism. Really? I suppose it is if you accept the terms of modernism in the first place, which Bosch explicitly does:

it is futile to attempt nostalgically to return to a pre-Enlightenment worldview. It is not possible to “unknow” what we have learned. . . . The ‘light’ in the Enlightenment was real light and should not simply be discarded. What is needed, rather, is to

realize that the Enlightenment paradigm has served its purpose; we should now move beyond it. [17]

The problem, in my opinion, is that Bosch and others have capitulated more completely to the philosophies of this world than they realize, even as they accuse fundamentalists of doing the same. (It almost feels like a number of mainliners are looking for a way to explain their dying denominations, and can't help but draw those rigid inerrantists into their malaise.) I should unpack all this much further, but I'll leave it at that.

2) I take issue with the **reductionism** which results from this revisionism. Since the conservatives adopt the historically revisionistic storyline of the ecumenicals almost wholesale, they fall into some of the same reductionism. Both emphasize the fact that the church is a people, and not a place. That's absolutely correct. But answering the question "Where on earth will we find the church?" requires us to fall back on the three marks of the Reformers—preaching, practicing the ordinances, and practicing discipline. As Mark Dever likes to say, three Christians who bump into each other at the grocery store do not comprise a local church. Both emphasize the fact that the nature of the church is "missional," that is, defined by the fact that the church is "sent." True enough. But we must also define the nature of the church as the blood-bought, new covenant people of Christ. We've been sent because we've been bought. And the people of God will *worship, obey, and go* as they increasingly identify themselves by that amazing purchase. Don't overlook it.

Along these same lines, the conservatives writers should take care to define "attractional" more carefully when they pit it against "missional." The church should be attractive. In fact, this new covenant, Holy Spirit indwelled community of love, holiness, and unity should be the most attractive people of all!

I know that's not what Stetzer is getting at when he critiques the "attractional" church. He's talking about fancy programs, not a holy people, and he's right on. But let me state for the record that the most attractive church—one that images its Savior through faithfulness to his word—will be the most missional church. Interestingly, the ecumenical crowd does a better job of being explicit on just this point whenever they emphasize the church as a *sign* and a *foretaste* of God's kingdom. [18]

3) I take issue with the **ambiguity of terms** when moving back and forth between different authors, particularly over the all-important term, the "gospel." When conservatives co-opt ecumenical themes, they need to take greater care, I believe, in defining exactly what they mean by such essential terms. After all, the content of the soil will inevitably affect the plant.

4) I take slight issue with the term "**incarnational**." I understand and appreciate the impulse to see that our hands and feet, eyes and tongues, *do and live and put on* our creed. Yet it's important for us to recognize that, historically, the term "incarnation" has referred to the unique, once-in-history event of God becoming man. No, the term is not a biblical one, but there are good reasons to preserve the uniqueness of the term in our usage. First of all, equating what the divine Son did in becoming Jesus the God-man with what I do when I imitate Jesus downplays the ineffable wonder of that one-time event. It might even be said to make the divine Son a little smaller and me a little bigger.

More significantly, the primary purpose of the incarnation, I believe, was for the Son to offer his life as the perfect sacrificial substitute in order to assuage the wrath of God against eternally damnable transgression. Yet when I make the incarnation primarily about something else,

something that I can emulate in my own life, I risk shifting the focus away from Christ's wonderous, astounding, amazing work of wrath removal.

5) I also take a little bit of issue with the **equation between ethnicity and worldviews**. The Mandarin and Cantonese languages are morally neutral. Nihilism and materialism are not. Bobo-ism, hip-hop, and Valley are not. It's one thing to remain in the Cantonese tribe. It's another to remain in the hop-hop tribe. I'm not saying one shouldn't. I'm saying that the equation is not so clean cut. Frankly, I haven't thought through all the implications of these differences. I'm simply suggesting that we should think them through.

#### ***Four Instructions***

Those issues aside, I believe advocates of the missional church instruct us in at least four very helpful ways.

1) I am especially grateful for the emphasis the ecumenicals give to the **witness of the corporate body**. One author writes,

In North America, what might it mean for the church to be such a city on a hill? to be salt? to be a light to the world? It means, first of all, that the inner, communal life of the church matters for mission. [19]

Amen! This author goes onto emphasize the importance of love, holiness, and unity. The content he fills into these three words might be a little different than the content an evangelical pours in, but the trajectory is a good one. Conservative writers on the missional church tend to emphasize the mission of every individual member to share the gospel. That's excellent. But let's emphasize the importance of our corporate witness as well. Our churches should be attractive. They should be foretastes of Christ's consummated kingdom.

2) I'm grateful to be instructed by Stetzer and others to adopt more of a **missional posture**. We too easily fall into complacency in our "resident" status, as Eric Simmons' reminds us. We need to hear Newbigin's reminder that we are a "pilgrim people."

I spent a month in a former Soviet republic two years ago, living with a missionary family. The entire month I strategized to pour myself out for the kingdom. For instance, I developed a friendship with one non-Christian man who wanted to attend an American business school and then return to his country and help it economically. He had spent a year studying for the GMATs, but could not yet afford to pay the registration fee. I forget what the fee was — \$200 maybe? On an American income, that's nothing. On my friend's income, it would have cost him three or four months of labor. So I happily paid the fee for him (and congratulated myself on doing so). Praise God, my friend is presently at business school in the United States, and has now been baptized as a believer by a local church. I was not the principal witness in his life, but I trust that God used me to play one small part.

Yet here's the point, and the question you should ask me: Jonathan, have you ever randomly given \$200 to a non-Christian friend in the United States as a display of friendship and Christ's love? Sadly, the answer is no. Too much of the time, I'm just a resident, not a missionary, more interested in buying books, CDs (no, I don't have an iPod), a nice dinner, and just a little bit more automobile or house. Yet imagine how the non-Christians around us would respond if we Christians became known for regular acts of generosity? We shouldn't do it for the world's favor; we should do it *accompanied by a verbal explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ*.

Also, go read Eric Simmons' article.

3) We do well to heed the instruction of missional church writers to **exegete our culture**, because studying it, ironically, helps us to distance ourselves from it. Learning about the culture should remind us that we are sojourners, and do not finally belong to any one time and place.

4) Finally, we do well to be instructed by the **passion** of missional writers like Ed Stetzer to be **biblically faithful** in planting churches and **reaching the lost**. I have offered the five critiques above *not* because I think he and others are on the wrong path, but because I think they are on the right path. They inspire me. My critiques are offered in the attempt to help the cause.

## **Q: HOW DOES A LOCAL CHURCH ENGAGE THE THEOLOGY OF BEING MISSIONAL?**

### **What Does it Really Mean for a Church to Be “Missional”? Is it Important?**

#### **Meaning of Missio Dei**

The English word “mission” comes from the Latin, “*missio*.” The *missio Dei* is, thus, the “mission of God.” For many years, Christians understood the mission of the Church to reflect the mission of God in the world, summarily, by the Great Commission of Jesus at His ascension ([Matthew 28:18-20](#)). Most properly, the word “missional” is an adjective to describe the Church’s foremost enterprise of pursuing the *missio Dei* in the world.

#### **Meaning of a Missional Church**

As in many other examples, “missional” can be “hijacked” and “repurposed” for a particular theological or sociological agenda. So, acknowledging that the term “missional” may be interpreted by others in the Church in several other ways, we believe that the phrase has merit when understood in traditional Christian missiological context. Thus, for purposes of clarity of communication, we propose this working definition for a “missional church:”

#### **Aware, Wise, and Intentional**

The missional church is one that is *aware* of its parish’s socio-historical context, including an understanding of the development of the context, and responding *wisely* in sharing the Gospel of Jesus [Christ](#). Thus, every part of the church’s ministry is attuned to the surroundings and *intentional* in its outreach ministry to the community. We do not disagree with [Alan Hirsch’s](#) definition of a “missional church” as “posture toward the world.” However, we believe that such a posture must be that the world is lost and in need of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Theologies that “embrace the city” without pointing to the *sin in the city* and the unbelieving city dwellers’ need for personal repentance and faith in the resurrected and reigning Jesus Christ are not missional as the word describes the urgent mandates of the Gospel.

## What is Missional Theology?

"Missional Theology" has found its place in the vocabularies of both the academy and the church, but it can be difficult to pin down exactly what the term "missional" means. Because of the term's broad usage in a variety of different settings, and the different shades various authors and practitioners insist upon, many people still find themselves asking, "What is missional theology?" Let me begin to answer that question by clarifying that **missional theology isn't one particular concept, but rather a constellation of ideas that come together in a comprehensive conversation about God, the church, and what God has sent the church into the world to be and do.** The publication of *Missional Church* launched the missional conversation in 1998 with a core of ideas that has remained significant [note]Darrell Guder, ed. *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998). See my review of the landmark work *Missional Church* here.[/note], although like all good conversations the ideas have taken on different nuances and directions as new voices from the church and the academy have joined in the discussion. I've reviewed *Missional Church* elsewhere; here I'd like to offer a distilled version of missional theology as an introduction for those who are joining the conversation now. Essentially, missional theology is a movement that offers a theological shift, a sociological recognition, and a set of distinct church practices. Let's take each of these categories in turn.

### **A THEOLOGICAL SHIFT**

At the core of missional theology is a different way of thinking about God, the church and mission. Although there is a constellation of ideas involved in that theological shift, I will confine the conversation here to three critical emphases: the agency of God in mission, the nature of God's intent for creation, and the importance of the reign of God.

### **THE AGENCY OF GOD**

The authors of *Missional Church* perceived that the church often spoke of missionary work as an activity that the church carried out. Van Gelder writes that the church developed foreign mission structures throughout the twentieth century with the goal of carrying the gospel into other parts of the world, holding the mindset that God had given them this evangelistic mission in the great commission. This emphasis undergirds a "church-centric" view of mission that "views the church as the primary acting subject responsible for doing something on God's behalf in the world." [note]Van Gelder and Zcheile, 21, 24.[/note] In response, the missional church has pivoted towards an understanding of mission that proclaims that mission is, first and foremost, rooted in the identity and nature of God. Guder describes this "theocentric" understanding Christian mission: "We have come to see that mission is not primarily an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation." [note]Guder, 4.[/note] The location of mission within the nature of God's own being results in the perception that God is always at work bringing about the mission, and sometimes in ways that the church is unaware of, and which are located outside the church's activity. This already brings about the possibility that the church may look to recognize and discern God's activity outside of itself, but also points towards the great theological question: What is the mission of God?

## THE *MISSIO DEI*: GOD'S INTENT FOR CREATION

There may be many paths of answering that great theological question, which rises to the significance of the meaning of creation and the intent of all of God's interactions with creation. In the missional conversation, the quotation above already offers a possible trajectory, referencing "God's purposes to restore and heal creation." This is perhaps enough of a departure from theologies that view creation as tangential to God's intent to warrant our attention, but we may be more particular in the direction of missional theology. Missional theologians and practitioners often describe God's intent for creation by recognizing and describing a particular narrative arc within scripture. The basic line of that narrative may be described like this: God's intent was for creation to be full of life and goodness (whatever goodness might entail is an important question), but creation is corrupt because of human collaboration with evil. Nevertheless, God pursues that intent, restoring corrupted creation through the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and will one day bring about the final restoration, reconciliation, and recreation of all things. This process has already begun in the in-breaking and spread of the reign (or kingdom) of God.

## THE REIGN OF GOD

Thus missional theology understands that it is by God's own divine agency, in which the church of Jesus participates by the Spirit, that creation will return to God's intent. At the invitation of Jesus, the church enters into God's reign, learning to live under God's kingship. This line of theology has much to commend it, not the least of which is the way it refigures the church's identity. In this view, the church, comprised of disciples of Jesus, is not simply a collection of people who have accepted a promise of salvation and await a rewarding afterlife, pending good behavior. Rather, the church is a community that represents God's kingdom in the present. It embodies the reign of God as a community, and is sent into the world as the kingdom's servant and messenger. It is both a foretaste of God's kingdom and an agent of that community—and both of these facets of its being are ways of participating in God's own mission. Thus, missional theologians see mission as not simply an activity of the church, but as a feature of its very nature and being. Mission is not confined to the pursuit of (distant) proselytes, but is wrapped into every moment where the church lives in alignment with the will of God. As disciples practice love and peace with each other and also with their neighbors, they are about the work of the mission of God. They also naturally invite others to join them in living in the kingdom of God.

## A SOCIOLOGICAL RECOGNITION

Along with this theological orientation, the missional conversation, particularly in North America[note]It's interesting that much of the missional literature assumes a North American context, given the importance of the insights of Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, both of whom worked outside this context.[/note] contains a specific sociological recognition. A second broad feature of the missional movement grows from a certain analysis of the social situation of the church, particularly in western contexts, and even more particularly in North America. The first paragraph of *Missional Church* closes with a sentence that signals the trajectory of this conversation:

"On the other hand, while modern missions have led to an expansion of world Christianity, Christianity in North America has moved (or been moved) away from

its position of dominance as it has experience the loss not only of numbers but of power and influence within society." [note]Guder, 1.[/note]

The importance of this claim for the direction of the conversation can be further seen from the structure of that seminal work; after the introductory chapter, the next two are devoted to making the case of the shifting position of the church due to cultural trends and the evolution of American religious practices. Although various writers within the missional vein may approach this sociological claim with different emphases, here I will describe two recurrent themes: the loss of Christianity's privileged status within society, and critique of the church of Christendom. The first of these emphases, the loss of Christianity's privileged status, refers to a sense that society was once structured so that the church held a powerful voice in the public sphere, but that the church has been pushed to the margins as the construction of a secular, pluralistic public sphere has evolved. Taking Leslie Newbigin's lead, the missional conversation argues (and more lately, assumes) that the modern western cultural assumption is that no religion should be permitted to make ultimate truth claims in public. It is more readily apparent that there is tension and conflict between North American culture(s) and the church at the levels of worldview, values, and praxis. Thus, the church can no longer assume a *de facto* partnership with the broader culture in which the church helps people become better citizens and the culture forms people as good disciples. In the current cultural reality, the missional movement has claimed, the church cannot continue to make the same assumptions about the starting places of conversations with its neighbors about Christianity as were held under Christendom.

[note]Whether or not these assumptions were actually valid even under Christendom is a question to be explored another time.[/note]

*Missional Church* furthers this point by describing how the church, having been blocked from the public sphere, increasingly focused its message on a private, interior sort of religious life. [note]Guder, 54. Alan Roxburgh deepens this argument by demonstrating how churches not only survived by becoming the caretakers of private faith, but for some period of time thrived as they continued to possess a religious monopoly on this private space. Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality*. (Harrisburg, Pa: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1997), 6-13. [/note] The authors argue that as the churched culture either collapsed or was eroded in the second half of the twentieth century, morality based on faith was generally rejected or marginalized in terms of its fit for public debate, and faith commitments could only be leveraged for personal decisions.

"Notions of shared public morals gave way to personal decisions of expediency, pleasure, or private judgment. Expectations of privileged position gave way to irrelevance and marginalization. People no longer assumed that the church had anything relevant to say on matters beyond personal faith. Public policy became increasingly secularized, as public morals became increasingly personalized and privatized." [note]Guder, 54.[/note]

A final step in this argument comes from Alan Roxburgh, who argues that pervasive pluralism has stripped away the church's privileged monopoly over even interior faith. The new situation is that churches, once driven from the public sphere but given sanctuary in the private life of Americans, now finds themselves in a crowded marketplace of ideas with competing spiritual sources and authorities. [note]Roxburgh, 12-14.[/note]

Missional authors respond to the church's loss of the cultural center on a variety of levels. Most basically, they insist on the acknowledgement of this reality and its practical implications,

employing their rhetoric to implore churches to adopt and adapt. Even if they grieve the loss of the former arrangement, the missional movement argues that churches must move forward and learn new ways of being if they are to survive or be fruitful in the new situation. However, a more forceful vein of rhetoric argues that the new situation is in and of itself good, that it provides the opportunity to abandon distorted and corrupted forms of ecclesiology in favor of a model that more aptly represents not only this sociological shift, but also theological reality. This critique of Christendom may vary from critiques about its missiological distortions, its collusion with secular power, its hubris, or its oppression of others. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch vigorously advance a critical perspective of Christendom in *The Shaping of Things to Come*, referring to the Christendom model of ecclesiology as an idol and a virus, which can't help but spawn churches that carry in their DNA its critical flaws.[note]Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*, Revised and Updated edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2013), 29, 34.[/note] Their text is essentially a response to three specific flaws, namely that the church of Christendom is attractional, dualistic and hierarchical. Churches that recognize the unsustainability of the Christendom model, they argue, are thus freed to create communities that represent alternatives to these flaws, practicing incarnational mission, messianic spirituality, and apostolic forms of leadership.[note]Frost and Hirsch, 48, 49.[/note]

## A SET OF CHURCH PRACTICES

Frost and Hirsh viewed these three practices as an extension of the twelve hallmarks of missional churches identified by the Gospel and Our Culture Network.[note] These hallmarks can be found in *Treasure in Clay Jars*, Ed. Lois Barrett, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004). The GOCN is the parent network of scholars that published *Missional Church*. [/note]

1. The missional church proclaims the gospel.
2. The missional church is a community where all members are involved in learning to become disciples of Jesus.
3. The Bible is normative in this church's life.
4. The church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death and resurrection of its Lord.
5. The church seeks to discern God's specific missional vocation for the entire community and for all of its members.
6. A missional community is indicated by how christians behave toward one another.
7. It is a community that practices reconciliation.
8. People within the community hold themselves accountable to one another in love.
9. The church practices hospitality.
10. Worship is the central act by which the community celebrates with joy and thanksgiving both God's presence and God's promised future.
11. This community has a vital public witness.
12. There is a recognition that the church itself is an incomplete expression of the reign of God.

Along with the practices suggested by Frost and Hirsch, these practices begin to outline a different set of church practices than what might be considered the norm in North America previously. At the risk of overly distilling the lists (and the other lists they represent!), let me offer

two distinct directions for these practices: Developing a Contrast Community of Disciples and Engaging the Church's Neighbors.

## A CONTRAST COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES

As a result of its theological convictions and perception of its sociological reality, the missional church sets out to prepare its people to live differently than the people around them. It seeks to intentionally form people by practices that implant them with the story of God and prepare them to live out values like love and justice through practices like hospitality and reconciliation. The missional church wants people to learn the gospel so that they may practice the gospel, working for good, loving sacrificially and persevering hopefully in ways that mirror the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is what marks the internal life of the church—ministry that forms people to live as God's people, sent into the world.

## ENGAGING THE CHURCH'S NEIGHBORS

Externally, the missional church pursues relationships with its community and engages the needs of the people it shares life with. It enters into partnerships with people who work towards making the community whole, and joins those who seek to infuse new life into places of hurt and brokenness. The missional church knows that as it engages these neighbors it must speak a word of the gospel, but it also seeks to listen. It expects that God may indeed use the community to shape the church, even as the church shapes the community, and knows that its own practice of the kingdom of God is not yet a perfect expression. By becoming a vulnerable neighbor, the church demonstrates the gospel of Jesus, and always seeks to deepen its own faith, even as it shares that faith with its neighbors.

## **Q: HOW DOES A REFORMED CHURCH ADOPT EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY?**

### Worship: Evangelical or Reformed?

**W. Robert Godfrey**

---

One of the challenges of being Reformed in America is to figure out the relationship between what is evangelical and what is Reformed. Protestantism in America is dominated by the mainline Protestants, the evangelicals, and the charismatics. After these dominant groups, other major players would include the confessional Lutherans. But where do the Reformed fit in, particularly in relation to the evangelicals, with whom historically we have been most closely linked?

Some observers argue that the confessional Reformed are a subgroup in the broader evangelical movement. Certainly over the centuries in America, the Reformed have often allied themselves with the evangelicals, have shared much in common with the evangelicals, and have often tried to refrain from criticizing the evangelical movement. But are we Reformed really evangelical?

One area in which the differences between evangelical and Reformed can be examined is the matter of worship. At first glance, we may see more similarities than differences. The orders of worship in Reformed and evangelical churches can be almost identical. Certainly, both kinds of

churches sing songs, read Scripture, pray, preach, and administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. But do these similarities reflect only formal agreement, or do they represent a common understanding of the meaning and function of these liturgical acts in worship?

If we look closely, I believe that we will see the substantive differences between evangelicals and Reformed on worship. That difference is clear on two central issues: first, the understanding of the presence of God in the service; and second, the understanding of the ministerial office in worship.

### **The Presence of God in Worship**

The presence of God in worship may seem a strange issue to raise. Do we not both believe that God is present with his people in worship? Indeed we do! But *how* is God present, and *how* is he active in our worship?

It seems to me that for evangelicalism, God is present in worship basically to listen. He is not far away; rather, he is intimately and lovingly present to observe and hear the worship of his people. He listens to their praise and their prayers. He sees their obedient observance of the sacraments. He hears their testimonies and sharing. He attends to the teaching of his Word, listening to be sure that the teaching is faithful and accurate.

The effect of this sense of evangelical worship is that the stress is on the *horizontal* dimension of worship. The sense of warm, personal fellowship, and participation among believers at worship is crucial. Anything that increases a sense of involvement, especially on the level of emotions, is likely to be approved. The service must be inspiring and reviving, and then God will observe and be pleased.

The Reformed faith has a fundamentally different understanding of the presence of God. God is indeed present to hear. He listens to the praise and prayers of his people. But he is also present to speak. God is not only present as an observer; he is an active participant. He speaks in the Word and in the sacraments. As Reformed Christians, we do not believe that he speaks directly and immediately to us in the church. God uses means to speak. But he speaks truly and really to us through the means that he has appointed for his church. In the ministry of the Word—as it is properly preached and ministered in salutation and benediction—it is truly God who speaks. As the Second Helvetic Confession rightly says, "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."

God is also actively present and speaking in the sacraments, according to the Reformed understanding. The sacraments are much more about him than about us. He speaks through them the reality of the presence of Jesus to bless his people as he confirms his gospel truth and promises through them.

The effect of this understanding of Reformed worship is that the stress is on the *vertical* dimension of worship. The horizontal dimension is not absent, but the focus is not on warm feelings and sharing. Rather, it is on the community as a unit meeting their God. Our primary fellowship with one another is in the unified activities of speaking to God in song and prayer and of listening together as God speaks to us. The vertical orientation of our worship service insures that God is the focus of our worship. The first importance of any act of worship is not its value for the inspiration of the people, but its faithfulness to God's revelation of his will for worship. We

must meet with God only in ways that please him. The awe and joy that is ours in coming into the presence of the living God to hear him speak is what shapes and energizes our worship service.

### **The Ministerial Office in Worship**

The difference between the Reformed faith and evangelicalism on the presence of God in worship is closely tied to their differences on the ministerial office in worship. For evangelicalism, the ministers seem to be seen as talented and educated members of the congregation, called by God to leadership in planning and teaching. The ministers use their talents to facilitate the worship of the congregation and instruct the people. The ministers are not seen as speaking distinctively for God or having a special authority from God. Rather, their authority resides only in the reliability of their teaching, which would be true for any member of the congregation.

The effect of this evangelical view of office is to create a very democratic character to worship, in which the participation of many members of the congregation in leading the service is a good thing. The more who can share, the better. The many gifts that God has given to members of the congregation should be used for mutual edification. Again, the *horizontal* dimension of worship has prevailed.

The Reformed view of ministerial office is quite different. The minister is called by God through the congregation to lead worship by the authority of his office. He is examined and set apart to represent the congregation before God and to represent God before the congregation. In the great dialogue of worship, he speaks the Word of God to the people and he speaks the words of the people to God, except in those instances when the congregation as a whole raises its voice in unison to God. We who are Reformed do not embrace this arrangement because we are antidemocratic or because we believe that the minister is the only gifted member of the congregation. We follow this pattern because we believe that it is biblical and the divinely appointed pattern of worship.

The effect of this view of office is to reinforce the sense of *meeting with God* in a reverent and official way. It also insures that those who lead public worship have been called and authorized for that work by God. The Reformed are rightly suspicious of untrained and unauthorized members of the congregation giving longer or shorter messages to the congregation. In worship we gather to hear God, not the opinions of members. The *vertical* dimension of worship remains central.

### **Conclusion**

The contrast that I have drawn between evangelical and Reformed worship no doubt ought to be nuanced in many ways. I have certainly tried to make my points by painting with a very broad brush. Yet the basic analysis, I believe, is correct.

One great difficulty that we Reformed folk have in thinking about worship is that our worship in many places has unwittingly been accommodated to evangelical ways. If we are to appreciate our Reformed heritage in worship and, equally importantly, if we are to communicate its importance, character, and power to others, we must understand the distinctive character of our worship.

Our purpose in making this contrast so pointed is not to demean evangelicals. They are indeed our brethren and our friends. But we do have real differences with them. If Reformed worship is not to become as extinct as the dinosaurs, we as Reformed people must come to a clear understanding of it and an eager commitment to it. In order to do that, we must see not just formal similarities, but more importantly the profound theological differences that distinguish evangelical worship from Reformed worship.

### **What I Mean When I Call Myself a “Reformed Evangelical”**

Calling yourself an evangelical today means about as much as calling yourself a protestant or a theist – the category is simply too broad to have any functional utility. As such many younger Christians; if they continue to use the word at all – use it alongside of a modifying adjective. They refer to themselves as “post-evangelical”, “progressive evangelical”, “conservative evangelical” or “reformed evangelical”.

While there is a part of me that misses the old evangelical consensus, the realist in me appreciates the clarity that these terms can bring to the on-going conversation. I like to know where people stand – and I think that ambiguity and equivocation hinder the growth of authentic friendship and community. Therefore, in pursuit of useful dialogue within and without the wider clan, allow me to introduce myself. I am a reformed evangelical and by that term I mean to communicate the following:

#### **I believe in a really big God**

I believe that God always goes first and is in some sense the first cause of everything that happens in this universe. I believe that because God says that about himself: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” (Deuteronomy 32:39 ESV) God is comprehensively Sovereign – and yet, in some way beyond my complete understanding, I, along with every other human being, make real choices for which I and we are ultimately responsible.

I believe that.

Not because I come from a long line of capital R reformed people who believed that (I do not) but because I see it in the Bible. In his Pentecost sermon, for example, Peter said to the crowd in Jerusalem:

“this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” (Acts 2:23 ESV)

Peter saw no inconsistency in arguing for God’s Sovereignty and human responsibility in the same passage and therefore, neither do I. The people in Jerusalem made real decisions, for which they will be held responsible, but at the end of the day, everything went down that day exactly as God had planned and foreknown.

Likewise, I believe that I am saved today because God of the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. He went first in my life. Before I ever believed in him he was working graciously in me. Not because he saw something in me that made me a worthy recipient of his grace but simply

because he is God and he does whatever he pleases. He kills and he makes alive. Because that is who he is and that is who he says he is.

"I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." (Exodus 33:19 ESV)

When I call myself a "reformed evangelical" I am saying that I believe in that.

### **I believe in a fallen and sinful humanity**

I am also saying that I believe in a fallen and sinful humanity. I don't believe that all people are maximally bad but I do believe that all people are born fallen, twisted and in need of redemption. I believe that because the Bible says that.

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm 51:5 ESV)

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

I was born with a broken compass. If I listen to my own desires and treat my own instincts as authoritative I will surely end up on the road that leads to death. I am not a sinner because I sinned; I sin because I am a sinner. I do what I am and what I always have been. I believe that about myself and I believe that about human beings in general.

"For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22–23 ESV)

We all want wrong and we all do wrong. We are all living lesser lives than we were created and designed to live.

When I call myself a "reformed evangelical" I am saying that I believe in that.

### **I believe in an atoning Christ**

I am also saying that I believe in an atoning Christ. I believe that Jesus died on the cross not just to set an example and not just because he was a threat to the corrupt leaders in Jerusalem; I believe that he died on the cross in order to deal once and forever with the problem of human sin and to secure our peace with God.

I believe this because the Bible clearly teaches it. Hebrews 9:26 says of Jesus: "he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Hebrews 9:26 ESV)

While I recognize that there is legitimate debate between born again, Spirit-filled believers as to the precise way in which the death of Jesus Christ put away human sin I believe that the concept of penal substitutionary atonement is clearly taught in the Bible. That the death of Jesus made a just payment ("penal") for human sin seems clearly taught in Romans 3:24–26. Paul said that we are justified:

"through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:24–26 ESV)

The death of Jesus was a sacrifice or payment that in God's estimation was righteous and appropriate and that allowed him to forgive sins without compromising on his Word or his character as a just judge. This was done:

"so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:26 ESV)  
That it was "substitutionary" in nature seems hard to argue given the clear testimony of 2 Corinthians 5:21:

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV)

The death of Jesus on the cross was "for our sake" and salvation is thus a matter of a "great exchange"; our sins being attributed to Christ on the cross and his righteousness being attributed to us by grace through faith – thanks be to God!

That this transaction secures my peace with God (atonement) seems gloriously self-evident from Romans 5:1:

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1 ESV)

When I refer to myself as a "reformed evangelical" I am affirming my whole-hearted and glad belief in the doctrine we have come to refer to as "penal substitutionary atonement" – while at the same time rejoicing in other supporting and ancillary metaphors and descriptive terms.

### **I believe in a sustaining and guiding Spirit**

I am also saying that I believe in a sustaining and guiding Spirit. I believe that the only reason I am still following Jesus Christ nearly 40 years after my initial profession of faith is because I am filled, led and sustained by the Holy Spirit of Christ – thanks be to God!

I believe what Charles Hodge said about the Holy Spirit; that:

"He is our teacher, sanctifier, comforter, and guide." [1]

Without the Holy Spirit I would twist the Scriptures to suit my own desires and to match the mood of the crowd.

Without the Holy Spirit I would never want to change into the image and likeness of Christ. Without the Holy Spirit I would never be strong enough to overcome temptation and to say no to wickedness and sin.

And without the Holy Spirit I would never be able to make decisions that align with the will of God and the good of my fellow man.

But with him I can do all those things and more – thanks be to God!

I recognize that not all "reformed evangelicals" hold the same views on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We are still reacting to and retreating from the excesses of the charismatic movement in the latter decades of the 20th century. Some pulled back further than others but before excesses and over-reactions, many reformed types had a robust belief in the tangible guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the true believer. In his autobiography "Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners" Bunyan spoke often about the ministry of guidance that the Holy Spirit

exercised in his life. He speaks for example of hearing a loud voice, like an alarm speaking to him and warning him about impending temptations from the devil:

“Now about a week or fortnight after this, I was much followed by this Scripture, *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you* ([Luke 22:31](#)), and so sometimes it would sound so loud within me, yea, and as it were call so strongly after me, that once above all the rest, I turned my head over my shoulder, thinking verily that some man had behind me called to me, being at a great distance, methought he called so loud...”[\[2\]](#)

The Apostle James spoke in a similar way, writing to the churches in response to the Jerusalem Council:

“it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” ([Acts 15:28](#) ESV)

They read Scripture and they sensed the guidance of the Holy Spirit coming to them from within it – that is exactly the kind of charismatic I aspire to be!

I believe that the Spirit of God sustains people, empowers people, sanctifies people and guides people in the Word and through the Word. I believe in those things and delight in those things and that is a significant part of what I mean to communicate by referring to myself as a “reformed evangelical”.

### **I believe in an urgent mission**

To be any kind of “reformed” is to believe that God’s will cannot be resisted. It will certainly come to pass. The Bible says:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” ([Isaiah 55:10–11](#) ESV)  
God’s Word effects that which it predicts and God’s Word clearly predicts a massive gathering of people around the throne of God from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth. We read about that in [Revelation 7](#):

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”” ([Revelation 7:9–10](#) ESV)

A great multitude – more massive than anyone could number!  
From every nation, tribe, people and language group on planet earth!  
Standing before the throne and before the Lamb!

Clothed in white robes and crying out with loud voices “Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb!”

That glorious prediction is in the Bible and therefore I believe that it will certainly come to pass. God's Word will make it happen. But that isn't to say that we should all sit back while the Word of God does all the work. Once again, the Bible sees no tension in speaking about the Sovereignty of God and the responsibility of people. God uses ordinary means, as the Apostle Paul makes very clear in Romans 10:14-17:

"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:14-17 ESV)

The Word of Christ will do it – but how will they hear unless we go and tell them? That is precisely the balance and conviction I mean to communicate by calling myself a reformed evangelical. The "reformed" in me believes that the Word of God does the work of God. The "evangelical" in me is eager to present myself to God as an ordinary means.

### **I believe in a final judgment**

When I call myself a "reformed evangelical" I am saying that I still believe in a final judgment. I believe that every human being will be resurrected and will stand before God in the flesh to give an account for how they lived in the body.

I believe this because the Bible says it.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Corinthians 5:10 ESV)

I believe that not everything works out in this life. Because the world is fallen and because Christ has not yet returned bodily to rule over all things, we don't always get what we deserve; we don't always reap what we sow; sometimes we raise up a child in the way he should go and he does depart from it when he is older.

This is not heaven.

We aren't there yet and so somethings will never be sorted out and some injustices will never be addressed until the final judgment.

But that will happen.

One day Jesus will take his seat and all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats.

That will happen and it will determine the nature of our eternal existence. I believe that some people:

"will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Matthew 25:46 ESV) Jesus said that and therefore I know it must be true. It has to be true.

"He who will not execute his threatenings, cannot be relied upon to fulfil his promises."[3]

Jesus is faithful and I believe that he will reward his faithful followers and remove from the earth:

“all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” ([Matthew 13:41–43](#) ESV)

When I call myself a “reformed evangelical” I am saying that I believe in that.

### **I believe in a glorious future**

When I refer to myself as a “reformed evangelical” I am probably also attempting to distance myself from the negativity and escapism of evangelicalism as a whole in the 20th century. In the evangelicalism of my youth an awful lot of people seemed to have an expectation of smallness, weakness and mixture. We expected to lose ground and to retreat into the shadows and to generally decline until that marvelous day when we would be rescued by the Rapture whereupon the world would quickly go to hell in a handbasket.

When I call myself a “reformed evangelical” I am saying that I don’t wish to identify with that. I believe in the parable of the mustard seed.

I believe that the kingdom of God started small – and always starts small – but it did and does grow into something big, beautiful and life giving.

I believe in the parable of the field.

I believe that the Kingdom will grow and the “weeds” will grow, side by side right up until the end.

I think that it is the middle ground that is likely to disappear entirely over the coming years.

I anticipate that the church will ultimately grow and be purified. I interpret our current retrenchment in the west to be merely one of dozens of such seasons of pruning that the Lord has used to cut off dead branches and to extract the cancer of nominalism from the church.

But I anticipate that we will emerge from this season stronger and purer and more prepared and equipped than ever before.

And I imagine that the devil’s army will be much improved over the next decades and centuries as well – should the Lord tarry.

I expect that the wheat and the weeds will grow together right up until the moment of the Lord’s glorious return – that’s what I mean when I say that I believe in a glorious future. I think the best (and hardest) days of the church still lie in the future.

And of course I believe in the beauty, grandeur and wonder of the eternal kingdom. I believe that Jesus Christ will rule over a renewed creation for the glory of his Father and for the good of his people forever. That is my ultimate hope as a believer – that I will see the Lord in my resurrected body and enjoy his goodness forever.

Thanks be to God!

### **I believe in a reliable Bible**

And of course, it goes without saying, that I believe in a reliable Bible. The Bible is the source and ground of all that we know about God, all that we know of ourselves and all that we know about redemption.

It is the Bible that tells us about a big, gracious, Sovereign God who has the first and last word over everything in creation.

It is the Bible that tells us that we are sinners – and how we came to be so.

It is the Bible that tells us about Jesus. The Bible tells us that he is God and always has been; the Bible tells us that he was born of the Virgin Mary, grew up in Galilee of the Gentiles, obeyed God perfectly, loved others entirely and died sacrificially, rose gloriously and victoriously and ascended bodily into heaven where he ever lives to make intercession for his people.

And the Bible tells us about the Spirit given to the church and the mission of the church and the future vindication of the church – all of that information comes to us – and only comes to us through the Bible.

I believe in that Bible.

I believe that it is inspired and useful and true in all it says and affirms.

I believe that it is clear with respect to the message of salvation and that it is sufficient for all matters of life and godliness.

I believe that it is infallible in all that it does and inerrant in all that it says.

I believe that when the Bible speaks, God speaks.

That's what I mean, fundamentally, when I call myself a "reformed evangelical".

It was very nice to meet you.

### What It Means To Be Reformed

<https://heidelblog.net/2008/07/are-reformed-evangelical-or-evangelicals/>

### **Are Reformed "Evangelical" or "Evangelicals"?**

Lee Irons raises the question of the relations between Reformed Christians and American evangelicals. Much of this discussion comes down to definitions and I don't recall that Lee offered a definition. In the immortal words of President Nixon, "let me say this about that." Judged on the basis of the Reformed confessions and the classic reformed of theology of the 16th and 17th centuries, there can be no doubt that the Reformed theology, piety, and practice, is evangelical. The great difficulty in this discussion is that, in our time, the word the evangelical no longer denotes what it did in the 16th have the 17th centuries.

Since the 18th century, and particularly since the middle of the 19th century, the word of evangelical has come to denote what I call "the quest for illegitimate religious experience" (QIRE). By that I mean to say that to be an evangelical, in the modern sense, is to be on a quest for the immediate experience of the risen Christ, apart from Word and sacrament ministry, apart from the means of grace.

Further, it's not at all clear what it means to say that one is "an evangelical" any longer. As Darryl Hart has pointed out in *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, the particulars of "evangelicalism," raise real doubts about whether any such thing really exists any more. Consider that one can be an "evangelical" and affirm inerrancy in the traditional sense or deny it. One can hold to divine sovereignty or deny it. One can hold to the historic doctrine of the Trinity or deny it (via social Trinitarianism). One can affirm the historic Protestant doctrine of justification *sola gratia et sola fide* or deny it (via NPP or FV). One can affirm an open canon or deny it and be an evangelical. Today there are Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic evangelicals. Perhaps the greatest difference between the old definition of evangelical and the modern is that to be a modern "evangelical" is to deny the doctrine of the church—which follows from the pietist/QIRE trajectory of evangelicalism since the 18th century.

Does this mean that Reformed confessionalists have nothing in common with evangelicals? Not at all. I have much in common with orthodox evangelicals who continue to confess the historic doctrines of grace (e.g. ACE, T4G, Gospel Coalition; I'm not sure the WHI guys would want to be called "evangelicals" in this context) who take a different (e.g. pluralist) view of the church or sacraments. I guess that my Reformed friends who work with those orthodox evangelicals take a somewhat different view on this than I do. That's okay.

Perhaps it would be helpful to distinguish between being "evangelical" and being "an evangelical"? I am the former but not the latter. I deny that much of what has become "evangelical" in the modern period is really evangelical at all. What does modern, post-canonical glossolalia have to with the the evangel? What does the health and wealth message have to do with the evangel? What does taking back America (or any form of the so-called "social gospel") have to do with the evangel? What does the emerging movement have to do with the evangel? I haven't even raised the specter of the appalling theology of worship and the consequent practice of most contemporary evangelicals.

Does that make me a snob or an elitist? I don't think so. The "evangelicals" (e.g., proponents of the 1st Great Awakening) accused the Old Side Presbyterians of the same thing. If I question "every member" evangelism I get accused of being unregenerate or unconcerned about the lost. The first time it happened I was a little stunned but by now I've gotten used to it. No I'm not an elitist—I can match plebian, working class roots with the best of 'em. No I'm not quenching the Spirit—not unless you are the Apostle Paul! I am conscious of the democratization of American religion, however, (thank you Nathan Hatch) and I'm critical of those those trends among contemporary evangelicals and in the confessional Reformed churches.

Reformed confessionalists are evangelical, but after 30-40 years or so of calling "evangelicals" back to the historic definition I think it's time to admit that we lost and we lost a long time ago. We lost when the Old Side and New Side merged. We lost when Charles Hodge put the value of a "national" Presbyterian church above confessional subscription. We lost in 1929 and we lost again in 1936 and in 1994. The evangelicals don't need the confessionalists any more and they aren't listening anyway. It's been a long time since Carl Henry was attending Van Til's lectures and Carl Henry isn't the face of the evangelical movement any more. It's Roger Olson or Rob Bell or Brian McLaren. My friends who are trying to save evangelicals from themselves are fighting a rear-guard action. If they were doing it from the editorial board of Christianity Today or Wheaton or Fuller Seminary, there might be hope for "the evangelicals" but they aren't and there isn't. That doesn't mean that I'm hopeless. Despair is a sin and we confess that Christ is risen, his Spirit has been poured out and that his word will not return empty.

Reformed confessionalists are evangelical. We do long to see the true gospel preached truly to everyone and we do expect Christ to operate sovereignly and graciously through his gospel to call his elect from every tribe and tongue. We do long to see Christ's church full. We long to see sinners coming to a knowledge of their sin and to a saving knowledge of Christ. We long to see those sinners growing in the grace of discipleship but, if I can presume to speak for confessionalists, we don't have much confidence that contemporary evangelicalism is in any shape to do most of that. Most "evangelicals" today can't tell you the evangel and there's no consensus on what the Christian life looks like. Asking evangelicals to do evangelism and discipleship is like asking a hospice patient to lift weights. It's not only fruitless it's cruel.

I'm evangelical, just as I'm catholic, and biblical but I'm not "an evangelical" because I still believe, preach, teach, and confess unequivocally the law and the gospel, because I confess

that Christ established a visible, institutional church through which he intends to administer his kingdom and that it is to that entity that he has entrusted the ministry of the gospel and the ministry of the signs and seals of the kingdom.

### **Distinguishing Reformed From Evangelicalism: Realism**

As evangelicals become dissatisfied with the emphasis on personalities, annoying trendiness, and the shallowness of Modern evangelical theology, piety, and practice they begin to look around for an alternative. One challenge they face right away is that, in many cases, their religious experience has been hermetically sealed within the Modern evangelical bubble. They sang the same contemporary worship songs, listened to the same contemporary Christian music, and followed the same fads as everyone around them. They might not know any path out of the bubble. Practically, for many evangelicals, it is as if the church began on a beach in Costa Mesa in the 1960s. It did not. The New Covenant church was inaugurated with the death of Jesus and ratified with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It existed for most of two millennia before the Modern evangelical movement began in the early 18th century and long before Charles Finney (1792–1875) revolutionized evangelical theology, piety, and practice with his heretical (Pelagian) theology and destructive, rationalistic methods. Another of the challenges evangelicals moving toward the Reformation face is a very different eschatology. I am thinking not so much of the end times but about the relations between heaven and earth. Many evangelicals have been sold a bill of goods. They have been promised more heaven in this life than is really possible or to be expected.

### **What Has Been Is What Will Be**

The writer of Ecclesiastes, whom the superscript (Ecclesiastes 1:1) and an ancient rabbinical tradition suggests might have been Solomon, says:

What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done,  
and there is nothing new under the sun (ESV).

For many evangelical readers of Ecclesiastes it is a given that these cannot be the words of a believer. Thus, many have theorized that Ecclesiastes must be in the canon of holy Scripture in order to teach us what *not* to think or say. This is the Berenstein Bears theory of Ecclesiastes. In that series of children's books Papa bear is always doing stupid things and then telling the cubs not to do what he did. Come to think of it, why do fathers fare so poorly in so much of children's media? I digress.

Ecclesiastes was not inspired by and imposed as canon upon the church by the Holy Spirit in order to show us what not to think or say. That so many have reacted this way to Ecclesiastes

says something about the prevailing evangelical eschatology and the difference between that and Reformation realism.

The message of Ecclesiastes is that this is a fallen world and there is much frustration and even futility because of it. There is a resolution to it all but Ecclesiastes does not shy away from facing things as they really are in the fallen world. Whoever wrote Ecclesiastes was a keen-eyed, realistic truth-teller. History tells us that, indeed, there is nothing new under the sun. What is happening now is not absolutely new. Our ignorance of the past does not mean that there was no past. All the heresies being touted today have been taught before. All the amazing insights that this or that exciting new teacher is promoting have been seen before.

### **Realism Versus Osteen**

Reformation theology, i.e., confessional Lutheran and Reformed theology, piety, and practice is *realistic*. As I suggested above, Modern evangelical theology, piety, and practice has been fueled by a different eschatology. As evangelical theology, piety, and practice came to be dominated in the 18th century first by the quest for revival and religious excitement and by the quest to know things the way God does, there developed a great internal pressure to move beyond the ordinary to the extraordinary, to the supernatural. The revivals in Northampton in the 18th century became the outbreak of Pentecostalism at Cane Ridge, KY in 1800 and Cane Ridge became Topeka and Azusa Street in the early 20th century. Northampton became the sawdust trail in the mid-19th century and the sawdust trail became stadium-sized revival meetings in the 1950s and 60s. Cane Ridge became Benny Hinn. Excelsior!

We have all met that Christian who never gets a virus. He has a demon. What, for most of us is treated with some Pepto Bismal, he treats with an exorcism. This is the extreme end of the spectrum but it is on the spectrum of the highly supernaturalized Modern evangelical piety where things are not supposed to be ordinary, where everything must outstanding, wonderful, and excellent. The successful evangelical of the late 20th century was under tremendous internal (and external) pressure to create or participate in a movement that was “life-transforming,” “powerful,” and “exciting.” Joel Osteen did not just happen. He is Modern evangelical theology, piety, and practice distilled to its toothy essence: Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism (See Christian Smith, *Almost Christian*, 2005).

The theology, piety, and practice of the Reformation churches, when they are faithful to their own confession, is the antithesis of Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, and the church-growth movement. It is much closer to the realism of Ecclesiastes. It is a theology, piety, and practice of the regular use of the divinely ordained (ordinary) instruments (means) by which God communicates his free favor (grace) to his people. It expects less of heaven on earth now than the evangelicals have typically expected.

Whereas the Wesleyan doctrine of perfectionism (entire sanctification) is the natural consequence of Modern evangelical theology, the Reformation understanding of the fall and its consequences expected humans to be and remain sinful in this life. In Heidelberg Catechism 32 the Reformed confess that we continue to fight against sin *all* our lives. The Catechism refers to

our continuing sins and sinfulness throughout. It keeps coming back to that reality. E.g., Heidelberg 56:

56. What do you believe concerning the “forgiveness of sins”?

That God, for the sake of Christ’s satisfaction, will no more remember my sins, nor the sinful nature with which I have to struggle all my life long; but graciously imputes to me the righteousness of Christ, that I may nevermore come into condemnation.

The Reformed do look forward to glory but we not expect it or perfection in this life. Like the Lutherans we are deeply influenced by Luther’s critique of what rightly called “the theology of glory,” which covered a range of errors: justification through works, knowing God savingly through nature, and the Pelagian doctrine of sinless perfection in this life.

Our confidence lies not in our progress in sanctification (though we believe that the Spirit is graciously, gradually bringing us into conformity to Christ), but the objective promise of the gospel: Christ for us. He is our substitute. He is our hope. He is our righteousness.

The Christian life is not a succession of thrilling mountaintop experiences. It is more like a marathon during which there are moments of exhilaration but mostly it is a slog. It is wonderful to finish but the race itself is hard and often very punishing. Hebrews 12 uses this imagery in this way to describe the Christian life:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us... (Heb 12:1; ESV).

The Christian life is more like Nebraska than it is like Colorado (or, for our European readers, the Swiss Alps).

One of the great differences between Reformation theology, piety, and practice and Modern Evangelical theology, piety, and practice is the degree to which the two traditions expect heaven on earth. When the Reformation churches are at their best, they expect their worship services to be faithful, obedient to the Word (especially the Reformed), and Christ-exalting. It is deeply satisfying but those services may not produce many dopamine highs. They are more like a good steak than a Pop-Tart.

The book of Ecclesiastes was written, under the inspiration of the Spirit, to teach us this eschatology, this vision of the Christian life. Modern evangelical theology, piety, and practice seems to be burning out and cracking up. There is an alternative, however, and it is not Rome or Constantinople. It is God’s Word as confessed in Geneva, Heidelberg, Dort, and

Westminster. It is their recovery of the worship and theology of ancient church. It is their embodiment of the eschatology of Ecclesiastes.

## **Q: TELL US YOUR VIEW OF THE ACRONYM TULIP AS IT RELATES TO SALVATION.**

<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/tulip-and-reformed-theology-introduction/>

Just a few years before the Pilgrims landed on the shores of New England in the *Mayflower*, a controversy erupted in the Netherlands and spread throughout Europe and then around the world. It began within the theological faculty of a Dutch institution that was committed to Calvinistic teaching. Some of the professors there began to have second thoughts about issues relating to the doctrines of election and predestination. As this theological controversy spread across the country, it upset the church and theologians of the day. Finally, a synod was convened. Issues were squared away and the views of certain people were rejected, including those of a man by the name of Jacobus Arminius.

The group that led the movement against orthodox Reformed theology was called the Remonstrants. They were called the Remonstrants because they were remonstrating or protesting against certain doctrines within their own theological heritage. There were basically five doctrines that were the core of the controversy. As a result of this debate, these five core theological issues became known in subsequent generations as the “five points of Calvinism.” They are now known through the very popular acrostic TULIP, which is a clever way to sum up the five articles that were in dispute. The five points, as they are stated in order to form the acrostic TULIP, are: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints.

I mention this historical event because it would be a serious mistake to understand the essence of Reformed theology simply in light of these five doctrines—the Reformed faith involves many other elements of theological and ecclesiastical confession. However, these are the five controversial points of Reformed theology, and they are the ones that are popularly seen as distinctive to this particular confession. Over the next five posts, we are going to spend some time looking at these five points of Calvinism as they are spelled out in the acrostic TULIP.

### **See also:**

- [TULIP and Reformed Theology: An Introduction](#)
- [TULIP and Reformed Theology: Total Depravity](#)
- [TULIP and Reformed Theology: Unconditional Election](#)
- [TULIP and Reformed Theology: Limited Atonement](#)
- [TULIP and Reformed Theology: Irresistible Grace](#)

- TULIP and Reformed Theology: Perseverance of the Saints

## TULIP or, The Five Points of Calvinism

### Dead in Sin?

Is the faith of our fathers living in your life? In your church? We sing the song: "Faith of our fathers living still..." and no doubt the faith *is* living. But the question is, "Where is that faith living and confessed?" And, "What is the faith of our fathers?" It was expressed over 350 years ago by our church fathers at the Synod of Dordt (in the Netherlands). We use the familiar acrostic: **TULIP** to help us remember what our fathers said the Bible teaches:

### T - Total Depravity

That means simply **MAN is DEAD**. The Bible says that you and I are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-6) unless we are born again. **DEAD!!!** More than that, the man or woman who is dead in sin hates God, and his "carnal mind" is "enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). His will is stubbornly steeled against God. This Biblical idea changes a lot of modern talk about salvation.

Consider what that means:

1. Can a man do good works then, if he is not a Christian who is born again? No. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).
2. Can a man *want* to be born again and follow instructions on "how to do it?" No, for that would be like saying that a man in a grave can desire to come out of the grave, or follow instructions on how to be made alive. It would be like trying to lure him out of the grave. "It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing" (John 6:33).
3. Can any man "accept Christ" as his personal Savior, so that he becomes saved after that? Of course not. Accepting Christ is a good work done only by a Christian. Only **AFTER** God makes a person alive, can he and will he accept Christ. "No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44).
4. Can you "offer salvation" to anyone? That is surely impossible. One might as well offer food to a dead man than salvation to a dead sinner (Eph.2:1-2).

**ONLY GOD CAN MAKE US ALIVE. AND GOD DOES THAT SOVEREIGNLY - WITHOUT OUR AID, WITHOUT OUR ASKING.** From beginning to end, "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). This is the faith that *we preach*, because it is Biblical, because it is the **FAITH** of our fathers, which we love, still living in our hearts, and because it gives God all the glory!

## Not My Choice

Is the faith of our fathers living in your life? In your church? We sing the song: "Faith of our fathers living still..." and no doubt the faith *is* living. But the question is, "Where is that faith living and confessed?" And, "What is the faith of our fathers?" It was expressed over 350 years ago by our church fathers at the Synod of Dordt (in the Netherlands). We use the familiar acrostic: **TULIP** to help us remember what our fathers said the Bible teaches:

### **U - Unconditional Election**

This means simply: God *chooses* to give some people eternal life, *without* looking for anything good in them *as a condition* for loving and saving them.

Before any man or woman is born -- in fact, before the world was made -- God decided who would go to heaven and who would not. Before they did good or bad, God chose some to be His people and rejected others.

"CONDITIONAL election" would mean that God chooses to be His those who *first love and choose Him*. But the Bible says: "You have not chosen me, I have chosen you" John 15:16. (Please also look at Romans 9:11-21.) Acts 13:48 says that "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Only, when we speak this language is the horse placed before the cart. CONDITIONAL election puts the cart before the horse, because it says that man believes and THEN is ordained to eternal life. Read carefully John 10:26 for another plain "horse before the cart" passage. Can one imagine what the *denial* of this doctrine would mean? If we remember that before we are saved, we can *do nothing good* (John 15:5; Ephesians 2:1-6), the only conclusion is that we could never choose God. And never would. And never would be saved.

But God is sovereign and chooses whom He will choose. And after He chooses us, we choose Him daily. All we are and all we have is given us by God.

Again, this is the faith that we preach, because it is Biblical, because it is the faith of our fathers, living still in our hearts, and because it gives God all the glory!!!!

---

## For All Men?

Is the faith of our fathers living in your life? In your church? We sing the song: "Faith of our fathers living still..." and no doubt the faith *is* living. But the question is, "Where is that faith living and confessed?" And, "What is the faith of our fathers?" It was expressed over 350 years ago by our church fathers at the Synod of Dordt (in the Netherlands). We use the familiar acrostic: **TULIP** to help us remember what our fathers said the Bible teaches:

### **L - Limited Atonement**

The great gospel message that so many today are urgently carrying to distant lands is that *Christ made atonement with His death*. But there are two critical points at which this message is so severely distorted that it no longer carries the gospel message.

THE FIRST DISTORTION concerns what Christ's death *did*. The Biblical truth of the *Atonement* is that His death *paid for sins*. Yet so many today teach that Christ's death was only an example for us to follow, and if one merely follows His example he will be saved. Or it is taught that Christ's death did not actually pay for any specific sins, but made it *possible* for all sins to be paid for.

But the Bible says that Christ's death on the cross actually paid for sins. Acts 20:28 says that God bought the church with His own blood. See also Matthew 26:28, Hebrews 7:26-27.

THE SECOND DISTORTION of this biblical truth is that Christ died for all men. Some teach that Christ made it possible for all men to be saved. But the questions that must be asked are: "If Christ died for all men, why are not all men saved?" "Can not God do what He desires to do?" "Is there something defective in Christ's death?" "Must man desire to be saved first?" But a man who is totally depraved can not will to be saved. He hates God and wants nothing to do with Christ's death. So it must not be said that Christ died for all men.

The Bible says that Christ laid down His life for His sheep, and only them. John 10:11. The *ATONEMENT* is *LIMITED* to the elect of God. Every sin of every one of Christ's sheep is paid for. Those sins and those alone have been paid for. That is the only gospel because that is the Bible.

---

### **Dragged Kicking & Screaming to Heaven?**

Is the faith of our fathers living in your life? In your church? We sing the song: "Faith of our fathers living still..." and no doubt the faith *is* living. But the question is, "Where is that faith living and confessed?" And, "What is the faith of our fathers?" It was expressed over 350 years ago by our church fathers at the Synod of Dordt (in the Netherlands). We use the familiar acrostic: **TULIP** to help us remember what our fathers said the Bible teaches:

#### **I - Irresistible Grace**

The fourth Biblical truth in the five points of Calvinism teaches *that God's grace to save a person cannot be resisted*. Grace is God's *free and unmerited power* to save a person from his sins which would otherwise lead us to hell. Grace brings him to heaven who naturally would end in eternal hell.

That grace is irresistible. That means that if God gives grace to you, there is nothing in the world that you can do to resist it and thwart God's intention to take you to heaven. The certainty of salvation for God's elect is seen in John 6:37 where Jesus says: "All that the Father hath given me shall come to me..." There is no doubt that they will be saved. Verse 44 says that those who come to God come *because God draws them*. Not our will, but God's will is first and powerful.

Now, some ridicule this truth of the Bible and say that it makes man go to heaven against his will. "He kicks and screams all the way to heaven." But that is not how the Bible presents God's grace. God makes His people "*willing* in the day of His power" Psalm 110:3. For a wonderful illustration of that truth, just consider the converted Apostle Paul. "By the grace of God" he was what he was (1 Corinthians 15:10). And immediately after his conversion he said *willingly*, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Acts 9:6. That surely was not against his will.

God's grace is sweet and irresistible. He makes us love it and want nothing else. He is as irresistible to us as a husband to his newly-wed bride. Come with us and hear God's wonderful grace proclaimed in Christ any Lord's Day.

---

## Living Like the Devil?

Is the faith of our fathers living in your life? In your church? We sing the song: "Faith of our fathers living still..." and no doubt the faith *is* living. But the question is, "Where is that faith living and confessed?" And, "What is the faith of our fathers?" It was expressed over 350 years ago by our church fathers at the Synod of Dordt (in the Netherlands). We use the familiar acrostic: **TULIP** to help us remember what our fathers said the Bible teaches:

### P - Preservation of the Saints

The last of the five points of Calvinism teaches that *God preserves His people so they can never be lost*. To put it simply, it means this: "Once you are saved, you are always saved."

God's Word is full of proof for this beautiful truth. And though many deny it, and tell you that you can be lost and saved many, many times, and therefore can never be sure of your salvation, the Bible says otherwise. Talking about His elect sheep, Jesus said: "And I give them eternal life; and they shall *never* perish, *neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand*" (John 10:28). See John 6:39, 17:2, 11,12; Romans 8:37-39; II Tim. 1:12; 4:18, etc. etc.

Some object to this doctrine because it supposedly makes men "carnally secure" in their salvation. That is, if I know nothing can make me go to hell once God has saved me, I will "live like the devil." There have been some who have used this beautiful truth as an excuse to live like the devil. But they are not Christians. Nor do they understand this truth. Because this truth also implies "PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS." Those who never fall away are *saints*. They are *holy*. And they are given power to live holy lives. They "continue in well-doing." Anyone who says he can "live like the devil" has not experienced the saving power of Christ and does not know the meaning of Philippians 1:6, "He that hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." God will continue working good works in us until Christ returns. Don't think otherwise.

Is there any hope for Christians without this doctrine? We don't need to be "scared to heaven." We need comfort. Because we know that if it were up to the Christian to remain saved, he would never be able to do it. You know yourself!!!! There is no power in me apart from God's grace.

### Calvin's TULIP

The simplistic version)

**T** -- total depravity. This doesn't mean people are as bad as they can be. It means that sin is in every part of one's being, including the mind and will, so that a man cannot save himself.

**U** -- unconditional election. God chooses to save people unconditionally; that is, they are not chosen on the basis of their own merit.

**L** -- limited atonement. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was for the purpose of saving the elect.

**I** -- irresistible grace. When God has chosen to save someone, He will.

**P** -- perseverance of the saints. Those people God chooses cannot lose their salvation; they will continue to believe. If they fall away, it will be only for a time.

(The TULIP in full bloom)

### **TOTAL DEPRAVITY OR INABILITY (= "T" of TULIP)**

The first point asserts that the entire or TOTAL human being--body and soul, intellect and will, etc.--is fallen and that everyone is born spiritually dead, helpless, and passive; indeed, everyone is worse than volitionally dead or unable to desire spiritual good but is actually enslaved to sin, positively and actively hostile to the things of the Spirit (Calvinists cite, e.g., John. 1:13; 8:43, 47; 10:26; 12:37-40; 18:37; Romans. 7:18; 8:5-8; 1 Corinthians. 2:9-14).

### **UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION (= "U" of TULIP)**

The second point inescapably follows from the first: since one is born totally depraved and enslaved to sin, one's ELECTION cannot be dependent or CONTINGENT on any spiritually worthy actions one commits. According to this point, God predestines or chooses to soften the hard, sin-enslaved hearts of certain fallen individuals and liberate them from their death not because of any merit they have but despite their demerits--i.e., He ELECTS to change their hearts (and thereby join them to Christ and His saving work) DESPITE the fact that they hate God and oppose Him and have hard hearts, not soft hearts, and have sin-enslaved wills, not free wills. Thus, believers have no reason to boast about themselves or their own actions: the only thing that differentiates them from Judas, Esau, or others who never respond in faith is that God gave them grace that He withheld from such reprobates (Calvinists cite, e.g., Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27; Rom. 9:11-18; 1 Cor. 4:7; Eph. 2:8-10; cf. Jn. 1:13; 15:16; Acts 13:48; 16:14; 18:27; Phil. 2:13).

### **LIMITED ATONEMENT or Particular Redemption (= "L" of TULIP)**

This point says that while Christ's blood--indeed, His entire life, death, and resurrection--is infinitely INTENSIVE in saving power and thus unlimited in one sense, it is not infinitely EXTENSIVE and is thus limited, not universal, in the extent of its application; for while everyone CONDITIONALLY or "provisionally" shares in Christ's life, death, and resurrection (thus, if everyone believed, everyone would be joined or married to Christ), only members of Christ's

body or bride or flock (ELECT believers) actually share in His blood (Calvinists cite, e.g., Jn. 10:11, 15, 26; 17:9; cf. 6:37, 39; 17:2, 6, 24).

### **IRRESISTIBLE (SUFFICIENT) GRACE (= "I" of TULIP)**

This is virtually a synonym for Luther's slogan "grace alone" (sola gratia) and is logically implied by points "T" and "U" above. It teaches that God's INWARD CALL is perfectly EFFECTUAL or SUFFICIENT--a hard, fleshly, sinful heart need not add anything to God's grace, such as "co-operation," for this special call or grace is invincible, overpowering all hatred and melting all opposition (Calvinists cite, e.g., Jn. 3:6-8). Here Calvinists distinguish God's inward, effectual call--i.e., IRRESISTIBLE GRACE or sufficient, effective grace--from His outward call, which is simply His commandments written on tablets of stone. The latter is eminently resistible, insufficient, and ineffective to give life to a dead soul or liberate a sin-enslaved heart (e.g., Acts 7:51; 13:39; Rom. 8:3).

### **PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS or Eternal Security (= "P" of TULIP)**

This is not the idea that no matter what a believer does he or she cannot lose his or her salvation but the idea that " . . . He who began a good work in you will perfect it . . ." (Phil. 1:6 [NASB]; cf., e.g., Jn. 6:37, 39; 10:28-29; Rom. 8:31-39)--i.e., the idea that whenever God creates faith in our hearts and thereby joins us to Christ and His saving work, He will sustain that faith, that saving relationship with Christ, causing us, by His grace, to persevere in faith.

### **An Explanation of the TULIP**

The aforementioned "TULIP" was fashioned at the Synod of Dordt (Dordrecht) in the early 1600s only in REACTION to five assertions of the Arminians (the "Remonstrants" or Dutch "semi-Pelagian" protesters). As a result, these five points aren't the clearest, most coherent, or most comprehensive presentation of the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation. By the way, Luther, Cranmer, Zwingli, Bullinger, Bucer, et al., were all strict predestinarians and fully Augustinian in their view of grace, etc., but the AP test seems to associate predestination only with Calvin and Zwingli).

Nonetheless, once one understands the essence of the Calvinistic order of salvation (ordo salutis), then TULIP makes sense. According to both English and American Puritans and Continental Calvinists, SALVATION is conditional, whereas ELECTION is unconditional (U = UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION). This distinction is vital to understanding TULIP: ELECTION is God's eternal decree, outside of time, of who will have faith in Christ and thereby become a member of His body and thus be spotless and righteous and obtain eternal life; in contrast,

SALVATION is God's historical outworking of this decree in time. Thus, according to Calvinism, there is an entire chain of necessary and sufficient CONDITIONS one must meet in order to be "saved" or obtain "SALVATION": if and only if one believes will one be joined to Christ's body and participate in His blood and His fulfillment of the law; if and only if one is thus joined to Christ will one be justified or declared legally righteous; if and only if one is thus justified will one be adopted and volitionally sanctified and persevere in Christ; if and only if one thus perseveres will one be physically glorified and receive a transformed resurrected body and spend eternity with Christ.

HOWEVER, according to Calvinism, while one can thus ask "What must I do to be SAVED" (Acts 16:30), it is nonsense to ask "What must I do to be ELECTED?" Why? Because a volitional corpse or a spiritually dead person simply cannot read the Word or pray to God in a way that will volitionally resurrect himself (herself) or soften his (her) heart's hostility to God--i.e., in regeneration or in being "born again," one is passive. In a word, the unregenerate, fleshly person is TOTALLY UNABLE (= "T" of "TULIP") to do any spiritual good--he or she can't even co-operate or work "synergistically" with the Holy Spirit (hence Calvinism teaches a pure monergism, as did St. Augustine). Thus, if one is born a slave to sin and spiritually dead--is "TOTALLY DEPRAVED or spiritually unable"--then salvation must ULTIMATELY be a free or UNCONDITIONAL gift, in no way finally dependent or contingent on one's actions--back to the "U" or "UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION": God simply reaches down and chooses to breathe life into some spiritual corpses and pass over others.

## **Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON THE TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF MAN?**

Original sin corrupted every member of the human race - except for Christ - in every area of our being, physical, mental, emotional and will. However, we are not as corrupt as we possibly could be.

**Considering the significant aspects of the atonement, what is your view of sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and/or redemption?**

**In your view, what is the relationship between regeneration and conversion in the Reformed view of the Order of Salvation?**

**What is your view of predestination?**

**What is the significance of our adoption as God's children?**

**Discuss how Special Revelation and General Revelation work together.**

### **General and Special Revelation — A Reformed Approach to Science and Scripture**

In this series of blog posts, we have been discussing Dr. R.C. Sproul's answer to a question about the age of the universe during the Q&A at Ligonier's 2012 National Conference. In the previous post, we stopped in the middle of his

answer to discuss his assertion: All Truth is God's Truth. Following this statement, Dr. Sproul continued by making a very important point about general and special revelation. He said:

I believe firmly that all of truth is God's truth, and I believe that God has not only given revelation in sacred Scripture, but also, the sacred Scripture itself tells us that God reveals Himself in nature—which we call natural revelation. And, I once asked a seminary class of mine that was a conservative group, I said, “How many of you believe that God's revelation in Scripture is infallible?” And they all raised their hand. And I said, “And how many of you believe that God's revelation in nature is infallible, and nobody raised their hand. It's the same God who's giving the revelation.

A Reformed approach to science and Scripture requires a Reformed understanding of revelation. The word “revelation” denotes a “revealing.” In Christian theology, it refers to God's act of communication to man or to the content of that communication. Historically theologians have distinguished between different kinds of revelation. Many medieval theologians described the difference using the terms *natural* and *supernatural* revelation. The distinction had nothing to do with the source or origin of the revelation. Theologians who made this distinction believed that all revelation was supernatural in origin because God was its source. Instead, this distinction had to do with the *mode* of revelation. Natural revelation was communicated by God through so-called “natural” phenomena (His created works), while supernatural revelation was communicated by God through special divine intervention (dreams, visions, etc.).

## General Revelation

A more common distinction among Reformed theologians is the distinction between *general* revelation and *special* revelation. Article 2 of the Belgic Confession (on the means by which we know God) states the distinction in the following words:

We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see *clearly the invisible things of God*, even *his everlasting power and divinity*, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20. All which things are sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation.

This distinction between general and special revelation focuses more on the extent and purpose of revelation.<sup>i</sup> General revelation is referred to as “general” revelation because it has a general content and is revealed to a general audience. Through general revelation to all men, God communicates His existence, His power, and His glory, such that men are left without excuse.

A further distinction that must be made is the distinction between immediate and mediate general revelation. Immediate general revelation occurs without an intermediating agency. Mediate general revelation occurs through an intermediating agency. John Calvin described immediate general revelation in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity [*divinitatis sensum*]. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God himself has implanted in all men a certain understanding of his divine majesty (I.3.1).

In other words, God has revealed himself by directly implanting knowledge about Himself in all men. In a later chapter, Calvin described the mediate general revelation that God accomplishes through His created works:

The final goal of the blessed life, moreover, rests in the knowledge of God [cf. John 17:3]. Lest anyone, then, be excluded from access to happiness, he not only sowed in men's minds that seed of religion of which we have spoken, but revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship of the universe. As a consequence, men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him (*Institutes*, I.5.1).

God, then, reveals Himself through His works. Here, Calvin is simply restating what the Psalmist said in Psalm 19:1–2.

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.

The Apostle Paul elaborates on the same idea in Romans 1:19–20.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

As John Murray explains, "We must not tone down the teaching of the apostle in this passage. It is a clear declaration to the effect that the visible creation as God's handiwork makes manifest the invisible perfections of God as its Creator, that from the things which are perceptible to the senses cognition of these invisible perfections is derived, and that thus a clear apprehension of God's perfections may be gained from his observable handiwork."<sup>ii</sup>

## Special Revelation

General revelation, whether immediate or mediate, is directed to all men. It is, however, “not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.1). General revelation does not reveal Jesus Christ or His work of redemption for sinners. Thus there is a need for what is called “special revelation.” Special revelation is the revelation of the way of salvation.

One of the most important biblical texts describing God’s special revelation is found in Hebrews 1:1–2, which reads:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

In times past, before the completion of Scripture, God revealed His redemptive work through the prophets by means of dreams, visions, and theophanies. But now, special revelation has received its permanent form in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (WCF I.1).

Given this summary overview of the nature of general and special revelation, we return to the question Dr. Sproul asked his seminary class. Recall that he asked: “How many of you believe that God’s revelation in Scripture is infallible?” And they all raised their hand. Then Dr. Sproul asked, “And how many of you believe that God’s revelation in nature is infallible?” And this time no one raised their hand. As we will see in our next post, the reason for the different responses had to do with the students’ right concern to recognize that Scripture is a higher authority than scientific theories. That, however, was not what Dr. Sproul asked.

And therein lies the rub in many contemporary discussions of this issue. We end up talking past each other because we are not listening carefully. Dr. Sproul asked his students a question regarding something God does. And despite the misgivings of his students, the answer Dr. Sproul gave is correct. God’s revelation in creation is equally as infallible as His revelation in Scripture because in both cases, it is God who is doing the revealing, and God is *always* infallible. God cannot err in His work of revealing Himself. The question the students *thought* Dr. Sproul was asking is an extremely important question, but it cannot be answered adequately until Dr. Sproul’s original question is answered correctly.

In our next post, we will examine what may be the most important point Dr. Sproul raised in connection with the contemporary discussions, and that is the difference between God’s infallible revelation (general and special) and our fallible interpretation of that revelation (general and special). In connection with this topic, we will need to look at Dr. Sproul’s commentary on Article 12 of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* in order to understand the difference between scientific theories that contradict an interpretation of Scripture as opposed to theories that contradict an actual teaching of Scripture.

## Which Has the Priority: General Revelation or Special Revelation? 6 Theses on Natural Law and Scripture

In an insightful article for *Eikon: A Journal for Biblical Anthropology*, Joe Rigney—assistant professor of theology and literature at Bethlehem College and Seminary and the author of The Things of Earth and Lewis on the Christian Life—has a helpful meditation on Scripture and natural law, special revelation and general revelation, the authority of God's Word and the authority of God's world.

Using Psalm 19 as a guide, he explains that while

- General revelation has a chronological (time), ontological (reality), and epistemological (knowledge) priority over Scripture,
- Scripture has a linguistic (language) and redemptive (salvation) priority over general revelation.

They are sufficient for different things and are mutually interpreting.

---

### **1. General revelation is the first and foundational revelation upon which all subsequent revelation is built.**

Special revelation is “special” because it presupposes the existence of general revelation.

### **2. General revelation has an ontological and epistemological priority over Scripture.**

The existence of created reality and experiential knowledge of created reality are both necessary in order for Scripture to be intelligible.

For example, “the heavens declare the glory of God” is unintelligible apart from the existence of the heavens (ontological priority) and our knowledge of the nature and existence of heavens (epistemological priority).

Psalm 19, as special revelation, doesn't mean anything unless the sun blazes up out of the east and moves across the sky, and we've seen it do so. [JT: This is a bit overstated. It still means something even if you're blind and even if you have eyes to see but haven't personally witnessed it, like God's work in the depth of the sea. But the point is still taken.]

### **3. Special revelation has linguistic priority over general revelation (owing to our relative immaturity and creatureliness).**

The Scriptures, because they use human words, are more direct and therefore more intelligible to us than the revelation of God in nature.

In saying that Scripture has a linguistic priority, we are not saying that nature is obscure or unclear. It is clear. The heavens clearly declare the glory of God. Paul tells us that “what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:19-20). The obscurity we may feel about what God is declaring in nature is owing first to the way that God reveals himself in nature.

God doesn't issue direct, linguistic commands through nature. Instead, he creates a natural order that is designed, that has purposes, trends, trajectories. All of creation is governed by God's fixed and established laws and principles.

Then, human beings, through the use of their minds, reflect on this fixed natural order and its trends and trajectories and draw conclusions which they express in human language.

So general revelation includes both the fixed natural order as well as human minds to discern and express the import and implications of that order. But that process takes time and effort and maturity, and therefore, Scripture, by giving us God's revelation in human language, is more direct, even if both Scripture and nature are clear.

Let me illustrate through Jesus' words about anxiety in Matthew 6. Jesus doesn't want us to be anxious, so he exhorts us to "consider the birds of the air," how God provides for their basic needs despite their lack of barns (Matt. 6:26-27). The birds of the air are crystal clear in their witness to God's provision. But it takes time and effort and maturity to stop and think about the birds and how their needs are met, and how valuable we are relative to them, and to therefore, draw the conclusion that God will provide for us, and to therefore draw the conclusion that we ought not be anxious.

It's all there in nature, in general revelation, but it remains obscure because of our immaturity and creatureliness.

#### **4. Special revelation has a redemptive priority over general revelation (owing to our sinfulness).**

Not only does Scripture have a linguistic priority over general revelation owing to our relative immaturity and creatureliness, it has a redemptive priority owing to our sinfulness.

The obscurity of general revelation which we experience is not only owing to the fact that it takes time, effort, and maturity to comprehend God's revelation in nature; it's also owing to the Fall. Because of our truth-suppressing rebellion, in our natural state we are deaf to God's voice and blind to his beauty. Again, Romans 1: even though we know God (through nature), we suppress what we know and we refuse to honor God as God and give thanks to him (Rom. 1:21). The Holy Spirit restores man's sight through the new birth by means of special revelation. Or, in the words of Psalm 19, it is the law of the Lord which revives the soul and enlightens the eye.

Thus, special revelation has both a linguistic priority and a redemptive priority in giving us knowledge of God.

#### **5. Both general and special revelation are sufficient, but for different things (general revelation: condemnation; special revelation: salvation).**

General revelation is sufficient to condemn us. The authority and clarity of general revelation leaves us without excuse. But it is not sufficient to save us.

Only special revelation is sufficient to save, since through it alone, God causes the new birth. He has caused us to be born again through the living and abiding Word of God (1 Pet. 1:23).

#### **6. Thus, Scripture and nature are mutually interpreting for each other: mutually meaningless without each other and mutually fruitful with each other.**

You can't understand the Bible rightly without some general revelation.

You can't understand nature rightly without the illumination of the Bible.

Again Psalm 19 illustrates this point. "More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold. Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). You can't know the meaning of that verse unless gold and honey exist, and you've experienced a desire for gold and the sweetness of honey. And you can't experientially make the connection between desiring the Word of God more than gold and honey unless God causes you to be born again through special revelation.

**Q: WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?**

**Q: EXPLAIN YOUR VIEW ON CESSATIONISM.**

**Q: TELL US YOUR VIEWS ON EGALITARIANISM AND COMPLEMENTARIANISM.**

**Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON THE END TIMES?**

**Q: WHO SHOULD BE ALLOWED AT THE LORD'S TABLE?**

**Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON PAEDO-COMMUNION?**

**Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE LORD'S SUPPER?**

**Q: IN YOUR VIEW, WHO QUALIFIES FOR THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM?**

**Q: WHY DO WE BAPTIZE INFANTS?**

## **Q: WHAT IS YOUR VIEW ON RE-BAPTISM?**

## **Q: WHY ARE CHAPTERS 34 AND 35 OF THE CONFESSION IMPORTANT?**

### **Article 34 - Westminister Confession of Faith**

#### **Chapter 34 - Of the Holy Spirit**

1. THE Holy Spirit, the third Person in the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son, of the same substance and equal in power and glory, is, together with the Father and the Son, to be believed in, loved, obeyed, and worshiped throughout all ages.

2. He is the Lord and Giver of life, everywhere present, and is the source of all good thoughts, pure desires, and holy counsels in men. By him the prophets were moved to speak the Word of God, and all the writers of the Holy Scriptures inspired to record infallibly the mind and will of God. The dispensation of the gospel is especially committed to him. He prepares the way for it, accompanies it with his persuasive power, and urges its message upon the reason and conscience of men, so that they who reject its merciful offer are not only without excuse, but are also guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit.

3. The Holy Spirit, whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates men by his grace, convicts them of sin, moves them to repentance, and persuades and enables them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith. He unites all believers to Christ, dwells in them as their Comforter and Sanctifier, gives to them the Spirit of adoption and prayer, and performs all these gracious offices by which they are sanctified and sealed unto the day of redemption.

4. By the indwelling of the Holy Spirit all believers being vitally united to Christ, who is the head, are thus united one to another in the Church, which is his body. He calls and anoints ministers for their holy office, qualifies all other officers in the Church for their special work, and imparts various gifts and graces to its members. He gives efficacy to the Word and to the ordinances of the gospel. By him the Church will be preserved, increased, purified, and at last made perfectly holy in the presence of God.

### **Article 35 - Westminister Confession of Faith**

#### **Chapter 35 - Of the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions**

1. God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man, doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the gospel.

2. In the gospel God declares his love for the world and his desire that all men should be saved; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and commands all to embrace the offered mercy; and by his Spirit accompanying the Word pleads with men to accept his gracious invitation.

3. It is the duty and privilege of everyone who hears the gospel immediately to accept its merciful provisions; and they who continue in impenitence and unbelief incur aggravated guilt and perish by their own fault.

4. Since there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel, and since in the divinely established and ordinary method of grace faith cometh by hearing the Word of God, Christ hath commissioned his Church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are, therefore, under obligation to sustain the ordinances of the Christian religion where they are already established, and to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the Kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth.

## Church History and Reformed Tradition

**Q: HOW DO SOME OF THE MAJOR CONTRIBUTORS TO REFORMED THOUGHT PRIOR TO THE REFORMATION INFLUENCE YOUR MINISTRY TODAY?**

### Searching for Gospel-Centered Theology Before the Reformation

In recent years there has been a marked movement of evangelical converts to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. This trend has included not just younger, untrained evangelicals, but established pastors and professors and even one president of the Evangelical Theological Society. While the causes for this phenomenon are doubtless complex and different in each individual case, one frequently cited reason is the sense of historical rootedness these traditions offer. Thus at the website Why I'm Catholic, one former Baptist chronicles his conversion to Roman Catholicism in terms of his parallel discovery of church history; at Called to Communion, one former Presbyterian equates his acceptance of Roman Catholicism with an acceptance of "historic Christianity"; and at Journey to Orthodoxy, one former Anglican describes how blessed he feels to be worshiping in direct succession with the apostles through the liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox church.

Within Protestantism also there's a migration toward more historically rooted traditions (especially Anglicanism, the so-called *via media*) and more liturgical, historically conscious expressions of worship and spirituality. For devotional reading, most of my younger Protestant friends love Thomas à Kempis's The Imitation of Christ but wouldn't be caught dead with a John Eldredge book. Hymn writing is on the rise, and many evangelicals are suddenly interested in the liturgical calendar.

What's causing this shift? While leaving room for the complex theological issues inevitably at play, I think one significant factor is the sense of rootlessness and restlessness many younger postmoderns feel today. At the heart of my generation is a profound emptiness—a sense of isolation and disconnectedness and consequent malaise. We're aching for the ancient and the

august, for transcendence and tradition, for that which has stability and solidity and substance. And it's driving many of us out of evangelicalism.

At 29 years old, I can relate to this feeling of being lost in the world without a context by which to interpret it. But I don't think we need to abandon evangelicalism to find a sense of historical placement. In fact, I believe this thirst for rootedness can be fully satisfied within a Protestant and evangelical framework. You can be catholic without becoming Catholic, and orthodox without becoming Orthodox. As we promote "gospel-centered ministry for the next generation," we must make clear there's nothing inconsistent with being both evangelical and ancient, "gospel centered" and "historically rooted." The reason is simple: gospel-centeredness is *itself* historically rooted. In fact, it's as ancient as the gospel itself.

## Evangelicals and Pre-Reformation Church History

How many Christians between the apostle John and Martin Luther do you think today's average American evangelical can name? It seems we contemporary evangelicals have a tendency to neglect this span of church history, acting as if the important stuff basically skipped from the 1st to the 16th century. Yes, we acknowledge the importance of Augustine (especially his *Confessions*). And there were some key battles about Christology and Trinitarianism early on, and some courageous martyrs somewhere back there, too. Sometimes we'll even enjoy a John Chrysostom sermon or Bernard of Clairvaux poem. But all too often we give the impression that our *real* tradition is roughly 500 years old—with a few scattered precursors, perhaps—rather than one solid, 2,000-year-old tradition. And there are huge stretches of time to which we have no conscious connection. What would it have been like to be a Christian in the 9th century, for example? Did gospel-centeredness (the reality, not the word) exist then? How does the ministry approach we champion today relate to the entire history of the church?

If we contemporary Protestants have sometimes failed to explore these questions, it isn't an error we learned from the first Protestants. Nor is it intrinsic to Protestantism. In fact, the Reformers took pains to emphasize they were seeking to *reform* the church, not *recreate* it, and that the true gospel had never entirely vanished from the earth. Even the most strident critics of Roman Catholic theology (like Luther, or later Turretin) insisted that during seasons of great corruption and decadence God had always preserved a regenerate people (though Luther, in typical tongue-in-cheek fashion, speculated that at times it had perhaps dwindled down to a few maid-servants). And when Roman Catholic theologians appealed to Augustine and the church fathers to vindicate the tenets of the Counter-Reformation, John Calvin didn't respond by saying, "Who cares about Augustine and the fathers? They're nothing." Instead he became a diligent student of the church fathers, seeking to establish points of continuity between Reformation theology and patristic theology. *Sola scriptura* meant Scripture alone is the supreme *authority*—not that Scripture alone is *valuable*.

## Owning the Family Photo Album

I'm a Protestant, and I believe Reformation theology protects the gospel. But I also believe it's possible to be robustly Protestant and vitally connected to, say, medieval Christianity. The church didn't completely sink during the eras of castles and cathedrals, monks and monasteries, bows and arrows, and knights in shining armor—only to suddenly re-emerge with Luther's 95 theses. No, there's a solid and steady chunk of Christianity subsisting right alongside Caedmon

and Charlemagne and Chaucer. And since through many advances and retreats, corruptions and renewals, Jesus has always been building his church (Matt. 16:18; cf. Isa. 42:4), we can stand to *learn* from medieval theology. It can serve as a resource for ministry in our post-Christian, wandering culture.

To be sure, it's possible—and dangerous—to so emphasize “mere Christianity” that we lose our Protestant distinctives. But it's also possible to so bask in our particular denominational enclave that we lose touch with the entire Christian tradition. We contemporary Protestants need a *balanced* historical identity. We need to engage with both the last 500 years and also the previous 1,500, recognizing areas of discontinuity as well as encouraging points of overlap. As an African Christian in the patristic era remarked, “I am a Christian, and nothing which concerns Christianity do I consider foreign to myself.”

I think this statement captures exactly what our attitude should be in engaging pre-Reformation church history: this is part of *my* heritage, *my* identity. The image I think of is a family photo album. In any such album there may be pictures that embarrass us, and we may be more proud to be related to one great uncle than to another. But warts, blemishes, and all, my family is still *my family*—and it would be foolish to cut myself off. After all, I wouldn't even be here without them.

## Where to Begin?

If we want to increase our awareness of our pre-Reformation roots, where should we begin? The first six chapters of Mark Noll's Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity serve a great starting point in terms of secondary literature, but let me here mention three primary texts. These are all classic works of theology I believe deserve a wider readership among contemporary Protestants.

1. Boethius's The Consolation of Philosophy Despite being one of the most influential books throughout church history, this work has been almost forgotten in recent centuries. Of it C. S. Lewis remarked: “Until about two hundred years ago it would, I think, have been hard to find an educated man in any European country who did not love it. . . . To acquire a taste for it is almost to become naturalised in the Middle Ages.” Written in alternating poetry and prose while Boethius was awaiting execution in AD 524, *The Consolation* explores themes of suffering and divine providence. Boethius's treatment of the classic difficulty of divine foreknowledge and human free will in Book 5 alone makes the volume worth reading.
2. Gregory the Great's The Book of Pastoral Rule Calvin called Gregory (c. 540-604) the last good pope. This book is a classic of pastoral theology; every minister should consider reading it. Gregory's thesis is that pastoral ministry requires a delicate balance of inner and outer qualities—theory and practice, contemplation and activity, administration and asceticism, otherworldly holiness and earthly wisdom. This is a helpful reminder since pastors tend to gravitate toward one of these realms more than the other. A good edition can be found in St. Vladimir's Seminary's Popular Patristics series, which in general is a great resource for becoming acquainted with early Christian thought.
3. Anselm's Proslogion Although famous for its “ontological argument” for God's existence, this volume's rich theology and impassioned prayers make it a nourishing and edifying read as well. My doctoral research concerns St. Anselm's doctrine of heaven in chapters 24-25, and my delight and amazement with this book is the chief cause of this article. If anyone doubts the

value of reading pre-Reformation theology, all I can say is, find a good translation of the first chapter of *Proslogion*, and *tolle lege*!

See “notable precursors” in [Protestant Reformers](#)

### **Notable precursors**

*Main article: Proto-Protestantism*

Throughout the Middle Ages, there were a number of Christian sects, cults and movements that sought a return to the purity of the Apostolic church and whose teachings foreshadowed Protestant ideas.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the main groups were: Paulicians (6th to 9th centuries); Tondrakians (9th to 11th centuries); Bogomils (11th century); Petrobrusians (12th century); Henricans (12th century); Brethren of the Free Spirit (13th century); Apostolic Brethren – later known as Dulcinians – (13th to 14th centuries); Neo-Adamites – including Taborites, Picards and some Beghards – (13th to 15th centuries); Men of Understanding (15th century).

Some of those whose doctrines influenced later Protestant movements were:

#### **Arnoldist**

- Arnold of Brescia (1090-1155)
- other early Arnoldist reformers

#### **Waldensian**

- Peter Waldo (1140-1205)
- other early Waldensian reformers

#### **Lollard**

- John Wycliffe (1320-1384)
- other early Lollard reformers

#### **Hussite**

- John Hus (1369-1415)
- Jerome of Prague (1379-1416)
- Petr Chelčický (1390-1460)
- other early Hussite reformers

#### **Other**

- Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498)
- Tomáš Štítný ze Štítného (1333-1409)
- other early independent reformers

## **Q: IN YOUR OPINION, WHAT SETS APART THE REFORMED TRADITION FROM OTHER MOVEMENTS?**

### **Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed by RC Sproul from What Is Reformed Theology?**

#### **Lecture 2, Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed:**

How do you *define* sovereignty and how do you *apply* that to your theology? The answer to that question will determine all else about what you think of God and how He relates to His creatures. Considering this, and how it applies to biblical theology, Dr. Sproul continues this series as he looks at the views of “Catholic, Evangelical, and Reformed.”

#### **Message Transcript**

We continue now with our overview of the subject, “What is Reformed theology?” I recently published a book titled *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology* (this book has since been re-released under the title, *What Is Reformed Theology?*). I’m basically trying to follow the outline of this book, which goes into much greater detail of these things than I’m able to give in this brief summary

In our first session, we saw that Reformed theology is a *theology*. Now I want to suggest to you that Reformed theology is a *systematic* theology.

#### **All the Parts Fit Together**

It’s been one of the privileges of my lifetime to be able to teach the discipline of systematic theology at the seminary level.

In this day and age, with the advent of existential philosophy, there’s been this growing antipathy toward the whole idea of systems. Sometimes there is good reason for that. Part of the concern people have is that we know what happens when people take a system of philosophy and bring it over to the pages of the Bible, and then try to force everything the Bible says into that system.

The idea of systematic thinking goes way back in church history. But even in the period of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, with the advent of the modern scientific method, philosophers advocated what they called the “analytical method” of study. In popular language, this was called the task of seeking to find the “logic of the facts.” That is, scientists would explore the details of the physical universe, point their telescopes into the heavens, and gather as much particular data as they possibly could. Then after they got this data, they tried to make sense out of it to see how all the particular parts fit together.

Historically, the task of systematic theology is something like that. It is not to come to the Bible with a preconceived system, but rather to come to the Bible, listen to the Word of God in all of its particular details, and then try to discern how all of these individual truths fit together. The assumption of systematic theology is that the Bible is coherent. Though God reveals many things to us, all of His truth is unified in His own person and His own character.

I find this in teaching. Sometimes we’ll have seminars where it will be a kind of open-ended discussion with my students, and we’ll start the seminar by looking at a particular doctrine in the

panoply of systematic theology. If I allow the students to interact with their questions, then in a very short period of time we run far afield from the doctrine we first started to study.

At first glance, it may seem that we're just running around chasing rabbits down extraneous rabbit trails. But then I remind them: "These questions you're asking are questions that we should be asking because they flow out of the doctrine that we're studying. Every doctrine of Christian theology touches every other doctrine of the faith in some way."

The whole of the Christian faith is intimately and intricately related in all of its pieces. In fact, one of the things that never ceases to amaze me is the way the Bible speaks about so many things over so many years, with myriads of details, and yet the symmetry of Scripture is there. It fits together in such a coherent way.

When we say that Reformed theology is systematic, we're saying at the outset that we are trying not to impose a system upon Scripture. Rather, we are trying to find the system of doctrine present in the Scriptures themselves to see how all of the parts fit together.

### **A Paradoxically Distinctive Aspect of Reformed Theology**

There is an irony in Reformed theology. I'll even use the word *paradox*. When we study systematic theology, we usually begin with the study of what is called "theology proper." Now, that isn't distinguished from "improper" theology. Rather, theology proper refers to a focus on the doctrine of God as distinguished from the doctrine of sin, or the doctrine of justification, or some other doctrine. Theology proper focuses on the understanding of the nature and character of God Himself.

Here's where the paradox comes in. At the beginning of that study I will say to my students that, if we look at the Reformed creeds and confessions and read what they say about the nature of God, we'll have to look very hard to find anything that would be distinctively Reformed. The confessions of Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and all other denominations have basically the same content and affirmations in their creeds. We all say that God is eternal. We all believe that God is invisible, that He is a Spirit, that He is immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, and all those other things that we speak of with respect to the attributes of God.

So, I say on the one hand that there's nothing particularly distinctive about the doctrine of God in Reformed theology that is different from any other theology. Yet (here's the paradox), if someone were to say to me, "R.C., what do you think is the most distinctive aspect of Reformed theology?" I won't hesitate to answer that question by saying, "It's our doctrine of God."

You say: "Wait a minute. You're giving me an Excedrin headache. You just said a minute ago that there's nothing particularly distinctive about the doctrine of God in Reformed theology. Now you're saying out of the other side of your mouth, paradoxically, that the most distinctive thing about Reformed theology is its doctrine of God. What are you trying to say?" I see puzzled looks from people even now as I make this seemingly contradictory statement. I accent the word *seemingly*. Let me unwrap it and tell you what I mean.

### **The Central Unique Factor of Reformed Theology**

All Christians have a basically orthodox creedal affirmation about the character of God. But what I think happens frequently in other theologies is this: when the attention is diverted to another doctrine, there's a tendency to forget your affirmation about the character of God, and the doctrine of God becomes just one of many doctrines in the faith rather than the controlling doctrine of the faith.

For example, I've never met a Christian in my life who looked me in the eye and said, "I don't believe that **God is sovereign**." Christians characteristically are quite willing to affirm the sovereignty of God. But if we push the discussion toward the relationship of God's sovereignty to the doctrine of election or the doctrines of grace, for example, then in a very short period of time there will be a serious controversy about the nature of God: Does God ordain everything that comes to pass? Does He know everything that comes to pass before it happens?

Again, if we just backed up and said, "Do you believe that God is omniscient?" then most Christians would say, "Yes." But when we explore what it means that God knows everything, are we saying the same thing? Are we saying that He knows it simply because He has some genius perception, or are we saying that He knows all things because He ordains all things? That is, what is the relationship of God's sovereignty to His knowledge?

In Reformed theology, we constantly test our doctrine by going back to our fundamental understanding of the character of God. I think that is the central unique factor of Reformed theology—it is relentlessly committed to maintaining the purity of the doctrine of God through every other element of theology.

## A Catholic Foundation

Now, there are some other things I want to say about Reformed theology, one of which is that Reformed theology is not only systematic, but *catholic*. What do I mean when I say that Reformed theology is *catholic*?

Usually we think of the Reformation as a protest against Catholicism. But remember, the theology that emerged and came to the front of the stage in the sixteenth century was not invented for the first time in the sixteenth century. It was a reformation, not a revolution. It was an attempt in the sixteenth century to recover the historic Christian apostolic faith.

At the time of the Reformation, virtually every church that arose out of it continued to embrace the *catholic* truths of the Christian faith—the truths that are embraced and confessed by Christians of all stripes, denominations, and traditions. Here the word *catholic* does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church or some particular group. Rather, the term is used in its original sense meaning "universal"—the whole church.

In the early centuries, the church assembled councils to deal with major theological issues because of the threat of major heresies, such as the Arian controversy in the fourth century, the Monophysite controversy in the fifth century, and so on. At these great councils such as the Council of Nicaea, the deity of Christ was firmly embraced and confessed. At the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon, the church confessed her faith that Christ is truly man and truly God.

The affirmations of historic Christianity about the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atonement of Christ, and so on are shared by all orthodox Christian bodies historically. Those affirmations are found in the creeds of the various denominations so that the Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians historically have a large body of doctrine that they hold in common with each other. This common essence of Christian thought is the foundation upon which all theology rests.

So, when we talk about Reformed theology as distinctive to differentiate it from dispensational theology, Lutheran theology, or whatever other particular theology we're talking about, we acknowledge that there is a common core of doctrine among all these different groups.

The reason I make this point is that there is a tendency to think about Reformed theology as if Reformed theology were simply the *distinctives* of Reformed theology. Some people say to me:

“Tell me about Reformed theology. Isn’t that the five points of Calvinism?” And I will say that the five points of Calvinism have much to do with the Reformed faith, but it would be a very serious distortion of Reformed theology to think of it exclusively in terms of its distinctives. We must remember that those doctrines rest upon a common foundation that we share with a host of other Christian bodies. That is, we have a catholic faith.

## An Evangelical Tradition

In addition to that, all Reformed theology is *evangelical*. That’s the second broad heading we’re using—the first was *catholic*, the second is *evangelical*.

All who are evangelical in the historic sense are also catholic. Not all who are catholic are evangelical, but all who are evangelical share the common doctrine of the church universal with everybody else.

Not everybody who is evangelical is Presbyterian or Lutheran or Methodist or any of these other distinctives, so not everyone who is evangelical is Reformed. But everyone who is Reformed in the historic sense of the term is also evangelical. We share not only a common heritage of catholic Christianity but also a common evangelical tradition with our Protestant brothers and sisters.

The term *evangelical* is under siege in our day and there is some confusion as to what it really refers to in our time. That confusion does not exist historically.

### Justification by Faith Alone

At the time of the Reformation, the label *evangelical* was coined by the Reformers. They believed that, with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, they were recovering the *evangel*, or gospel, of the New Testament. Since the heart of the controversy in the sixteenth century focused on the doctrine of justification, the whole debate centered on the question, What is the gospel? So, Protestants called themselves *evangelicals*, meaning by that label that they were embracing Luther’s definition of the doctrine of justification—justification by faith.

Out of that tradition there were many in the sixteenth century who embraced Luther’s view of justification as the biblical view. And different traditions came from that, all of which shared the central core conviction that justification is by faith alone and that this is at the very heart of the gospel itself. They differed over questions concerning the sacraments, church government, and so on, but they kept this common commitment to justification by faith alone.

### The Authority of Scripture

The other doctrine that was common to historic evangelicalism was the doctrine of the authority of Scripture, or *sola Scriptura*, which we’ll take up in a later session. Historians have said that the “material” cause of the Reformation was the doctrine of justification and the “formal” cause was the doctrine of the authority of Scripture.

Though the Reformation saw a fragmentation of numerous bodies of Protestants, there was a core unity among them. They agreed on two central theses: 1) the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and 2) the doctrine of the authority of Scripture.

## A Reformed Heritage

Now we’ll look at the third label, which is the label *Reformed*. When we use that label, we’re making further distinctions in the taxonomy of theology.

Taxonomy is the science of classification. We do this in the biological world. We divide the kingdoms—the plant kingdom and the animal kingdom. All plants are in the plant kingdom, and all animals are in the animal kingdom. Then we divide up the kingdoms between the phyla, genus, species, order, and so on. As we begin to refine more and more between mammals, reptiles, vertebrates, invertebrates, and that sort of thing, we keep making finer and finer distinctions as we seek to understand the world around us. We do the same thing in theology and with theological traditions.

There are many evangelical bodies, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, and so on, and they differ from each other at certain points. For example, we would say that a Lutheran is a person who holds to the historic doctrines that are particularly characteristic of Lutheranism. They are also evangelical, and they are also catholic.

As the Reformed tradition is defined, we have doctrines that are specific to the Reformed faith that are not always shared by other Christian bodies. When we say that somebody is Reformed, we're saying that person embraces the distinctively Reformed creeds of history such as the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and so on. In addition, they share a common evangelical heritage with other believers, as well as a catholic foundation.

## More Than the Distinctives

This by way of preparation: we have to be careful not to think that the label *Reformed* and its distinctives alone are the Reformed faith. The Reformed faith, though it has its own distinctives, contains within itself unifying doctrines with other Christians—with all evangelicals and with those who hold the catholic truths of historic Christianity.

In the rest of this series, we will be paying close attention to those distinctives that mark off Reformed theology from other evangelical theologies, and from the broad heading of catholic theology. We'll be examining the distinctives, but only with this caveat: when we look at the distinctives, the distinctives are not all that's there. The distinctives set on the platform are established on the foundation of catholic and evangelical Christianity.

### What Makes a Christian Reformed?

“Reformed” is a word bandied about by all and sundry in all kinds of ways. But what really is a “reformed” Christian? Historically “reformed” refers to a tradition within Christianity that arose out of the sixteenth century Reformation. So, as a part of the Reformation 500 celebrations this year, I hope to clarify what it means to be “reformed”. It will help us understand something of what happened in the Reformation itself and its importance for us today.

## The Problem with Labels

Labels like “reformed” can be used unhelpfully. Some Christians wield “Reformed” to bully others. For example, some use it to exclude: “You’re not really reformed because you don’t believe in limited atonement”. Others use the label to claim superiority: “We Reformed affirm God’s grace in salvation unlike you Arminians”.

**A label like ‘reformed’ helps us identify the unique characteristics of one strand within the Christian tradition to evaluate whether its emphases and reading of Scripture support our love and service toward God.**

However, labels do have value. They help us classify information to better understand it. The “pine” and “gum” are both trees. These labels help us grasp the differences between two types of tree, and so aid their care and flourishing. And so, a label like “Reformed” helps us identify the unique characteristics of one strand within the Christian tradition; and to evaluate whether its emphases and reading of Scripture support our love and service toward God.

### **The Problem with “Calvinist”**

Many use the label “Calvinist” as a synonym for “reformed”. But there are two problems with this. Firstly, “Calvinist” was originally a term of abuse, and so lacked a precise meaning. And over the years it’s accumulated even more baggage, muddying its meaning even more. But, secondly and more importantly, no reformed Christian of the sixteenth or seventeenth century understood John Calvin as defining their tradition *in toto*. He was viewed as one figure amongst others like Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Henry Bullinger, John Oecolampadius, and Peter Martyr Vermigli, who all helped found the reformed tradition. Yes, Calvin was a giant amongst them. But his writings were neither confessional nor regulative for the reformed. Calvin is not enough.

### **The Problem with TULIP**

Many contend that the so-called five points of Calvinism are what defines a “reformed” Christian. The five points are supposedly a summary of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) using the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and final Perseverance.

But there are two difficulties in using five-points this way. Firstly, the Synod of Dort was not an attempt to define the reformed tradition as a *whole* but resolve a *particular* controversy (the Remonstrance) in an already existent Reformed tradition. Back in 1979-1980 there was a dispute about why Australian cricket played with an 8-ball over. It was officially decided that cricket world-wide would use a 6-ball over. This controversy resolved one element within the game of cricket. It did not define the entire game. So, cricket cannot be defined as simply a 6-ball over. There is much more to it than that. This is like Dort’s relation to the Reformed tradition. It did not define the entirety of the tradition but resolved an element in it. And so, the five-points of Calvinism alone do not determine whether a person is reformed.

The second problem with using the five-points of Calvinism is that this *English* summary of a Latin document, with its acronym TULIP, fails to convey the nuances of Dort. The “five points” and acronym “TULIP” were developed hundreds of years after Dort, and they clip away important distinctions made by Dort. Take, for example, the third and most controversial point: “limited atonement”. No theologian of the sixteenth and seventeenth century ever used the word “limited” in reference to Christ’s death. The reformed divines all agreed that in some sense the atonement had an infinite *sufficiency* and in another sense an *efficiency* for only the elect. These two affirmations allowed for a variety of positions on the extent of the atonement but they excluded the Arminian (or Remonstrant) position. So, the slogan “limited atonement” fails to

convey both the sufficient and efficient affirmations of Dort. And when half a truth is taken to be a whole truth, it becomes an untruth.

## On Being Reformed

What then makes a Christian reformed? If the reformed tradition emerged from the Protestant Christian tradition (at the Reformation), we firstly need to know how to define the Christian tradition and secondly the Protestant tradition.

### *Catholic Christianity*

The Christian tradition is also known as “catholic”, in the sense of universal not Roman. Historically catholic Christianity is expressed in the Nicene Creed. It was written at the councils of Nicea (325AD) and Constantinople (381AD) against the Arian heresy. This creed contains a summary of the Trinitarian Gospel. It sets the belief boundaries of the Christian tradition encompassing Protestants, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, and the Ancient Church of the East. Because non-Trinitarian traditions like the Jehovah’s witnesses and Mormonism cannot affirm the Nicene Creed, they cannot be called Christian.

### *Protestant Christianity*

The Protestant tradition within Christianity surfaced at the sixteenth-century Reformation spearheaded by Martin Luther. The reformers originally called themselves “evangelicals” well before the term “Protestant” was used to show that the Gospel (*euangelion*) was central to their understanding of Scripture and theology.

**The Protestant tradition contends that Scripture alone is the supreme authority for believers, and that salvation is by God’s grace alone because of Christ’s work alone received by faith (or trust) alone.**

The Protestant tradition is usually distinguished by the four classic “alone” slogans: *Scripture alone*, *grace alone*, *Christ alone*, and *faith alone*. It contends that Scripture alone is the supreme (not only) authority for believers, and that salvation is by God’s grace alone because of Christ’s work alone received by faith (or trust) alone. In opposition to this, Roman Catholicism upholds the supreme authority of Scripture *and* tradition, and salvation by faith *as well as* a believer’s good works (even if they are spirit-empowered).

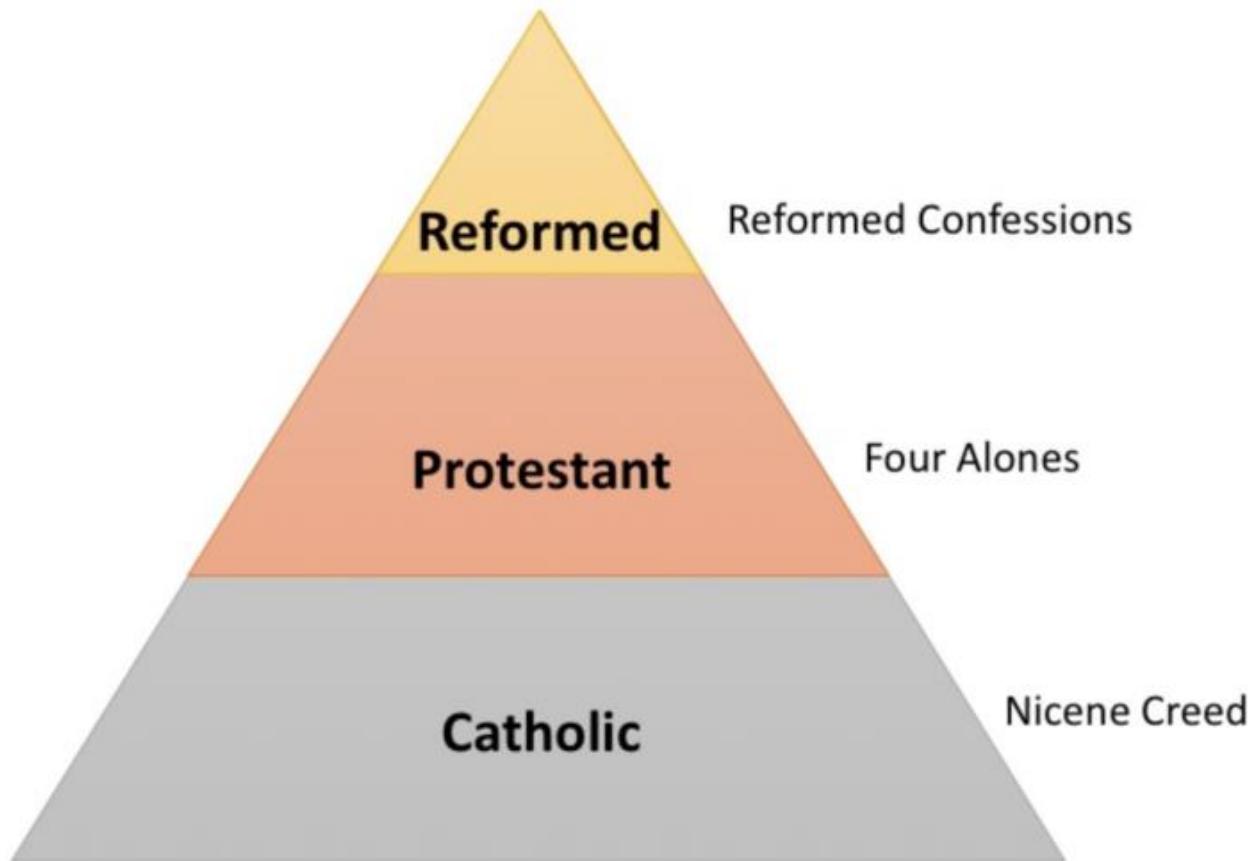
### *Reformed Christianity*

However, at the Reformation two traditions emerged within the Protestant camp: Lutheran and Reformed. What originally distinguished the two was not predestination but the Lord’s Supper. Luther and his followers held that Christ’s body and blood were physically present in the bread and wine (the real presence). Reformed figures such as Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin denied it. But the real presence was so important to Luther and his followers that it led to an official parting of ways between the Lutheran and Reformed.

The boundaries of belief for the Lutheran tradition were officially defined in the *Book of Concord* (1580), a collection of important Lutheran confessions and affirmations. However, because the reformed tradition covered a number of separate geographic communities (in France, Scotland, England, the Rhineland, and the Low Countries to name some) each group crafted their own confession. Hence, the reformed tradition came to be marked out by a variety of confessions:

the Gallic (or French) Confession (1559), the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566). To these foundational confessions were added the Synod of Dort (1618/9) resolving one particular controversy in an already existent tradition. And it was further refined by the great seventeenth century confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) for Presbyterians, the Savoy Declaration (1658) for Congregationalists, and the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith for reformed Baptists.

So, a Christian is reformed if they are able to affirm any one or more of their major confessions. We may diagram this as follows:



When we define the reformed tradition in this way several important implications follow. First, being reformed is not simply about predestination. The foundational reformed confessions also include a particular understanding, for example, of the church, ministry, and sacraments, much of which is lost to many who claim to be reformed.

Second, those in the reformed tradition are free to disagree about many issues over which the reformed confessions diverge or fail to define. For example, credo- and paedobaptists can both be reformed. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians can all be reformed. Concerning the extent of the atonement, followers of John Owen, Moïse Amyraut, and John Davenant, all fit into the reformed tradition. Those who deny or affirm the so-called covenant of works, are together reformed. And both single and double predestinarians are also both reformed. All these debates are intramural or within the reformed tradition itself.

Third, the doctrines unique to the reformed tradition are not as weighty as those that define catholicity. For example, the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is far more important than views on the real presence (which itself is not unimportant).

## **The Main Difference Between Calvinist and Non-Calvinist Views of Saving Grace**

by John Hendryx

Recently I had an exchange on a message board regarding the particulars of Calvinism. Hopefully you find it helpful:

**Visitor #1:** I gave up on Calvinism a long time ago.

**My response:** You mean you gave up on the idea that Jesus Christ alone is sufficient to save you?

**Visitor #1:** Yep

**Visitor #2 chimes in:** John, is it possible you're caricaturing the situation just a smidge? Calvinism cannot possibly have a monopoly in affirming Jesus Christ as sufficient.

**My response:** Actually the central difference between Calvinist and non-Calvinist soteriology is that Calvinist believes Jesus Christ is sufficient to save to the uttermost while non-Calvinist soteriology believes that while Jesus is necessary, he is not sufficient. To clarify what I mean, both Roman Catholics and Arminians for example, would anathematize anyone who says you can be saved without the grace of God. The Reformers never claimed Rome believed you can be saved apart from grace. That wasn't the debate. The debate of the Reformation was never ever about the necessity of grace, it was always about the sufficiency of grace. That remains the issue today in so many contexts (James White). So no I am not caricaturing the situation. This is the essence of it. The theology of Calvinism or Reformed Theology centers on the sufficiency of Christ in salvation. There is nothing more essential to its position and this is what sets it apart from other all other types of theology. Another way to put it: it is the difference between Monergism & Synergism. As Michael Haykin notes, "the most vital question, is, whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving us by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying us for Christ's sake when we come to faith, but also raising us from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring us to faith." In other words, whatever God requires of us, (including faith), if we believe the unregenerate man has the power in himself to exercise, then we make the cross and grace of Jesus Christ of no effect. Either Christ is a complete savior, OR He helps us to save ourselves. What Calvinism means in the historic sense, is that Jesus Christ is a complete savior, not a partial one.

**Visitor #1:** I gave up on Calvinism because grace is resistible.

**My response:** Jesus himself teaches that no one can believe in him unless God grants it (John 6:33-35)... and ALL to whom God grants it will believe (v. 37). These passages plainly teach that Jesus alone is sufficient to save. His grace is effectual. He leaves no room for the unregenerate, natural man making good choices on his own, so as to leave no room for any boasting. Why do you think one person believes the gospel and not the other? Was one born with more natural wisdom? Or inclination to good? What makes people to differ? Jesus Christ or something else?

**Visitor #1:** so does "sufficient" mean that those whom God decides shall have salvation shall have salvation, or that those whom God decides shall have salvation can have salvation?

**My response:** The word "sufficient" means that Jesus Christ meets all the conditions for us that are necessary for our salvation, not only some of the conditions. It further means what Jesus does for us on the cross meets all of God's requirements for us, including giving us a new heart which is needed to believe and obey (Ezekiel 36:26). In other words, apart from grace sinners are unable to obey the gospel, any more than the law, without a new heart. The non-Calvinist (synergist) position denies this and instead affirms that the natural man, can have faith in Christ while still in the flesh (with an unrenewed heart).

So to answer your question, it means that what Jesus does for us in his life death and resurrection is not only necessary but completely sufficient to save us. This was the point of the Reformation's affirmation of the principle of *Solus Christus*, or Christ alone. God's love for His own is unconditional so He makes sure the job gets done. To look at it from another perspective, the synergist denies that what Jesus does for us is sufficient to save us... grace is necessary but the unregenerate man must also somehow come up with the good will to exercise faith apart from the Holy Spirit granting renewal of heart. So God's love for the sinner is conditional, based entirely on his response. But the Scripture says that "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all...no one can come to [Jesus] unless it is granted him by the Father." (John 6:63, 65)

**Visitor #1:** John: thanks for the response...boiling that down, though, does Calvinism hold that if God decides that someone is to receive salvation, then that person will indeed receive it? My understanding of Calvinism is that the answer is "yes", and what you're saying seems to validate that: Jesus Himself meets all the necessary conditions, so there remains no condition that the one receiving salvation must fulfill.

**My response:** Yes that's right! - This is what Jesus teaches in John 6:63-65. & 37. A new heart which has faith is part of Christ's grace to us (Ezekiel 36:26). We don't come up with faith on our own (drawing from our own resources), apart from the Holy Spirit. This passage in John (among many others) should put an end to all argument on this issue. God's love for his people in Christ is unconditional, not conditional ... therefore Jesus meets the conditions of salvation for us, doing for us what we are morally unable to do for ourselves. He is a Savior, not merely a helper. That means when He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3,4) he makes sure the job gets done on earth in time. On the other hand, the non-Calvinist, or synergist position, believes God's love for people is conditional. That is, conditioned on the natural man's response.

The difference between the two views could perhaps be illustrated fairly well by two parents whose children run into the street. The first parent stands afar at the curb and calls out to the child to get out of the way of the car, but does not lift a finger beyond asking him to use his will. The second parent, on the other hand, runs out into the street at the risk of his/her life, scoops him up, and makes sure the child does not get hit by the car. Which is more loving? When the person loved cannot save themselves true love does not dilly dally.

God loves his loved ones with a resolute will that gets the job done. The God of the Bible names and numbers his sheep, who saves the lost sheep and fends off the wolf.

**Visitor #1:** Well, despite your well-formulated arguments, I'm sticking by my abandonment of Calvinism. Let me just say a few things in my defense, though, before we put the matter to rest:

John 6:37 - Everyone the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will never cast out.

I don't take that as a guarantee of salvation--the guarantee is that Jesus will not renege on His offer of salvation, provided those who come to Jesus remain with Him. Remaining with Jesus,

might I add, is the subject of much of the NT: "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called." "Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." etc. etc. ... Read More

What's more, in John 6, after Jesus finished speaking, a number of His disciples left him...they cast themselves out, as do those described by Hebrews 6:4

As for the rest of John 6, note all of the conditions which fall on us:

- \* This is the work of God: that you believe in the One He has sent
- \* For this is the will of My Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him MAY have eternal life
- \* Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in yourselves.

**My response:** So in other words, you believe Jesus takes you part of the way, but you have to do the rest?" So Jesus' work isn't enough to save, according to your theology?. In this view Jesus only conditionally justifies you. You have to maintain your own just standing before God? In Galatians 3 Paul rebukes the church for this view: He says, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" I would argue the Scriptures emphatically teach that all who believe are already justified before God (past tense). Jesus saves us to the uttermost. We do not (and cannot) maintain our own just standing before God. Jesus ALONE is our justification and our sanctification. There is nothing we could EVER do to be good enough to meet God's perfect and holy demands.

Of course you and I both agree God calls us to believe and persevere in the faith. But all of God's commands He gives us the power to do in Christ. He receives us ONLY because of Christ, not because of ANYTHING he sees in us. Those who he saves, He preserves so that they will continue on to the end. He gives us both the gift of faith and of perseverance. Without it we must depend on something in ourselves. This is the very reason we differ from Roman Catholics and that the Reformation happened in the first place. So while I agree with you that **God requires His people to persevere in the faith** (Colossians 1:21-23; 1 John 1:5-10; 3:3-6, Hebrews 10:26-31, Hebrews 12:1), yet **God also promises in the Scripture that He will preserve us in the faith** ( John 6:38-40, John 10:28-29, Romans 8:28-39, Philippians 1:4-6, Philippians 2:12-13, 1 John 2:19. In other words, He grants what He commands in Christ.

Which brings us to another problem: your understanding leaves you dilemma of being unable to thank God for your faith. You can thank God for everything else, but your faith and ability to persevere is the one thing **YOU** must contribute to the price of your salvation. Can you thank God for your faith? and perseverance in the faith or sanctification? (1 Cor 1:30). Is this his gift to you or something you did to maintain your standing before God, apart from Christ?

John 10:26-27 Jesus says to some unbelieving Jews, "you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."

**Visitor #1:** I believe God gives us a choice, and God will honor our choice despite it being against His will for us.

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."

You know, I think Reformed theology suffers from the problem that Christ's sacrifice was insufficient to save everyone. Christ was unable to fulfill the Father's will that all men shall be saved, so thus God decided not to "will" certain people to be saved. Maybe that's one of "[His] reasons for choosing some and not others..."

Seriously though, for the sake of my family vying for my attention, I want to stop this back and forth. We'll have to talk about miracles and stuff sometime.

By the way, thanks for exposing me to the "Synergist" term. I've never heard of it before. I'll have to use it sometime to describe my beliefs.

**My response:** You said, "Reformed theology suffers from the problem that Christ's sacrifice was insufficient to save **EVERYONE**."

Interesting charge. Before I answer it you may want to consider that synergistic theology suffers from the problem that Christ's sacrifice was insufficient to save **ANYONE**. It loves many people with a general, ineffectual love, but loves no one in particular. Furthermore synergism limits the sins which Christ dies for. Just to show that this is no straw man, let me give you two examples: The synergist believes that Christ does not die for any person for 1) the sin of unbelief or 2) their moral failure to persevere. So then, we ask, is His work on the cross not powerful enough to cover all sins? So he dies for only some of our sins and we have to make up for the rest? So again, back to the same core thesis of my argument: Christ's work (to the synergist) is not sufficient to save completely since he dies for only some sins. We must make up for the sins He does not cover. This is extremely problematic and should reveal that the synergist's picture of Christ is woefully incomplete.

On the other hand, Calvinism believes the Scripture teaches that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to atone for all His people's sins, including our sins of unbelief and lack of faithfulness in persevering. He is both the author and perfecter of our faith and gives His people everything they need that they could not provide for themselves. He is a complete Savior, not a partial one.

With this in mind, let's take your objection to Calvinism above, where you assert that in Calvinism, Christ's sacrifice is insufficient to save everyone. The Bible teaches that the Father elects a particular people, the Son redeems them and the Holy Spirit convicts, regenerates and unites them to Christ. The Trinity works in harmony to make certain God's will is accomplished. We see this particular love everywhere in the Bible. For example, in Jesus' high priestly prayer just prior to his atoning sacrifice, Jesus prays, "you have given him [the Son] authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him...I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours." (John 17:2,9). The reason this is called the high priestly prayer is that it is just like the high priests' in the Old Testament who prayed specifically for Israel prior to atonement in the Holy of Holies.

So obviously, Jesus' prayer to the Father is about whom He intends to save on the cross. We can see, then, that the issue is not whether Christ's sacrifice was sufficient to save everyone. That is the wrong paradigm. The issue, rather, is God's intent, not his power, for we all know that God has the power to save the whole world, and 10,000 more beside.

In fact, when we ask the question, “Is there anything biblically that limits Christ's power to save,” the only answer we ever find is that, in fulfilling his redemptive mission, Christ can only do what the Father has willed. He cannot do anything on his own, that is apart from or at odds with the Father's plans (see John 5:17-19, 30; 8:28-29). Of course, this is not an inability of power, but an inability of the persons of the holy Trinity to work against each other – it is the impossibility that Paul later speaks of when he says that God “cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). But this is also the exact opposite of your charge: you say the Calvinistic perception of redemption is that Christ cannot fulfill God the Father's will; but in reality, the Calvinistic perception is that Christ cannot fail to fulfill God's will, hence he can only redeem those whom the Father has given him from all eternity.

Lastly, while God commands all people everywhere to repent and believe the gospel, no one, in their own power and insight, obeys this command. Yet, God still has mercy by determining that he will still forgive the debts of a particular people whom he has foreknown and loved from eternity in Christ (Eph 1:3, 4) ... a group, the Scripture says, that he has given the Son prior to the foundation of the world. People without distinction from everywhere in the world: since he purchased with his blood PEOPLE FROM every tribe, people, nation and language (Rev. 5:9).

### **Reformed v. Non-Reformed Theology: The Central Difference**

– John Hendryx of monergism.com writes:

The central difference between Reformed and non-Reformed theology is that the former affirms that Jesus Christ is SUFFICIENT to save to the uttermost while later believes that while Jesus is NECESSARY, the sufficiency of Christ in salvation. There is nothing more essential to its position and this is what sets it apart from other all other theologies.

The word “sufficient”, in this case, means that Jesus Christ meets all the conditions for us that are necessary for our salvation, not only some of the conditions. It further means what Jesus does for us on the cross meets all of God's requirements for us, including giving us the new heart which is needed to believe and obey (Ezekiel 36:26).

Evangelicalism broadly believes in an insufficient Jesus whose love is conditional, that is, that we must first meet a condition if He will help/love us. Can you imagine a parent who saw their toddler run out into traffic and first required them to meet a condition before the parent would run out to save them from oncoming traffic? No, no, no... parental love is unconditional and would run out at the risk of their life to save the child regardless of the child's will at the time because the parent loves his child and knows better than the child what is good for him/her. If this is true about love in everyday life, how much more is it true of God. No person would say that the parent who required the child to first meet a condition was more loving. That is why the argument about the necessity of free will to have true love is fallacious. In the Bible, God gives conditions, but in Jesus He meets all the conditions for us.

“God knows we have nothing of ourselves, therefore in the covenant of grace he requires no more than he gives, but gives what he requires, and accepts what he gives.”  
? Richard Sibbes, The Bruised Reed

## **Q: HOW DO THE FIVE SOLAS OF THE REFORMATION SUPPORT YOUR MINISTRY TODAY?**

### **TGC Course | The Five Solas**

#### **The Five Solas - Points from the Past that Should Matter to You**

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century changed Christianity forever. Roused to action by the corruption and abuses they saw in the Roman Catholic church of the time, visionary pastors and leaders like Martin Luther and John Calvin spearheaded a movement that transformed Christianity and eventually led to the emergence of the Protestant denominations that exist today.

The Reformers were guided by the conviction that the church of their day had drifted away from the essential, original teachings of Christianity, especially in regard to what it was teaching about salvation—how people can be forgiven of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and receive eternal life with God. The Reformation sought to re-orient Christianity on the original message of Jesus and the early church.

The Five Solas are five Latin phrases (or slogans) that emerged during the Reformation to summarize the Reformers' theological convictions about the essentials of Christianity.

**The Five Solas are:**

1. ***Sola Scriptura*** ("Scripture alone"): The Bible alone is our highest authority.
2. ***Sola Fide*** ("faith alone"): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ.
3. ***Sola Gratia*** ("grace alone"): We are saved by the grace of God alone.
4. ***Solus Christus*** ("Christ alone"): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and King.
5. ***Soli Deo Gloria*** ("to the glory of God alone"): We live for the glory of God alone.

Let's have a brief look at each of these five points.

#### **SOLA SCRIPTURA**

The Scriptures are our ultimate and trustworthy authority for faith and practice. This doesn't mean that the Bible is the only place where truth is found, but it does mean that everything else we learn about God and his world, and all other authorities, should be interpreted in light of Scripture. The Bible gives us everything we need for our theology.

Every word of the 66 books of the Bible is inspired by God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also helps us to understand and obey Scripture.

2 Peter 2:20, the Bible is about Jesus Christ and his role as God and Savior. Additionally, Romans 15:4 is 2 Timothy 2:16.

## **SOLA FIDE AND SOLA GRATIA**

We are saved solely through faith in Jesus Christ because of God's grace and Christ's merit alone. We are not saved by our merits or declared righteous by our good works. God grants salvation not because of the good things we do, and despite our sin.

As humans, we inherited (from our ancestor Adam) a nature that is enslaved to sin. Because of our nature, we are naturally enemies of God and lovers of evil. We need to be made alive (regenerated) so that we can even have faith in Christ. God graciously chooses to give us new hearts so that we trust in Christ and are saved through faith alone.

God graciously preserves us and keeps us. When we are faithless toward him, he is still faithful. We can only stand before God by his grace as he mercifully attributes to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ and attributes to him the consequences of our sins. Jesus' life of perfect righteousness is counted as ours, and our records of sin and failure were counted to Jesus when he died on the cross.

Sola fide and sola gratia express the teaching of Ephesians 2:8:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

## **SOLUS CHRISTUS**

God has given the ultimate revelation of himself to us by sending Jesus Christ, Colossians 1:15. Only through God's gracious self-revelation in Jesus do we come to a saving and transforming knowledge of God.

1 Timothy 1:5. Because God is holy and all humans are sinful and sinners, 1 John 1:1 Hebrews 7:25 Romans 8:34. Neither religious rituals nor good works mediate between us and God. Acts 4:12 by which a person can be saved other than the name of Jesus. Hebrews 7:23, and his sacrificial death alone can atone for sin.

## **SOLI DEO GLORIA**

Glory belongs to God alone. God's glory is the central motivation for salvation, not improving the lives of people—though that is a wonderful by product. God is not a means to an end—he is the means and the end.

The goal of all of life is to give glory to God alone: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). As The Westminster Catechism says, the chief purpose of human life is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

**Q: HOW HAS THE EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH APPROPRIATELY RESPONDED TO SOME OF THE DILEMMAS ARISING IN THE MAINLINE CHURCH?**

**Q: HOW HAS THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ACTED WITH A MISSIONAL EMPHASIS SINCE THE REFORMATION?**

**Q: HOW HAS THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH PARTICIPATED IN THE EVANGELICAL MOVEMENTS IN CHURCH HISTORY?**

**Q: THE HOLY SPIRIT MANIFESTED HIS GIFTS DURING THE REFORMATION IN VARIOUS WAYS. WHAT SIGNIFICANCE FOR YOUR MINISTRY IS THAT TODAY?**

**Q: TELL US ABOUT HOW THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HAS ENGAGED THE CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. (SEE PITMAN, CHAPTER 3)**

**Q: TELL US YOUR VIEW OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL MOVEMENT.**

A History of the Social Gospel Movement

By Lisa Marder  
Updated May 20, 2019

The Social Gospel movement was a powerful and broad religious movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that advocated many social reforms and whose ideas about social justice continue to influence policy today. This liberal Christian religious movement began after the Civil War in 1865 and continued until about 1920. Its goal was to solve social problems caused by industrialization and urbanization by applying individual Christian principles to society as a whole.

Protestant clergy became increasingly interested in social justice as they witnessed urban poverty and squalor brought on by industrialization and over-crowding, greater wealth disparity,

and the decline of their congregations with the increase of Roman Catholic immigrants to the U.S. from Europe. Using the teachings of Jesus — in particular, his second commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself” — Protestant ministers began to believe and preach that salvation depended not just on loving God, but also in behaving like Jesus, loving your neighbor, doing good works, and taking care of the poor and needy. They believed that wealth was meant to be shared, not hoarded. They did not believe in the concept of Social Darwinism or “the survival of the fittest,” a theory popular at the time, but rather, in looking out for the good of all.

The popular phrase, “What would Jesus do?”, used by Christians to help with moral decisions, grew in popularity as a result of the Social Gospel movement. The phrase was part of the title of a book, *In His Steps, What Would Jesus Do?*, written by one of the leaders of the Social Gospel movement, Dr. Charles Monroe Sheldon (1857-1946). Sheldon was a Congregational minister whose book was a compilation of stories told to his congregation about people facing a moral dilemma, to which he would pose the question, “What would Jesus do?”

Some of the other leaders of the Social Gospel movement were Dr. Washington Gladden (1836-1918), a Congregational minister and leading member of the Progressive Movement, Josiah Strong (1847-1916), a Protestant clergyman who was a strong supporter of American imperialism, and Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), a Baptist preacher and Christian theologian who wrote several influential books, among them *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, the most popular-selling religious book for three years after it was published, and *A Theology of the Social Gospel*.

## History

At the height of the Social Gospel movement, the population in America, and in American cities in particular, was rising quickly due to industrialization and immigration from southern and central Europe. It was the era of the Gilded Age and Robber Barons. To some of the clergy, it seemed that many of the successful leaders of society had become greedy and less aligned with Christian values and principles. The increase in wealth disparity led to the development of the labor movement, supported by the leaders of the Social Gospel movement.

American cities grew at an enormous rate while rural areas declined. For example, the city of Chicago went from a population of 5000 in 1840 to 300,000 in 1870, and 1.1 million in 1890. “This rapid population growth was achieved in part by pulling people out of rural areas, where 40% of American townships experienced shrinking population between 1880 and 1890.” Cities were unable to handle the mass influx of immigrants and others, though, and poverty and squalor soon followed.

This squalor was documented in a famous book by one of America’s first photojournalists, Jacob Riis, who captured the living and working conditions of the urban poor in his book entitled *How the Other Half Lives* (1890).

Certain religious groups also grew, such as the congregations of Catholic churches. There were also many new Eastern-Orthodox churches and Jewish synagogues being built, but the Protestant churches were losing many of their working-class parishioners.

## Progressivism and the Social Gospel

Some of the ideas of the Social Gospel movement grew out of the ideas that came out of social sciences departments at American universities at the time, particularly those related to the

Progressive Movement. Progressives believed that human greed had overtaken the benefits of industrialization and worked to cure many of the social and political ills in America.

Some of the social ills that the Social Gospel movement addressed included poverty, crime, racial inequality, alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment, civil rights, voting rights, pollution, child labor, political corruption, gun control, and the threat of war. Progressives addressed some of these same issues, such as better working conditions, child labor, alcoholism, and women's suffrage, but some of their other goals were less democratic. They opposed immigration and many joined the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s.

## Accomplishments

Some of the major accomplishments of the Social Gospel movement included settlement houses, such as Jane Addams Hull-House in Chicago, founded in 1889 by social reformer Jane Addams, the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Settlement houses were typically established in poor urban areas and inhabited by educated middle or upper-class residents who provided services such as daycare, healthcare, and education to their low-income neighbors. Photojournalist Jacob Riis also started a settlement house in New York which is still in existence today, the Jacob A Riis Neighborhood Settlement.

The Y.M.C.A. (Young Men's Christian Association) was founded in London, England in 1844 as a safe haven and resource for young men working in unhealthy and unsafe cities at the end of the Industrial Revolution (ca. 1750-1850) and soon made its way to the United States. In the U.S. it was taken over by proponents of the Social Gospel movement and grew to be a powerful entity and resource, doing much good for many urban poor.

## The Civil Rights Movement and the Social Gospel

Although the Social Gospel movement was initially "a segregated phenomenon in which white denominations focused newfound commitment to charity and justice on the needs of white people," many proponents of the Social Gospel movement were concerned with race relations and the rights of African Americans and the Social Gospel movement eventually helped pave the way for the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s-1970s. Washington Gladden worked for racial justice and helped to form the N.A.A.C.P. and Walter Rauschenbusch had a great impact on Martin Luther King, Jr., many of whom's ideas came from those of the Social Gospel Movement in response to racial inequality.

Many of the thoughts and ideas of the Social Gospel movement also contributed to other movements such as anti-war organizing, liberation theology, and liberation movements in other countries. In addition, "virtually all modern laws and social institutions designed to protect the most vulnerable and defenseless people from the destructive effects of society can trace their beginnings to the time of the social gospel movement." The Social Gospel movement elevated the social consciousness and resulted in laws, policies, and social institutions that still work to protect our civil rights and the most vulnerable among us.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_Gospel#:~:text=The%20Social%20Gospel%20was%20a,~and%20the%20dangers%20of%20war.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Gospel#:~:text=The%20Social%20Gospel%20was%20a,~and%20the%20dangers%20of%20war.)

The **Social Gospel** was a social movement within Protestantism that applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially issues of social justice such as economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racial tensions, slums, unclean environment, child labor, lack of unionization, poor schools, and the dangers of war. It was most prominent in the early-20th-century United States and Canada. Theologically, the Social Gospellers sought to put into practice the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:10): "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".<sup>11</sup> They typically were postmillennialist; that is, they believed the Second Coming could not happen until humankind rid itself of social evils by human effort.<sup>12</sup> The Social Gospel was more popular among clergy than laity.<sup>13</sup> Its leaders were predominantly associated with the liberal wing of the progressive movement, and most were theologically liberal, although a few were also conservative when it came to their views on social issues.<sup>14</sup> Important leaders included Richard T. Ely, Josiah Strong, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch.<sup>15</sup>

### **Three Fallacies of the Social Gospel**

Walter Rauschenbusch – Courtesy of John Hans

*Individualism means tyranny.*

Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch famously preached these words in Christian opposition to the evils of capitalism and big business. Of course, the opposite is true: individualism is freedom from tyranny. But he firmly believed the Gospel promoted a form of Christian socialism that is somewhat reminiscent in some Emerging Church circles today.

In the early 20th century, the Social Gospel movement was driven by the belief that the Second Coming of Christ could not happen until humanity rid itself of all social evils by human effort. Followers applied Christian ethics to social justice issues, especially as it related to economic policy.

Similar to the way Marxism twisted Scripture, as I pointed out in one of my recent posts, the

Social Gospel Movement was guilty of three major theological fallacies:

#### **1. Man is not so bad, and God is not so mad.**

In his book, The Kingdom of God in America, H. Richard Niebuhr criticized the liberal Social Gospel describing its message as,

*A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.*

Rauschenbusch and his followers tended to blame sin on societal structures rather than human nature. According to Kyle Potter in a Georgetown College article, they believed individuals could not leave a life of sin until they were freed from the social and economic situation that drove them into sin in the first place. This view plainly contradicts the Biblical concept of original sin.

## **2. Cultural restoration is the Gospel.**

Social Gospel adherents seemed to believe the Gospel was centered on cultural involvement: if people transformed culture, only then would Christ be revealed. But this understanding of the Gospel is too narrow.

Christians are absolutely called to engage culture—that is the heart of the Cultural Mandate—but the Gospel is larger than that. It is the story of God's creation, fall, redemption, and the final restoration. Rauschenbusch seemed to over-emphasize cultural restoration and minimize Christ as the agent of cultural transformation.

## **3. Social salvation is superior to individual salvation.**

Conservative theologians saw redemption as a matter strictly between each individual and God, but Discover the Networks says progressives in the Social Gospel Movement, *held that redemption could only be achieved collectively, by means of unified, social and political activism.*

Though Rauschenbusch saw individual salvation as important, he always considered it secondary to social reform. In a recent interview with the Gospel Coalition, Tim Keller rejects this notion:

*...individual salvation needs to be kept central.*

Though the Social Gospel movement has since fizzled, similar theology has appeared in Emerging Church circles today. Pastor Rick Warren referred to the Social Gospel supported by many of the mainline churches as "Marxism in Christian clothing." But Warren points out we shouldn't choose between cultural restoration and personal salvation. The Gospel contains both with Christ at the center.

### So What Does It All Mean?

As you work towards developing a biblical perspective on work, it's important to keep in mind these fallacies of the Social Gospel movement. As we labor on behalf of the Kingdom, it's easy for Social Gospel ideas to shape how we think about certain aspects of faith and vocation:

- Like the Social Gospel, it's easy to start treating cultural transformation as an end in and of itself.
- If cultural restoration becomes our gospel, we begin to think that the Kingdom is built by us.

Regarding cultural transformation, the Social Gospel rightly recognizes that it is important. However, it's not the end goal. Everything we do, all the transformation we work towards, should

point to the glory of God. In his post “[Kingdom Work](#),” Hugh Whelchel makes this point by quoting Bill Edgar:

*Our cultural involvements are the reflection of the deeper reality of our relationship with God.*

This more nuanced view of cultural transformation strikes a balance between outward work and inner salvation.

Another common yet subtle idea implied from Social Gospel teachings is that God’s Kingdom is built by us. It’s not. Every part of the Kingdom, from its establishment to its construction and eventual consummation is carried out by Christ. He uses us as his tools in this endeavor. It’s a subtle distinction. We aren’t building the Kingdom. God is building it and using us.

Tim Keller [explains](#) it this way (emphasis added):

*Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God fully accomplishes salvation for us, rescuing us from judgment for sin into fellowship with him, and then restores the creation in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever.*

In order for us to have a correct, biblical perspective on work, we need to understand that Christ drives the process, on both the individual and societal levels. He “accomplishes our salvation,” and uses us to restore His creation.

In my next post, I will examine liberation theology as a radical Marxist attempt to promote the Social Gospel.

What do you think? What is your understanding of the Social Gospel?

## History of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (See Fortson):

### **Q: WHEN DID THE EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH COME INTO EXISTENCE?**

Inaugural GA Sept 22, 1981 at Ward Church in Livonia, MI

### **Q: WHO WERE THE FOUNDING CHURCHES OF THE EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?**

12 churches represented at the first GA pp. 59-63?

**Q: WHAT ISSUES IN THE MAINLINE CHURCH PROPELLED THE EPC FOUNDERS TO SEPARATE? (FORTSON PP.17 – 26; 33 – 38; 42 – 54)**

A low view of Biblical authority, drift from traditional orthodoxy concerning the essentials – virgin birth, sacrificial atonement, bodily resurrection, miracles of Jesus. Neo-orthodoxy – universalism; liberal social gospel preferred over evangelism; liberal agenda to promote and require women in ordained ministry; homosexuals allowed to serve as pastors and elders; denominational ownership of local church property; diluted theology; gospel tending toward humanism; unbiblical view of marriage and divorce; ordination of women; financing of abortion – all traceable to a low view of Scripture; adoption of multiple confessions diluted Westminster

**Q: WHY WAS COMMITMENT TO WCF CRUCIAL TO EPC FOUNDERS? (PP. 59 – 68; 137 – 144)**

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the confession as *containing* the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture. While allowing exceptions on non-essential issues as determined by Presbyteries. This system is the Reformed or Calvinistic system in contrast to the Lutheran, Arminian, Antinomian, Pelagian, and Roman Catholic.

**Q: HOW DID BART HESS CONTRIBUTE TO THE EPC FOUNDING? (29 – 33; 55 – 59)**

The concept of the difference between essentials and non-essentials of the faith which led to the motto: “IN ESSENTIALS UNITY; IN NON-ESSENTIALS LIBERTY; IN ALL THINGS CHARITY.” Pastored Ward Church in Detroit, planted three churches in MI; decided it was time to leave the Northern Presbyterian Church as liberalism set in and denomination sought to limit freedom in choosing women elders or not, local church property “held in trust” by the denomination. Hosted the first GA at Ward Church.

**Q: WHO WAS ANDY JUMPER; WHY IS HIS STORY IMPORTANT TO THE ETHOS OF THE EPC? (38 – 42; 68 – 70)**

Able to get things done in the church courts; charismatic experience; founded renewal ministry Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians in the old southern pres church; Central church St. Louis not a founding member of EPC; gave significant guidance to creating the EPC BoO; joined EPC while member of the PCUS as a union church;

**Q: DESCRIBE THE CONTROVERSY OVER “THE ESSENTIALS.” HOW WAS IT RESOLVED IN 2001? (144 – 166)**

3 Problems: 1) Some pastors were committed to “The Essentials” others to the Westminster Standards. 2) Initially “The Essentials” were not part of the constitution, but Vow 4 referred to both WCF, catechisms and Essentials of the Faith, but Essentials was not officially part of the Constitution. 3) There were questions about “full subscription” to Westminster.

Resolution: 1)Amended Vow 4 to refer only to WCF and catechisms and eliminating the phrase “essentials of the faith.” 2)Added vow 5 which requires adoption and affirmation of the Essentials document, thereby making it constitutional. Do you affirm and adopt the Essentials of our Faith without exception? 3) Added to BoG 13.7: The candidate or transferring teaching elders shall provide a written statement of any exceptions to the WCF and catechism, and the Presbytery shall allow or disallow them. The Presbytery shall not allow any exceptions to the Essentials of Our Faith. If teaching elder has exceptions after ordination, he must report those to the Presbytery and the P must act to allow or disallow them.

**Q: HOW DOES THE “ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH” RELATE TO THE WCF IN OUR CONSTITUTION?**

They are not alternative statements of truth, but complementary. Westminster preserves commitment to the historic Reformed faith. Essentials preserves commitment to historic evangelicalism.

**Q: THE EPC CAN BE DESCRIBED AS “NEW SCHOOL PRESBYTERIANISM.” EXPLAIN. (2 – 17)**

New School concentrated on revivals of religion and increases of church membership by professions of faith. 4 principles: 1) religious liberty ( 2) living Calvinism; 3) co-operative Christianity; and, 4) aggressive Christianity. OS favored a denominational board, NS favored multi-denominational mission agencies. OS favored seminaries controlled by the Pres Church, NS favored independent seminaries. EPC is broadly evangelical while maintaining its Reformed commitments as opposed to dogmatic exclusive Presbyterianism.

**Q: IN YOUR VIEW, WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THE EPC POSITION PAPER ON WOMEN’S ORDINATION? (95 – 99)**

Its view that women’s ordination is a non-essential as reflected in Scripture. Gives local churches the choice.

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE EPC VIEW ON THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT? (99 – 101)**

Affirms the gifts as biblically valid for today.

**Q: DESCRIBE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EPC AND OTHER CONSERVATIVE PRESBYTERIAN BODIES. (101 – 105; 122 – 127)**

Fraternally related to the ARP and the Christian Reformed Church in North America, but not with the PCA, OPC.

**Q: HOW DID THE EPC DEAL WITH TENSIONS BETWEEN COMPLEMENTARIANS AND EGALITARIANS IN THE BOO IN 2012? (208 – 220)**

Amended BoG 2-2 to include a paragraph from the position paper of the Ordination of Women. It said, “The EPC believes that the ordination of women is not an essential...the EPC has chosen to leave this decision to the Spirit-guided consciences of the particular congregations concerning the ordination of elders and deacons, and to the presbyteries concerning the ordination of women as Teaching Elders.” This made explicit in the constitution what was already in practice.

**Q: WHAT IMPACT HAS KEN PRIDDY HAD ON THE MISSIONAL EMPHASIS OF THE CHURCH?**

Founded the GO Center, by 2016, there were 167 churches participating in church revitalization in order to become more missionally oriented.

**Q: THE CHICAGO STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INERRANCY HAS BEEN A RALLYING POINT FOR MANY EVANGELICALS. ON ITS 10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY, WHAT DID OUR GENERAL ASSEMBLY SAY ABOUT IT? (178 – 179)**

The 1988 Assembly “commended” it.

## Polity

You *will* be asked: Have you read the Book of Order of the EPC? (“No”=instant fail)

**Q: DEFINE THE BOOK OF ORDER.**

The Book of Order

**Q: WHAT DO YOU SEE AS VALUABLE IS THE MOTTO OF THE EPC?**

The motto of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is "In Essentials, Unity. In Non-Essentials, Liberty, in all things Charity."

**Q: WHY DO YOU THINK WE VALUE LIBERTY IN NON-ESSENTIALS?**

Freedom of conscience....

**Q: IF A COMMISSIONER TO PRESBYTERY TRIES TO DEBATE A NON-ESSENTIAL, WHAT WILL HAPPEN?**

Issues that propelled the EPC founders to separate Flashcards

EPC job, PCA in the future

**Q: WHO IS THE MISSIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTOR?**

**Q: WHO IS THE STATED CLERK OF PRESBYTERY? WHAT IS HIS EMAIL ADDRESS?**

**Q: WHO IS THE CURRENT MODERATOR OF PRESBYTERY?**

**Q: WHO IS THE CHAIR OF THE CHURCH DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE?**

**Q: IN YOUR OPINION, WHY ARE THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH IMPORTANT?**

The Marks of the Church by W. Robert Godfrey

by W. Robert Godfrey

If you move to a new town, you have to find a new church. The search for a new church can be difficult and frustrating. If you pick up the Yellow Pages and look under "Church," you are likely to confront a bewildering array of possibilities. Perhaps you already have some fairly definite ideas of what you want in a church. You may be looking for a good youth group or active senior citizens group. You may want a powerful preacher or a certain kind of music. You may be very loyal to one denomination or you may like to "shop around."

What should you be looking for in choosing a new church? Your first concern should be that the church be a "true church." You do not want to choose a church that is part of a sect or a cult. You do not want a church that still bears the name of church, but whose lampstand Christ has removed (Revelation 1–3). How do you recognize a true church? This question was acute at the time of the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church in the sixteenth century basically argued that Christ preserved the true church through the work of the Pope, the bishop of Rome. The true church is easy to recognize because it is in fellowship with the Pope. Any church that does not submit to the Pope is a false church.

The Reformers did not accept Rome's approach. They argued that the true church is not marked by submission to a supposedly infallible apostolic office—the Papacy—but by acceptance of apostolic truth. Luther declared that “the sole, uninterrupted, infallible mark of the church has always been the Word.” The true church is marked by submission to the Scriptures.

Anyone familiar with the Reformation knows the importance of the Bible in the formation of Protestantism. Against the claims of the medieval church that tradition, bishops, and councils were authoritative along with the Bible, the Reformers insisted that the Bible is the only absolute authority for Christians. The Bible must judge all traditions and church officers and assemblies. It is not surprising then that the Reformers taught that the centrality of the Word is the key mark of the true church. As one of the Reformation confessions put it, the true church is known “in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the Church” (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

This general recognition of the Word as the mark of the true church came to specific expression. Among the Reformed churches, eventually three marks were identified: faithful preaching of the Word, faithful administration of the sacraments, and faithful exercise of discipline.

In focusing on the marks of the church, the Reformers were not saying that all a good church needs to have are the marks of the church. They focused on the marks because the marks make the true church recognizable. The church of Christ has many more characteristics than the three marks. But these characteristics—we might mention prayer, fellowship, devotion—are not so easy to observe. The marks are important because they display the faithfulness of the church.

## **PREACHING**

Faithful preaching was the first mark of the true church because preaching most directly brings God's Word to His people. The Reformers stressed that God's great means of speaking to His people was by preaching. Luther talked of the several forms that the Word takes. The first is the eternal Word, the second person of the Trinity. The second is the incarnate Word, Jesus. The third is the inscripturated Word, the Bible. The fourth is the “shouted Word,” the preaching. At the heart of Christian worship and life is the ministry of the Word in preaching. If preaching is not faithful, the life of the church cannot be faithful. It is an essential mark of the true church.

Calvin added that this first mark of the true church is not just faithful preaching of the Word. A man standing on a street corner may be faithfully declaring the Word, but there is no church. Calvin said that in a true church a further dimension of this mark is that the Word must also be faithfully heard and received. Reformed worship is sometimes called a dialogue between God and His people—God speaks and His people respond. Calvin's point is that if God speaks through the preaching of His Word and no one is listening and responding, then no church exists. But where the Word is faithfully preached and received, there the mark of the true church can be seen.

## **SACRAMENTS**

The second mark of the true church is the faithful administration of the sacraments. At first glance we might be tempted to think that this mark is really more a sixteenth-century concern than a contemporary one. The Reformation, after all, confronted the Roman church, which stressed the absolute centrality of its seven sacraments. Did the Reformers make the sacraments a mark of the church just to distinguish their teaching of two sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) from the sacraments of Rome?

The Reformers certainly had a more fundamental concern than just to separate themselves from Rome on the sacraments. They were convinced that the sacraments are a fifth form of the Word, the visible Word. That phrase—"the visible Word"—had originated with Augustine and Calvin in particular had repeated it. The sacraments visibly display the very heart of the Gospel. Baptism shows that we are saved only by the washing away of sin in Jesus, and the Lord's Supper shows that Christians live only through the body and blood of Christ offered as a sacrifice on the cross. These sacraments are an observable mark of the true church. In a true church the biblical sacraments are faithfully administered and received.

## DISCIPLINE

The third mark of the true church is discipline. The exercise of the discipline taught in Scripture demonstrates the church's determination to pursue holy living before the Lord. If flagrant heresy or notorious unchristian behavior is tolerated in the church, how can that church be genuinely receiving the Word of God? Paul clearly insists that the church exercise such discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1–5, 13). Discipline is necessary in the church according to the Belgic Confession (Article 32) to preserve harmony, unity, and obedience. Where such discipline is missing, the church is not recognizable as a holy community.

The early Reformers such as John Calvin did not identify discipline as a mark of the church. Calvin certainly recognized the vital importance of discipline and even called it "the sinew of the church." Perhaps he felt that discipline was too subjective to function well as a mark. How faithful must a church be in discipline to qualify as a true church? But later Reformers saw the mark of discipline as one way of testing Calvin's concern that the Word not only be preached but be truly received. If a Christian community does not exercise and submit to discipline to some extent, then no true church exists.

Each of the three marks is an expression of the one great mark, the Word. Each mark expresses an aspect of the Word's life and power in the church. The true church submits to the Word of God. As the church father Tertullian said, "They are true churches which hold to what they received from the apostles."

By God's appointment the church is a vital and necessary institution. Each Christian needs the fellowship and ministry of the church. But that spiritual need can only be met by a true church. Today the variety of churches in the Yellow Pages makes the marks of the church more important and useful than ever. The Reformation insight into the Word as the great mark of the church must still guide and direct us to true churches of Christ.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four\\_Marks\\_of\\_the\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Marks_of_the_Church)

The **Four Marks of the Church**, also known as the **Attributes of the Church**, is a term describing four distinctive adjectives—"one, holy, catholic and apostolic"<sup>1</sup>—of traditional Christian ecclesiology as expressed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed completed at the First Council of Constantinople in AD 381: "[We believe] in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church."<sup>2</sup> This ecumenical creed is today recited in the liturgies of the Catholic Church (both Latin and Eastern Rites), the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Church of the East, the Moravian Church, the Lutheran Churches, the Methodist Churches, the Presbyterian Churches, the Anglican Communion and by members of many Reformed churches.<sup>3</sup>

While many *doctrines*, based on both tradition and different interpretations of the Bible, distinguish one denomination from another, largely explaining why there are so many different ones, the Four Marks, when defined the same way, represent a summary of what many clerical authorities have historically considered to be the most important affirmations of the Christian faith.

The **Marks of the Church** are those things by which the True Church may be recognized in Protestant theology. Three marks are usually enumerated: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. The Belgic Confession devotes a chapter (Article 29) to the "Marks of the True Church" and lists them as follows:

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church-- and no one ought to be separated from it.

Louis Berkhof notes that Reformed theologians have differed as to the number of marks: Theodore Beza spoke of only one (preaching), John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger spoke of two (preaching and sacraments), while Peter Martyr and Zacharias Ursinus spoke of three – preaching, sacraments and discipline.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Edmund Clowney points out that Calvin "included discipline in the proper observance of the sacraments."<sup>12</sup> Albert Mohler calls church discipline the "missing mark" of the church.<sup>13</sup>

<https://diocesan.com/4-marks-catholic-church-makes-us/>

**Q: THE BOOK OF ORDER STATES THAT THE FIRST DUTY OF AN ELDER IS TO REPRESENT THE MIND OF CHRIST AS THEY UNDERSTAND IT IN THE COURTS OF THE CHURCH. HOW IS THIS BENEFICIAL FOR US TODAY?**

**Q: IN 1984, THE GA ADOPTED A POSITION PAPER ON THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN. TELL US WHAT YOU PARTICULARLY APPRECIATE ABOUT IT.**

#### Position Paper on the Ordination of Women

Ordination of Women. The Evangelical Presbyterian Church does not believe that the issue of the ordination of women is an essential of the faith. The historic Reformed position on the scriptural doctrine of government by elders is believed to be that form needed for the perfecting of the order of the visible church, but has never been considered essential to its existence. The Westminster Confession of Faith makes it clear that the church catholic is sometimes more, sometimes less, visible according to the purity of the church at a particular time. Also, the purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error. Nonetheless, in spite of such failures to be all God wants His church to be, the Westminster Confession of Faith affirms that, "...there shall

always be a church on earth to worship God according to His will.” Thus, while some churches may ordain women and some may decline to do so, neither position is essential to the existence of the church. Since people of good faith who equally love the Lord and hold to the infallibility of Scripture differ on this issue, and since uniformity of view and practice is not essential to the existence of the visible church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church has chosen to leave this decision to the Spirit-guided consciences of particular congregations concerning the ordination of women as elders and deacons, and to the presbyteries concerning the ordination of women as ministers. It is in this context that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church states in its Book of Government, Chapter 6, titled “Rights Reserved to a Local Church” that “The local church has the right to elect its own officers” (6-2). This right is guaranteed in perpetuity. Finally, the motto of our church summarizes our stance: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” Adopted by the 4th General Assembly June 1984

**Q: IN 1986, THE GA ADOPTED A POSITION PAPER ON THE HOLY SPIRIT.  
TELL US WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT IT.**

<http://epcoga.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/Files/1-Who-We-Are/B-About-The-EPC/Position-Papers/PositionPaper-HolySpirit.pdf>

Holy Spirit Included in the seal of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church is a descending dove, the traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit. It also raises the question, “What does the Evangelical Presbyterian Church believe about the Holy Spirit?” In our doctrinal statement of faith called “The Essentials of the Faith,” we read, “The Holy Spirit has come to glorify Christ and to apply the saving work of Christ to our hearts. He convicts us of sin and draws us to the Savior. Indwelling our hearts, He gives new life to us, empowers and imparts gifts to us for service. He instructs and guides us into all truth and seals us for the day of redemption.” Our beliefs about the Holy Spirit—drawn from Scripture—are summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, where the following description of the nature of the Holy Spirit is found: “The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, proceeding from the Father and the Son, of the same substance and equal in power and glory, is together with the Father and the Son, to be believed in, loved, obeyed, and worshiped throughout all ages” (Chapter 34, The Holy Spirit). Therefore, we believe the Holy Spirit to be God, just as we believe the Father and the Son to be God in the mystery of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit remains, however, the least understood of the three. God the Father has a title that helps us define Him, and the Son took to Himself a body like ours. But the Holy Spirit by name seems less comprehensible to us and is therefore subject to greater misunderstanding than either the Father or the Son. How, then, does the Evangelical Presbyterian Church understand the Holy Spirit? As previously stated, we understand Him to be fully God. His primary function in this age is to glorify Christ by reconciling lost humanity to God. “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father is ever willing to give to all who ask Him, is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption. He regenerates men by His grace, convicts them of sin, and moves them to embrace Jesus Christ by faith” (Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 34:3). The activity of the Holy Spirit accomplishes what Jesus declared to Nicodemus as the only means by which an individual is able to enter the Kingdom of God, through the new birth. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:3-5). In our redemption, the Holy Spirit accomplishes several things. He convicts us of sin and brings repentance. He enables us to believe, confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. He seals the believer unto the day of redemption. “In Him, you also, after

listening to the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:13-14 NASV). The Holy Spirit functions within the life of the believer, unfolding and expressing the life of Christ in ever deepening, life-changing ways. This is the process of sanctification by which the believer is enabled to grow in grace throughout his lifetime. Sanctification is never complete short of glorification. Some Christians believe that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is a second work of grace, subsequent to the new birth. What is the position of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in this matter? As a denomination in the Reformed tradition, we subscribe to the ancient affirmation of orthodox Christian faith and believe in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). This baptism, while visibly expressed in the covenant sacrament that bears its name, is invisibly the work of the Spirit that takes place at the time of the new birth. Paul expresses this truth in 1 Corinthians 12:13, when he tells the Corinthians "...we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body..." Thus, we hold to the concept of the baptism in or with the Holy Spirit as the act of the Spirit that takes an unregenerate individual and, through the new birth, adopts him into the family of God. All the works of the Spirit that follow, then, are because of this initial baptism rather than separate from it. Since Christians are called to "...be filled with the Spirit..." (Ephesians 5:18), all believers in Christ having been baptized into His body by the Holy Spirit should seek to experience the fulfillment of this command. We believe that Christians are called upon to proclaim "a grace that reaches out to forgive, to redeem, and to give new spiritual power to life through Jesus Christ and the infilling of the Holy Spirit" (Book of Worship, 1-3). Regardless of what term is used, we recognize this deepening work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer as being both valid and necessary, producing evidences of His presence in the process. What do we believe to be these evidences of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer? Some would require that Christians manifest a particular gift, such as speaking in tongues, as evidence of a deeper work of the Spirit within. Others would have us believe such a gift is no longer available or acceptable. As a Reformed denomination, we adhere strongly to our belief in the sovereignty of God, a belief that does not allow us either to require a certain gift or to restrict the Spirit in how He will work. Rather, we call upon all Christians to open their lives unto God's Spirit to fill, empower, and "gift" as He sees fit. The Holy Spirit is evidenced, then, in part through the giving of spiritual gifts. Some of these gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4.

Our position with regard to the gifts is best summarized in the publication "Questions Most Often Asked About the Evangelical Presbyterian Church" where we read:

Q. How does the EPC view the gifts of the Holy Spirit? A. The EPC affirms the gifts of God's Spirit as biblically valid for today, and counsels that they be exercised under the guidance of God's Word and the authority of the local Session. Since the Holy Spirit is the source of Christian unity, we must ever guard against any use of the gifts which would lead to division within the Church. We also affirm the priority of the fruit of the Spirit over the gifts in the Christian life. 4 Because of our affirming of the validity of spiritual gifts in the Church today, we are sometimes asked if we are a "charismatic" denomination. The publication just referred to answers this question well.

Q. Is the EPC charismatic? A. If you mean are we Pentecostal, the answer is no. If you mean are we open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the answer is yes. We believe that the word "charismatic" should not be limited to specific manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues. However, "charismatic" does refer to the fact

that every Christian receives a gift, or gifts, from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7,11). In Romans 6:23, Paul states "...the wages of sin is death, but the gift (charism) of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." This means that all who are born again, receiving the gift of life in Jesus Christ, are by virtue of the gift "charismatic" in the broadest sense of the word (Ephesians 4:7).

What is the purpose of the work of the Holy Spirit? Obviously, it is to bring individuals to new life in Christ for their own sake, but it does not end there. When Jesus spoke of the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower His followers individually—and the Church corporately, which occurred on the day of Pentecost—He said that the Spirit's power would have a particular purpose: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Because of this primary function of the Holy Spirit to bring men and women to saving faith in Christ, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church sees the evangelization of the world as an urgent priority: "The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations" (The Essentials of the Faith).

Basic to all we have said here is our conviction that all Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16), and that He illuminates our minds to understand the truths of God's Word (John 14:26 and 16:13). In summary, what does the Evangelical Presbyterian Church believe about the Holy Spirit?

5 We believe that He is God, one with the Father and the Son. We believe that He is the inspirer of Scripture and the enlightener of the believer. We believe that His primary function in this age is to bring lost humanity to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ through the new birth. We believe that subsequent to the new birth—and because of it—He manifests the life of Christ in the believer in a variety of ways that include both fruit and gifts. We believe that the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to the believer to enable God's people to do what otherwise they could not do; namely, fulfill the Great Commission through missions and world evangelization, as well as build up the Body of Christ on earth. To these basic beliefs about the Holy Spirit we commit ourselves. We invite others of like mind and spirit to join us, to the end that on the day of His appearing, "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." Amen.

Adopted by the 6th General Assembly June 1986

**Q: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR A SESSION TO MAKE PROVISION FOR COURSES OF INSTRUCTION TO TRAIN RULING ELDERS BEFORE THEY ARE ORDAINED?**

**Q: WHAT IS YOUR PRACTICE IN REGARD TO FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP AND CHURCH GIVING?**

**Q: WHY IS IT IMPORTANT THAT THE EPC MAY MAKE NO PROVISION IN THE BOO TO ESTABLISH ANY TRUST OF PROPERTY HELD BY OR FOR A LOCAL CHURCH?**

**Q: REFLECT ON THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.**

**Q: WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT MAN'S CHIEF END IS TO GLORIFY GOD & TO ENJOY HIM FOREVER?**

**Q: SHOULD A FUNERAL ALWAYS FOCUS ON THE HOPE OF THE RESURRECTION? HOW WOULD YOU DO THIS?**

## Office and Work of the Pastor

You *will* be asked this question: **Q: WOULD YOU PERFORM A SAME-SEX WEDDING?**

Q: Describe how you would deal with the following issues and events:

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE CHURCH**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH ABORTION AS AN OPTION**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH CHURCH DISCIPLINE, INCLUDING RESTORATION**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH BAPTISM VS. BABY DEDICATION**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH DEALING WITH DIVORCE**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH MOTIVATING TO EVANGELISM**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH REMARRIAGE AFTER DIVORCE**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH DEALING WITH SUICIDE**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH A PARISHIONER STRUGGLING WITH GRIEF OR DEPRESSION**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH PASTORAL OVERSIGHT**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH UNFAITHFULNESS IN MARRIAGE**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH CHURCH CONFLICT**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH CONFIDENTIALITY**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH WHERE DO YOU SEE YOUR ROLE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SESSION?**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH DEALING WITH ABUSE IN MARRIAGE**

**Q: DESCRIBE HOW YOU WOULD DEAL WITH COUNSELING SOMEONE WHOSE INFANT DIED**

How would you counsel someone struggling with addiction to:

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL SOMEONE STRUGGLING WITH ADDICTION TO PORNOGRAPHY**

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL SOMEONE STRUGGLING WITH ADDICTION TO GAMBLING**

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL SOMEONE STRUGGLING WITH ADDICTION TO DRINKING/DRUGS**

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL A YOUNG WOMAN IN YOUR CONGREGATION WHO BELIEVES GOD IS CALLING HER TO SERVE AS AN ORDAINED PASTOR? WHAT SEMINARY WOULD YOU ADVISE HER TO ATTEND?**

**Q: IN YOUR VIEW, IS HUMAN LIFE SACRED? EXPLAIN.**

**Q: A MAN IN YOUR CHURCH TELLS YOU HE FEELS LIKE HE IS REALLY A FEMALE INSIDE AND IS THINKING ABOUT HAVING GENDER REASSIGNMENT SURGERY. HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL HIM?**

**Q: WHAT ARE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES FOR PASTORS AND THE CHURCH IN AMERICA TODAY?**

<https://www.brettmccracken.com/blog/blog/2016/10/27/21-challenges-facing-the-21st-century-church>

**1) Biblical Illiteracy.** Biblical literacy is a huge problem in the American church, and it makes many of the challenges on this list all the more challenging. Quite simply, people in churches (and even more so those not in churches) may pay lip service to the importance of the Bible, but by and large they do not read it or know it. Surveys have found that 82 percent of Americans think “God helps those who help themselves,” is a Bible verse. 12 percent think Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. 50 percent of graduating high school students think Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. It’s embarrassing, and there is much work to do.

**2) Presence.** Christians ought to be people of *presence*, connected to God and to one another through the inhabiting, unifying power of the Holy Spirit. But the 21st century world busies our lives and distracts us so that every moment pulls us away from presence. The church must reprioritize its vocation as *presenters of God’s presence in the world*, and to do so we must cultivate habits and liturgies that create the space and contours for that presence to be felt and known.

**3) Disembodied Tendencies.** The trajectory of technology is away from incarnational presence and toward disembodied experience. We increasingly live our lives via screens, streams, apps, phones. Our relationships are digital. This exacerbates existing Gnostic tendencies (a cerebral rather than embodied faith) and subtly deemphasizes the crucial physicality of the church, the “body of Christ” in the material and not just theoretical sense. Churches should find ways to encourage physical gatherings, the practice of the Lord’s Supper, meals together in neighborhoods, bodily movement in worship, shaking hands and hugging each other, whatever it takes! Anything to re-sensitize people to the fleshly reality of the church in the world.

**4) Compartmentalization.** We live our mediated lives via windows and boxes. We chat with multiple people at a time, post one fragment of our lives here and another there, consume visual media in one window and read the Bible in another. All of this makes it easier to fracture our lived experience into disconnected compartments, a process that wreaks havoc on our spiritual formation. Integrity is wholeness (integer = whole number), all parts of our lives integrated and reflective of the Lordship of Christ. Churches today must work extra hard to cultivate this.

**5) Boredom.** We are an antsy culture. Everything is fast-paced and harried; we can hardly remember which Netflix show we loved last month or which restaurant was the rage last year. We have short attention spans and get bored easily, and this poses a huge challenge to the church. The values of routine, tradition and stability that define the church are distasteful in our

fidgety age. Churches are naturally tempted to use gimmicks and trendiness to solve this problem, but this is ill-advised. The tricky task of the church in the 21st century is to lead people to awe, wonder and worship without watering things down or constantly reinventing the wheel.

**6) Temptation to Reinvent the Wheel.** The boredom challenge leads to this challenge, to “rethink” church every couple years. The problem is endemic in American evangelicalism. It is exhausting to read the scores of books that come out every year that provide a new paradigm or prescription for a revived church. One is tempted to just become Catholic so as to avoid the nauseous glut of “The church must become \_\_\_\_\_ to survive” blog posts and book rants. In this sense I think the evangelical church should become a bit more Catholic, trusting a bit more in continuity rather than seeing every cultural change as an invitation to reinvent the wheel.

**7) Complexity.** Related to our temptation to reinvent the wheel is the temptation to complicate Christianity and church life. We see this in the 345 definitive “definitions” of the gospel that various authors and theologians set forth every year. We see it in the enormous staffs and array of programs that turn churches into bureaucratically complex corporations. Complexity is cumbersome. It impairs mission. Especially at a time when faithful churches will be increasingly exiled from mainstream culture, we need to become leaner and more nimble. We need to rediscover the beauty of simplicity, focusing on the core practices and historic sacraments of the church. The more complicated we make the church, the less countercultural she is.

**8) Consumer Christians.** The ubiquity of consumerism in late capitalism has fully infiltrated the church, to the extent that “church shopping” and “what I got from the sermon” are things we say without thinking anything of it. People go to Sunday services to “get something.” They choose churches that “fit them” and match their checklist of preferences, just as one would choose a car or a new pair of jeans. But churches must challenge rather than cater to this mentality. Church is a place where members of a body come together for purposes beyond themselves. It’s an invitation to join Christ in what he is already doing in the world, not an invitation for Christ to affirm our self-actualization.

**9) The Temptation to Homogeneity.** The consumerism of contemporary Christianity has unsurprisingly led to churches that are more homogeneous than ever. When we go to churches that fit us (how we look, talk and worship) we will naturally be surrounded by people who look, talk and worship just like us. But homogeneity is not the biblical ideal. The power of the gospel is that of unifying diverse groups of people, breaking down the walls of hostility that naturally divide us (race, class, culture, gender, music preference, whatever). At a time when social media allows us to curate feeds and surround ourselves with people who agree with us and confirm our biases, this work becomes even more difficult.

**10) The “Authenticity = Brokenness” Fallacy.** I wrote about this a few years ago and still believe it’s one of the biggest challenges currently facing the church. At the heart of it is an unbelief in change and a weak theology of sanctification, a problem that leads to claims of “this is just who I am” essentialism and immutability. Aren’t we a people of resurrection and hope? Isn’t the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead within us now? Our anemic belief in change is coupled with a fetishizing of brokenness, and it’s a toxic combination. Many Christians today are quite simply more compelled by sin (though we call it “brokenness”) than we are with holiness, and that is a significant problem the church must address.

**11) The Idol of Autonomy.** Little poses a bigger threat to the church in 21st century western culture than the pervasive mindset that individual people are the sole arbiters of their identity, morality and destiny. The “be and do whatever feels right to you” philosophy of expressive

individualism is fundamentally at odds with Christianity, which calls us to bow to the lordship of Christ. Churches must counter this and disciple people to submit their convictions about themselves, however sincere and authentic they may be, to the authority of Jesus Christ as revealed to us in Scripture.

**12) Aversion to Commitment.** We live in a culture that is commitment averse. Millennials are the FOMO (“fear of missing out”) generation, preferring to keep options open rather than committing to something or someone and foreclosing other possibilities. We are the generation that has rendered RSVP-based party planning a futile endeavor. We are the generation that is opting to own homes at a far lower rate than previous generations did. 91% of us expect to stay in a job less than 3 years. We are far less likely to be affiliated with a religion or a political party than previous generations were, and we get married at lower rates and later in life than our parents and grandparents did. Naturally, this leads to weak (if any) commitment to the local church, which makes discipleship and true “long obedience” formation difficult. Against this backdrop, churches can be relevant not by reinforcing unencumbered individualism but by challenging people to connect and commit to the body of Christ.

**13) The Struggle for Balance in an Immoderate Age.** As the world becomes more and more polarized and less and less capable of nuance and complexity (favoring simple, soundbite answers and tweetable convictions), the church will increasingly struggle to resist oversimplifying or too neatly resolving important tensions and complex paradoxes (which often leads to heresy). Truth and love. Word and Spirit. Justification and sanctification. General and special revelation. Gathering and scattering for mission. Now and not yet. Churches must lean into the complexities and paradoxes of these things and try to seek healthy balance, tempting as it will be to claim “radical” and “extreme” positions so as to appeal to Generation Antsy.

**14) Social Media.** There are some positive things social media offers, but there are many things about it that pose challenges to the contemporary church. Chief among them is the challenge of *posturing*, a performative obsession that feeds pride and hypocrisy. But social media (and texting too!) also can complicate pastoral situations and make existing problems worse. Closely associated with social media, the allure of celebrity and “platform” has become pervasive in the 21st century and can destroy a church, particularly when pastors and leaders become more interested in impressing their “audience” than tending to the flock of God.

**15) The Need for Racial Reconciliation.** The church should be no haven for racism, and yet too often the church has let racial wounds fester and prejudice (whether explicit or implicit) go unaddressed. The 21st church must not be on the sidelines in the work of justice, healing and reconciliation; she must actually *lead* these efforts. The most vibrant centers of global Christianity are not in western countries these days, and the face of western Christianity is becoming much more diverse. Churches that celebrate, embrace and embody this reality in their communities will thrive, while those that resist diversity and cling to their ethnocentric privilege will falter.

**16) Gender and Sexuality.** This is a vast area that encompasses a wide range of things (homosexuality, gender identity, marriage, divorce, egalitarian vs. complementarian gender roles, pornography, etc.), each of which could be its own category on this list. We are already seeing how this issue creates fragmentation within churches, denominations and parachurch organizations, and this will only continue. It will also be the primary issue that drives the cultural alienation of the church in the 21st century. The challenges are aplenty here, with major theological and pastoral implications. One of the biggest challenges for theologically conservative churches will be to maintain a *consistent* biblical ethic on these matters, speaking

in truth and love about (for example) the witness of Scripture on divorce as much as the witness of Scripture on homosexuality.

**17) Religious Freedom.** The days are numbered for churches to freely conduct their affairs according to traditional beliefs and practices on issues of sexuality and gender, without government interference. The recent Massachusetts state law, which forces churches to allow transgender people to use church bathrooms and shower facilities of their choice, is just the tip of the iceberg. Churches will need to disentangle from the government to the extent that they can (return to house-churches?), or else figure out how to deal with inevitable legal/legislative challenges.

**18) Anti-Intellectualism.** It has been 21 years since Mark Noll's discouraging assessment in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (that "there is not much of an evangelical mind"), and while progress has been made there is still a lot of work to do in combating anti-intellectualism in the church. Too many churches do not encourage intellectual curiosity, vibrant debate and healthy questioning. They offer simplistic and unsatisfying answers to huge questions and in so doing they foreclose a whole arena (the life of the mind) wherein God can be worshipped and holy wonder cultivated.

**19) Hyper-Intellectualism.** The other end of the spectrum is a challenge as well. As important as apologetics, theological training and rigorous rational defenses are for the faith, if our presentation of Christianity is entirely cerebral it is missing something. The church in the 21st century must embrace the *mystery* and *embodied* elements of Christianity, the experience of God rather than just the conception of Him. This means worship and church life will be messier, more emotional and more unpredictable than the rationalists would prefer, but it will be more powerful and I daresay more transformative.

**20) Distrust of Authority.** For many (very valid) reasons, younger generations today have a real distrust of authority. This makes church inherently challenging for them, not only because they have a hard time trusting leaders but (more importantly) they struggle with submitting fully to the authority of Christ and the authority of Scripture. Yet churches must lean into the "transcendent authority" of Christ, countercultural as that may be. As Russell Moore recently observed, "In an age suspicious of all authority outside the self, the appeal to a word that carries transcendent authority can be just distinctive enough to be heard, even when not immediately embraced."

**21) Entanglements of Allegiances.** This has been a struggle for the church since her earliest days. In what sense does a person's allegiance to empire or nation or some other secular community interact with their allegiance to Christ and his church? Today we're seeing this play out in the messy entanglements of Christians in politics, to the point that we have to say out loud that trickle-down economics and the right to bear arms are political, not biblical values. Today's focus on identity politics makes this even more challenging, as any given member of a church may see their Christian identity as secondary to some other identity (gender, race, political affiliation, nationality, etc.). Churches will have the messy task of acknowledging and respecting multifarious identities while also challenging people to prioritize them in the right way.

<https://www.startchurch.com/blog/view/name/overcoming-the-challenges-of-the-21st-century-pastor>

### Five statements that I hear from pastors

#### 1. “I did not realize we could not do that.”

By nature, many pastors and ministry leaders have an entrepreneurial spirit. This is a good thing since many of them utilize endeavors in order to grow God’s kingdom.

However, from a legal standpoint, how might this affect the tax-exempt status of a church or ministry?

The activities of churches and ministries on a day-to-day basis need to be in line with the Income Tax Regulation in 1.501. In essence, **this regulation states that if an organization substantially participates in an activity that is not tax exempt, the organization jeopardizes its tax-exempt status.**

This brings into question some of the activities that churches engage in and could jeopardize their tax-exempt status if audited.

Such activities may include the following:

- Renting out facilities to the local public,
- Having too many bake sales, and
- Running a café or bookstore during non-church or non-ministry events.

(Recommended reading: [“Can Our Church Own a Business?”](#))

It is not that your church cannot engage in any of these activities, but rather these activities, **if NOT done correctly**, may be deemed by the IRS to be substantial activities unrelated to the church’s charitable purpose.

**If this happens, your ministry may lose its tax-exempt status.**

#### 2. “What do you mean the IRS can give me bad advice?”

In the case of *David Michael Maser v. Commissioner*, the tax court asserted that if an IRS employee gives you bad advice it is generally not binding on the Commissioner.

**This means that you can call the IRS for advice, and if in response you receive wrong advice, then the bad advice is not binding on the IRS.**

Can you imagine what that may mean to your church?

The fact is that many IRS employees are not sufficiently trained to answer questions dealing with even the simplest of matters, let alone complex questions pertaining to church and ministry compliance.

So, if you have a question about a matter relating to your church or ministry, do not call the IRS. Instead, give us a call at (855) 337-4901. This is one of the reasons why we exist.  
(Recommended reading: ["IRS Taxes Pastor for Money He Never Received"](#))

### **3. “I do not have time to work on the legal side of my church.”**

There is no doubt that your schedule as a pastor is full. And while it may be accurate that you do not have enough time to work on the legal side of your church, the truth is that we are living in a time when it can be costly not to work on your church’s legal foundation. Let me explain.

In 1992, the American Bar Association hosted a seminar and discussed how best to sue churches and win large settlements. A Christian attorney in attendance that day described it as “**blood being poured into shark-infested waters.**”

Since that time, there has been an overwhelming increase in churches being sued. Some statistics indicate that in the United States over 1,000 churches are being sued per month. For many pastors, the idea of their church getting sued and losing everything is a nightmare scenario. Although there is no sure fire way to prevent your church from ever being sued, **there are strategies you can implement to help protect your church.**

We teach these strategies at our [conferences](#).

One such strategy is for your church to establish a [tax-exempt holdings corporation](#). Imagine being able to shelter and protect your church’s assets. For more information on the holdings corporation and how it can benefit your church, you can click [here](#), or simply give our office a call at (855) 337-4901.

### **4. “I can hardly recognize the world we live in.”**

Pastors from previous generations served their churches in a culture where “the Church” had respect and moral authority. Pastors today are leading in a completely different culture. The Supreme Court’s decision two summers ago to legalize same-sex marriage has been a concern among many pastors and church leaders, and rightfully so. Then last year, North Carolina passed its infamous House Bill 2 (HB2), also known as the “**Bathroom Bill**,” which was repealed earlier this year due to mounting public pressure. (Both of these issues were addressed in a previous post. Click [here](#) to read.)

Recently, the **Iowa Civil Rights Commission** was forced to amend its brochure on “Sexual Orientation & Gender Identity” after a complaint was filed by Fort Des Moines Church of Christ with help from Alliance Defending Freedom.

The previous brochure indicated that churches would be required to accommodate bathrooms for individuals based on their sexual identity.

Although the Iowa Civil Rights Commission revised its brochure, this goes to show that religious freedom and expression is a continuous battle, and it is imperative for your church to have proper wording in its bylaws.

As we teach at our [conferences](#), your best First Amendment protection is your church’s bylaws.

Since legislation in our country is always changing, your church's bylaws need to include necessary language to provide adequate protection. For some of you, this means you will need to update your bylaws.

It is good practice to regularly review your bylaws to ensure they are up to date with current legislation.

## **5. "I feel totally unprepared and inadequate to lead effectively."**

It is intriguing to me that most ministry training programs teach ministers strategies that concentrate on the spiritual side of ministry (preaching, teaching, counseling, etc.), **yet at the same time fail to adequately prepare ministers to lead as CEO of their church corporation.**

It is not until ministers are actually leading a congregation that they realize the full weight of their responsibilities as CEO. In most instances, **ministers feel unprepared and inadequate to lead in such a capacity.**

The fact of the matter is that most pastors do not have the time or resources to pursue higher education or additional training they feel is necessary to lead as CEO. This is one reason why we have put together a one-day conference training that equips pastors and ministry leaders with the necessary tools, resources, and knowledge to help lead their ministries and churches as CEOs in the 21st century.

If you have not yet been to one of our conferences, we would love for you to join us! You can click here to find out when we will be in a city near you.

## **Overcoming the challenges before your ministry**

So, what do you do with information like this?

**I have discovered that though I am announcing it at a level 10 volume, many leaders hear it at only a level 1 volume.** The common thought pattern goes, "I will get to that later." By the time later comes, it usually means that something has occurred and is most likely too late. Unfortunately, many pastors are unaware of the compliance issues within their churches. With increased scrutiny and IRS enforcement presence, the years ahead may become more challenging for churches to StartRIGHT™ and StayRIGHT™.

Do not be one of the pastors who says, "I will get to that later." Be proactive in protecting all that God has given you to lead.

If you have any questions or would like to receive more information about how we can help you and your church, please give us a call at (855) 337-4901.

<https://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/challenges-for-21st-century-preaching-11574727.html>

I have visited many parts of the world in which the challenges to the 21st-century pulpit look rather different. So part of the purpose of the rest of this essay is modest: to stimulate thinking that will help others flesh out this list and modify it for different cultural locations.

## **Multiculturalism**

Transparently, the move toward multiculturalism is not evenly distributed. There are numerous rural pockets in the United States that have been largely untouched by what is almost a global phenomenon; there are entire countries that have experienced little of the phenomenon of mixed ethnicities (e.g., Japan in the industrialized world and some parts of the still-developing Two-Thirds World). Nevertheless the multiplication of ethnic diversity in our major metropolitan centers around the world is one of the most dramatic changes of the past fifty years. For this reason, ministry in New York City has more in common with ministry in Toronto, London and Berlin than it does with ministry in Franklin, Tennessee.

In some cities the pace of this change has been stunning. A bare three decades ago, Toronto was still largely white and at least substantially WASP. Now the United Nations says it is the most ethnically and culturally diverse city on the continent — and that includes Los Angeles. Moreover, many major cities that have been immune from such transformation are losing their immunization.

The reasons for such changes are many. Increased mobility, the relative ease of travel and its relative inexpensiveness, the massive movements of refugees on the one hand and of those seeking a better economic way of life on the other (while America has about 12 million undocumented Hispanics, South Africa has just under three million undocumented citizens of Zimbabwe — and similar statistics could be charted in many countries), all play their part. In Europe, one of the most significant pressures undergirding these developments is demographic: not a single European country has a birthrate of 2.1 or higher.<sup>[ii]</sup> The influx of international guest workers drafted to keep the economies moving invariably has far higher birthrates (e.g., Europe as a whole, about 1.35; Muslims in Europe, about 3.5). Mathematics does the rest. Already there are more worshipers of Allah on any weekend in the United Kingdom than there are Christian worshipers (even with the broadest possible definition of “Christian”); in France, the ratio is now higher than 2.5:1.

Why are such considerations important for the preacher? Certainly I do not want to belong to the doom-mongering crowd. Besides, many of us actually love the diversity now characteristic of many of our big cities. The last thing the church needs in a city like Toronto or New York is a church that hunkers down into ethnically and culturally pure enclaves. That is wrong biblically and stupid strategically. Yet there are at least five facets of these developments that have a bearing on 21st-century preachers and preaching.

First, preachers who serve in most of our large urban centers, and even in many small centers, will face increasing cultural diversity in the populace where their church is located. Woe to the church that lags way behind these demographic changes, for it is destined to become a narrow (and narrow-minded) enclave, instead of joyfully anticipating the day, in the new heaven and the new earth, where men and women from every language and people and nation will gather around the throne. Churches comprised of believers from diverse cultures will include people with different senses of humor, different tastes in food, different views on how to bring up their children, different perspectives on individualism and family identity, different traditions with

which they choose to identify themselves. Yet what unites them in Christ Jesus is far richer than what divides them.

The preacher sensitive to these changes will be eager to establish a growing, empathetic and biblically faithful distinction between “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3) and an immense array of cultural differences over which it is unwise to divide. Perhaps nowhere do matters become more sensitive than when our children express a desire to marry across racial and cultural divides — a phenomenon occurring with increasing regularity. How families respond to these pressures quickly discloses where their hearts and values are, not least how much they have been shaped by the gospel.

Second, preachers will have to distinguish between, on the one hand, the empirical pluralism and multiculturalism increasingly characteristic of our big cities, and, on the other, the dogmatic “PC” form of multiculturalism that refuses to make any moral or cultural distinctions. Are we so very sure that the culture of Nazism is morally indistinguishable from the culture of the Dutch folk who hid so many Jews? We shall want to eschew alike the traditionalism that always sides with our own inherited culture, the sentimental love of the esoteric that always sides with whatever is foreign, and the postmodern blinkers that refuse to allow much moral and cultural distinction and discernment at all. The preacher who is speaking from the whole of the Bible to the whole of human life will not be able to duck such issues.

Third, preachers in these environments need to take extra time to prepare *themselves* for ministry characterized by these challenges. It used to be that the better theological colleges and seminaries required of *missionary candidates* certain courses in cross-cultural communication. Nowadays pastors serving metropolitan areas need similar help. It is important to read up on the major groups in your area; it is even more important to develop friendships among the various people of your area, for such interaction will supplement your reading with experiences that no amount of reading can ever cover. One of the valuable things that pastors can do is spend time with more senior pastors who have already crossed a lot of the bridges, and who are willing to mentor a new generation coming along behind.

Fourth, these developments are generating in preachers the need to revive the debate over the validity or invalidity of “the homogenous unit” principle. Several decades ago, this principle was especially associated with the name of Donald McGavran, who taught missions at Fuller Seminary. McGavran argued that the gospel advances far more quickly and fruitfully if missionaries and evangelists target discrete ethnic and cultural groups. The countervailing argument was that the New Testament demands one unified people of God drawn from all races and cultures — in short, that McGavran’s formula was a betrayal of the gospel itself.

Thus cast, the two outlooks allow no common ground. In fact, some common ground is possible. Evangelistic outreach may demand special sensitivity to definable groups: Paul himself could make himself a Jew to Jews, a Gentile to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 9:19-23), with the aim of by all means saving some. What Paul will not sanction is that once they are converted, people may constitute churches separated by race or culture: the church in Antioch must be made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

A church that begins, say, an outreach Bible study into the Greek community nearby, or into the Mandarin-speaking community, may be working faithfully. But faithfulness equally mandates that the church attempt to bring disparate people together under the lordship of Christ. One can sympathize with immigrant churches that cater to folk of similar language and culture. On the

long haul, however, the priority of preserving the language and culture can easily trump the gospel itself — and in any case the second or third generation is going to start voting with their feet unless attempts are made to integrate with at least some larger parts of the broader culture. All of these things a preacher must think through as he plans a course of teaching and preaching in a complex, multicultural city.

Fifth, in some geographical locations special thought must be given to the very large groups of one kind of new immigrant: often (in North America) various Hispanic groups; often (in many cities in Europe, and in some places in North America) the Muslim population. In other words, addressing something abstract like “multiculturalism” may actually become an excuse for *not* thinking through the impact of *specific* cultures in our own neighborhoods.

### Rising Biblical Illiteracy

I have sometimes said that when I began doing university missions more than three decades ago, the atheists I met were mostly *Christian* atheists — i.e., the God in whom they did not believe was the Christian God, which is a nice way of saying that the conceptual categories were still largely on my turf. Nowadays one cannot count on even this minor alignment. Most university students are so utterly ignorant of the Bible today that the responsible preacher cannot make biblical allusions without unpacking them and cannot use biblically “loaded” words without explaining them. Even the smallest subset of our cherished Christian vocabulary — grace, faith, God, sin, atonement, resurrection and the like — is either a list of meaningless expressions or will prove to be deeply misunderstood by the folk we are addressing.

A preacher who is able to proclaim the gospel only to believers who are already deeply Christianized in vocabulary and concept will not be able to proclaim the gospel to people who are not only ignorant of basic biblical content and terminology, but who have already adopted stances toward spirituality and religion that are deeply at odds with what the Bible says. We are not simply writing fresh data on the blank hard drives of their minds; we are required to help them erase certain files and parts of files that clash irremediably with the truth of Scripture that we are trying to write onto their minds. These are challenges that exerted a few pressures on most Christian preachers in the Western world a bare half-century ago.

### Shifting Epistemology

The word *postmodern* and its cognates have come to mean slightly different things to different groups of people, and in particular to mean different things in different countries. In France, for example, people do not speak of *postmodernism* precisely because the “ism” suffix suggests a stability that the movement itself disavows. Even the preferred word *postmodernity* is nowadays rarely used, in part because the movement called *postmodernity* was closely tied to certain literacy and philosophical commitments that are no longer *de rigueur* in French intellectual circles. By contrast, in America the French postmoderns of a generation ago are still being read in translation. Here everyone talks happily about *postmodernism* and the presses keep churning out a disheartening number of books on the subject.

Although some have tried to tie postmodernism to anti-consumerism and other current agendas, most concur that in much of the Anglo-Saxon world the heart of the issue is epistemology. “Hard” postmoderns exaggerate the difference between moderns and postmoderns, depicting the former as being fixated on certainty, infatuated with propositions, invariably arrogant and intolerant, and largely blind to the ambiguities and artisries of life. By contrast, postmoderns

recognize the relativity of all truth claims, embrace the wide possibilities of a word like “truth,” approach the other groups with tolerance and cultural sensitivity, and embrace the subtleties and complexities of life. The caricature intrinsic to these stereotypes may be laughable to serious historians, but millions buy into it.

More important, “soft” postmoderns avoid the worst antitheses but insist nevertheless, not inaccurately, that there are only two kinds of perspectivalists: those who admit it and those who don’t. Only Omnidiscipline is not burdened with being a perspectivalist. Moreover, many hold that perspectivalism so limits our capacity to know very much with certainty that firmly held beliefs are read as narrow-minded dogmatism, theological exclusivism is taken to be intolerance, and most moral distinctions must remain nothing more than private preferences.

At very least we must see that the focus of interest has changed. It used to be that someone giving evangelistic addresses on a university campus could provide a full-blown defense of the resurrection of Jesus and thereby precipitate discussions about the truthfulness of the Bible’s claims. Nowadays it is more likely such a presentation will elicit the entirely tangential question, “Yes, but what about all the Hindus?” There was a time when one could easily talk about sex and its good purposes in God’s creation. Nowadays the same presentation will probably call forth the question, “Are you homophobic?” In short, what starts off as the perception of a tectonic shift in epistemology works down into ten thousand small but vital shifts in perspective and priority.

What I must do, then, is outline a handful of ways in which this epistemological shift ought to affect the preacher and his task. I shall mention only four, though many more could be added.

First, it has become more difficult to get across what the Bible says about sin. When more people lived in a world where “right” and “wrong” were widely perceived to be transcultural categories, it was easier to get across something of the enormity of violating the law of God.

Second, the current focus on narrative preaching has rightly broadened the older emphasis on discourse passages from the Bible. If it helps us better handle all the genres of Scripture faithfully and responsibly, it will be to the good. If it merely tips us from one cultural preference (viz., discourse) to another (viz., narrative), we have not gained anything. Indeed, because narrative is intrinsically more hermeneutically “open” than discourse, the move may merely contribute toward moving us away from truth. How much better to remain faithful to biblical truth yet simultaneously focused on Scripture’s existential bite.

Third, because for many people in today’s world, “faith” and its cognates refer to one’s personal, subjective, religious choice—a choice abstracted from any pretensions of public truth—it does no good to encourage people “to believe” unless one explains what “to believe” means, how important the object of belief is (see 1 Corinthians 15), and how faith and truth relate to each other. Many such links were simply presupposed by our hearers several decades ago. Few of the links are today culturally presupposed.

Fourth, the structure of apologetics needs to change somewhat. A great deal of the earlier intra-evangelical debates about presuppositionalism and evidentialism were themselves parasitic, in whole or in part, on the subject-object distinction as it developed in the modern period. That debate today takes on a raft of new emphases with the move to various kinds of postmodernism.

Thoughtful Christians will not want to align entirely with either modernism or postmodernism, of course, but the kindness of God in His “common grace” ensures that there are useful things in both epistemological structures that a Christian may usefully exploit, and things in both structures to confront.

The last three points — multiculturalism, rising biblical illiteracy, and shifting epistemology — combine to remind us that challenges like these are not new. When Paul preaches the gospel in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch ([Acts 13](#)), he does not sound exactly the way he does when he preaches the gospel to biblically illiterate intellectuals in Athens ([Acts 17](#)). On any reckoning, Paul has been in the ministry for more than two long decades when he preaches in Antioch. He is not shifting his message because he is intimidated. Rather, he recognizes that he is now in another cultural “world” than the one he inhabited when preaching in a synagogue. He perceives that the biblical illiteracy in Athens, combined with such alien frames of reference as Stoicism and Epicureanism, means he must start farther back and talk about monotheism, creation, who human beings are, the aseity of God, the nature of idolatry, and a view of history that includes teleology and final judgment, before he can help his hearers make sense of Jesus and the resurrection.

### **Integration**

What I have in mind is the need for Christian preachers so to think through God’s Word that they can wrestle discerningly, penetratingly, critically, and integratively with the manifold movements and cultural (including moral and ethical) questions of the day. This does *not* mean that the agenda of an age becomes the preacher’s agenda. It means, rather, that we must not pretend we can preach the Bible in a cultural vacuum.

Most of us have met preachers who have spent years of their lives reading the Puritans (or the Reformers, of the Fathers) and little else, and whose entire imaginations are locked in a time warp several centuries old. They should not deter us from reading history, or course: history opens our eyes to other cultures, introduces us to brothers and sisters in other times and places, and weaves depth and perspective into our lives. Preachers whose every point of integration and application springs from the Donatist controversy or the debate over Socinianism or the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes or the legitimacy or otherwise of the Hooker principle, but who never addresses abortion and other sweeping bioethical issues congregating around the beginning of life and the end of life, are living in the wrong century.

At a time when internet porn now outsells cigarettes, booze, and hard drugs combined, when digital worlds open up new horizons and yet shut down human intimacy, when globalization reminds us that we are one world and yet sometimes exploits the weak, when AIDS threatens tens of millions of human beings, and when Islam, fueled by oil, strengthened by demographic trends, and disgusted by the immorality of the West, is once again resurgent, the preacher who never demonstrates how the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses these things has, at best, retreated to an individualistic form of piety not sanctioned by the biblical prophetic tradition.

Christian preachers are not authorized to duck important issues. At the same time, these issues must not determine his message. Yet failure to show the bearing of the gospel on such issues is merely to trumpet that there is no bearing. Our task, then, is to be expositors of the Word of God yet to exercise that ministry in the time and place where God has providentially placed us.

## Pace of Change

The pace of change in the 20th century was staggering. But virtually all quantifiers promise that the pace of change in the 21st century will accelerate and prove to be far more rapid.

At one level, of course, this should matter little to the preacher. We deal in eternal realities. Indeed, endless analysis about change and its pace may distract us from the eternal gospel, the faith “once for all delivered to the saints.” Nevertheless, our task is to communicate the truth of God’s words, which are forever settled in heaven, to men and women who very much live on earth — a rapidly-changing earth.

What this suggests is that along with the primacy the preacher must give to the study of Scripture and ancillary disciplines, he must also set aside time to try to understand his own times. This may be done through reading, discussion groups of various sorts (e.g., analyzing books and films), seminars with the most experienced and insightful preachers, and much more. But to ignore the pace of change is to lust after a false security, the security of stability, that will not characterize any part of the 21st century.

## Modeling and Mentoring

For much of the last three decades my primary task has been to teach students at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. I have sometimes said that if, God forbid, I were suddenly appointed evangelical Pope, the first thing I would do on my first day in office would be to bring 10 or 15 of the ablest pastor-preachers to churches within a short driving distance of Trinity. The reason is obvious: a great many things are better caught than taught. I wish more of our students were exposed to great preaching. Some of the most important lessons I have learned about preaching have been gleaned by sitting under the ministry of able preachers.

This suggests we ought to be thinking hard about mentoring and apprenticeships. Various organizations, such as The Proclamation Trust in the United Kingdom, have developed preaching workshops that devote time to (a) listening to able preachers, and to (b) mutual criticism of sermon outlines that each participant prepares in advance. Other networks prepare preachers for urban ministry or cross-cultural ministry.

The apostle Paul understands how much of his own *life* must shape Timothy (e.g., 2 Timothy 3:10-11). Considering the challenges ahead of us, preachers are more likely to multiply their fruitfulness if they pay attention to the importance of mentoring than if they persist in “Lone Ranger” ministries all their days.

## Concluding Reflections

Preachers cannot responsibly ignore these things, for they stand between the speaking God and the listening people — people who are not empty ciphers but culturally located men and women who must be addressed where they are, even if our hope and prayer is that they will not remain where they are, but begin by God’s grace the march down the King’s highway, the narrow road that leads to life.

Our motivation to understand and address people in the 21st century is not to domesticate the gospel by constant appeal to cultural analysis, but to prove effective ambassadors of the Sovereign whose Word we announce. For one day the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever (Revelation 11:15). It

is precisely because we are anchored in eternity that we are so utterly resolved, like Paul, to address lost men and women who must one day meet their God.

<https://www.seedbed.com/5-unique-theological-challenges-for-the-21st-century-church/>

## **1. Embracing Exile (Without Abandoning Mission)**

In past generations, and especially in the Bible belt (where I live), religious leaders propagated the notion that there was a “moral majority” of Bible-believing Christians, who simply needed to be mobilized in order to (I apologize...) “take back America.”

Whether this was ever true may be debated. Yet in recent years, it is increasingly obvious that the idea is simply delusional. Committed Christians are nowhere near a place of numerical dominance, either within the larger culture, or within the self-identifying “evangelical right”—as illustrated by the embarrassment that is the rise of Donald Trump. Given this, we Christians are in no position to throw our cultural weight around. Those days, if they ever existed, are long since over.

So what cultural image should replace that of the not-so-moral non-majority? Let me suggest a biblical one: the vocation of a missional minority in a place of cultural exile.

But first, some qualifiers: Exile is not the same as persecution. Before throwing around the “P”-word, American evangelicals should turn on the world news, to find out what the term actually means. Also, in the Scriptures, exile isn’t all bad, nor is it the end of cultural engagement. While often a penalty for sins committed (of which we have more than our fair share), exile is a place of repentance, reflection, and of contribution to “the peace of the city” (Jer. 29.7).

To use an oft-quoted phrase, it means being a counterculture for the common good.

So while cultural exile doesn’t mean an end to mission, evangelism, or renewal, it does mean that we stop pretending that we can dictate demands based on our massive size or political influence. In doing so, we come to grips with life on the margins, where Jesus lived, and where the early church took root.

Cultural exile isn’t the end, but it does demand a change in posture, and that brings us to a second challenge.

## **2. Unbundling (Without Discarding Core Commitments)**

For Cable and Internet providers, “bundling” is a way to offer more for less. Why pay separately for certain items (TV, phone, and Internet) when they come prepackaged?

But when it comes to theological and social issues, “bundling” can be bad. Hence, another challenge for the American church will be to unbundle some personal and political opinions that have been oddly intertwined with the core commitments of the gospel, and then sold as a set.

In short, we need to be clearer about what are “gospel-issues” and what are not.

Some examples: One’s love for the 2nd amendment is not a gospel issue (at least not in the way that some seem to think it is). Nor is one’s opinion on which form of governance leads to human flourishing. Whether one endorses capitalism or sees it as morally deficient is a question over which good Christians may disagree, so long as our goal is neighbor-love as an expression of our love for God.

By all means, debate. Have strong opinions and back them up. But, do not bundle them together with the core commitments of our faith (Christ, Trinity, salvation, and the call to Spirit-driven holiness) and call it evangelicalism. Doing so does great harm to the gospel. In this way, unbundling the extraneous issues (without letting go of core commitments!) will continue to be a major challenge.

### **3. Responding to Science (Without Relinquishing our Reason)**

When I did my seminary training in the early 2000s, “postmodernism” was all the rage. At the time, whole cottage industries sprung up over rumors that certain churches were “emerging,” and there was a furious run on prayer candles and black-rimmed glasses.

I barely got mine.

Modernity was passé, and with it the preoccupation with Reason and Science as ultimate guides to truth.

Around this same time, I recall a classroom discussion in which a visiting professor was asked about what came next. What follows on the heels of this initial version of postmodernism? I still remember what she said—For many, it will be a reinvigorated “Scientism.”

This was before I had even heard of “The New Atheism,” but the thought was prescient.

From the “born that way” argument, to evangelical debates on the historical Adam, and on to some of the fastest growing Christian podcasts (See The Liturgists and Science Mike Mchargue)—Science is posing serious questions to the Christian faith.

And thoughtful Christians must respond in thoughtful ways. Neither fundamentalist antagonism nor blanket acceptance of the “assured results” will do. Thus, while groups like “Answers in Genesis” and “Biologos” provide polar (and not always satisfying) examples of Christian engagement, the question remains an open one: How will the church engage with scientific questions without compromising our commitment to the gospel?

### **4. Speaking in Tongues (While Saying Something Substantive)**

As I teach freshmen college students every semester, one reality is clear: Most of them don’t know the first thing about the Bible or Christian theology. And that includes the ones who have grown up in church. In some ways, this reality affords an opportunity, and I am grateful for it. The situation is largely not their fault, and it does not mean that they are unintelligent or apathetic.

For better or worse, most of them are familiar with the “bundles” of American evangelicalism (see above), but that’s about it.

And this presents a paradox.

On the one hand, it requires that we start from the beginning in the Christian story. We assume nothing, and we meet people where they are. In short, this must happen when you tell your story from a place of exile.

On the other hand, it will not work to simply abandon careful study of the Scriptures, robust doctrine, and nuanced theology. This is the very move that helped create the problem in the first place.

After all, what would you know of Scripture if every sermon you heard was little more than a motivational pep-talk, a moralistic drubbing, or a practical guide to better life? These moves are understandable in the quest to be relevant and understood—so we shouldn’t simply bash the efforts of the Seeker movement or the hardworking mega-churches. But if we’re not careful, the breathless chasing after relevance perpetuates the problem.

In short, we need the power of the Spirit to “speak in tongues.” And while I deeply love my charismatic brethren, I don’t mean this in the common sense. We must come to tell the scriptural story as the first apostles did (Note: Peter’s Acts 2 sermon was as biblical as it was blunt). But, we must also do this in ways that can be understood by our hearers, and this is

difficult. In fact, it is so difficult that, if it happens at all, it will be miracle. Yet as a Christian, I believe in those.

The future is not lost; let us then engage it with hope and holiness, grace and truth.

**Q: In your view, what is the most effective form of evangelism today and give an example of using this in your ministry?**

Friendship one on one or Questions group

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL A MEMBER OF YOUR CHURCH WHO DOUBTS THEIR ELECTION AND/OR SALVATION?**

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND IF SOMEONE WITH CANCER REQUESTED TO BE ANOINTED WITH OIL AND PRAYED OVER FOR HEALING BY YOU AND THE ELDERS?**

**Q: WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF THIS STATEMENT, “THE EPC AFFIRMS THE GIFTS OF GOD’S SPIRIT AS BIBLICALLY VALID FOR TODAY”?**

**Q: A MISSIONARY RETURNS FROM THE FIELD AND TELLS YOU ABOUT MIRACLES HE WITNESSED WHILE THERE. HOW WOULD YOU PROCESS THAT?**

**Q: A CHARISMATIC PERSON IN YOUR CONGREGATION WANTS A SEMINARY EDUCATION. WHERE WOULD YOU ADVISE HIM OR HER TO ATTEND?**

**Q: IF THERE WAS A PANDEMIC AND THE GOVERNOR IMPOSED A STAY AT HOME ORDER, HOW WOULD YOU AS PASTOR LEAD THE CHURCH?**

Questions about Marriage:

**Q: AN ENGAGED COUPLE SEEKS YOUR SERVICES TO OFFICIATE THEIR WEDDING. IN THE PROCESS OF LEADING THEM THROUGH PREMARITAL COUNSELING YOU DISCOVER THAT THEY ARE LIVING TOGETHER AND ARE SEXUALLY ACTIVE. HOW DO YOU RESPOND PASTORALLY TO THIS COUPLE?**

**Q: WOULD YOU RESPOND DIFFERENTLY IF THEY HAVE HAD A CHILD TOGETHER WHO IS LIVING IN THE HOME AS WELL?**

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL A COUPLE WHOSE PREVIOUS MARRIAGES ENDED IN UNBIBLICAL DIVORCES? ARE THERE SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES THAT WOULD SHAPE YOUR COUNSEL? WHAT DOES THE EPC POSITION PAPER SAY ABOUT IT?**

Divorce and Remarriage

I. Synopsis

Marriage is a sworn fidelity, a solemn covenant between a man and a woman, entered into before God, whereby He joins them in a life-long companionship of love for and commitment to each other. While God intends the marriage covenant should never be broken, it is broken by the death of either partner, or in the case of adultery or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrates. Such marital unfaithfulness is the grounds for a biblical divorce. God's call is to love and to forgive. Divorce is not necessitated in any event, and Sessions should exhort couples considering such a step to actively pursue reconciliation. Divorce under any circumstances should not preclude continued attempts to reconcile. Those who remarry after an improper divorce commit adultery and are subject to church discipline. As with all other transgressions, the blood of Christ covers these as well, and members may be restored to fellowship when guilt is acknowledged and true repentance for sin is expressed. Church Sessions and Presbyteries must exercise diligent care in considering divorced persons as candidates for church office.

II. Introduction

The confessional statement of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church on the subject of Divorce and Remarriage is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (24.5, 6, and 7) and in the Book of Worship (5-4): It is the divine intention that persons entering the marriage covenant become inseparably united, thus allowing for no dissolution save that caused by the death of either husband or wife. However, the weaknesses of one or both partners may lead to gross and

persistent denial of the marriage vows. Yet only in cases of extreme unfaithfulness (physical or spiritual)—unfaithfulness for which there is no repentance and which is beyond remedy—should separation or divorce be considered. Such separation or divorce is accepted as permissible only because of the failure of one or both of the partners, and does not lessen in any way the divine intention for indissoluble union. The Church—in keeping with the redemptive gospel of Christ—may sanction the remarriage of divorced persons when sufficient penitence for sin and failure is evident, and a firm purpose of and endeavor after Christian marriage is manifested. Divorced persons should give prayerful thought to discover if God's vocation for them is to remain unmarried, since one failure in this realm raises serious questions as to the rightness and wisdom of undertaking another union. If the Minister has any questions about the readiness of a divorced person to remarry according to these principles, the Session should be consulted and its concurrence sought. We affirm at the outset that any discussion of divorce and remarriage should be conducted in a spirit of genuine humility. Few experiences in life are more agonizing than the dissolution of a marriage. We realize that conclusions cannot be reached lightly, but only on the basis of a prayerful and diligent study of the teaching of God's Word. Difficult ethical problems arise in any divorce, and very few of these problems are so simple that right judgment can be easily made. Parties that are "innocent" are seldom to be found.

### III. Marriage

Before considering the breakup of a marriage, let us look at the biblical perspective concerning this relationship. In speaking of a husband and wife, Malachi says: ...the Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one? ...So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel (Malachi 2:14-16). The prophet here makes the important point that marriage is not primarily a mutual contract between two people; it is rather a sworn fidelity—a solemn covenant between a man and a woman, entered into before God, whereby He joins them in a life-long companionship of love for and commitment to each other. Scripture tells us that marriage is God-instituted from the beginning of creation (Genesis 2:18-24) and that marriage, from both the wife's and the husband's perspectives, reflects the relationship between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). While "this mystery is great" (Ephesians 5:32), at the very least we see that God is intimately involved in the marriage covenant.

### IV. Divorce in the Scripture

We believe that, according to the dictates of Scripture, marriage is for life. Clearly, God's standard is chastity before marriage and fidelity afterwards, and Scripture teaches that divorce is always an abnormality arising out of human sinfulness. But to say that God intended the marriage covenant should never be broken does not mean that the marriage union is therefore unbreakable. For example, it is broken by the death of either partner. Moreover, divorce was tolerated in Old Testament times—although not divinely approved. We discover from Deuteronomy 24:1-4 that Moses was not instituting or encouraging divorce; he was simply attempting to regulate it in a culture whose practice of it was out of control. It is important to note that the word "adultery" does not appear in these verses for the very good reason that under the Mosaic Law, the punishment for adultery was death by stoning. Divorce was obviously an established custom that is neither commanded nor condoned in this passage. However, the

Mosaic Law in general assumed the practice of divorce (Leviticus 21:7,14 and 22:13; Numbers 30:9; Deuteronomy 22:19,29). Divorces were even required when the post-exilic people of God who had married foreign women were commanded to “put them away” (Ezra 9-11; Nehemiah 9:2). Nevertheless, the Old Testament makes it very clear that God does not look favorably on divorce. Jesus said, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8-9). When Scripture says that a man shall “cleave to his wife” (Genesis 2:24), this is a covenantal term used elsewhere when the Israelites were challenged to “cleave” to the Lord with affection and loyalty (Joshua 22:5). In Malachi 2:14-16, the prophet affirms that it was because of the multiple divorces in Israel that God was withholding His blessing and no longer hearing their prayers. In the New Testament, Jesus calls His people to be faithful to the clearly defined will of God as expressed primordially in Genesis 2:24, and quoted and enlarged upon by our Lord in Matthew 19:4-6: “Haven’t you read,” He replied, “that the Creator made them male and female and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate.” One renowned theologian shows the extreme importance of these words of our Lord when he says, Now it was of course precisely the order of creation that Christ came to restore; therefore, the restoration of the order of creation should manifestly be taking place in His body the church, which is composed of new creatures, or renewed creations in Christ. The Christian Church, accordingly, has a special responsibility to bear witness in its practice as well as in its doctrine to the sanctity of the marriage bond. Of all the spheres of human society it least of all should show that ungodly hardheartedness which requires the divine standard to be accommodated to the debased level of man’s fallen state.

## V. Biblical and Unbiblical Divorce

As noted above, marriage is a sworn fidelity, whereby God joins a man and a woman in lifelong companionship. Nevertheless, divorce is permitted only in circumstances of grave repudiation of the marriage covenant, namely adultery and willful, irremediable desertion. The original text of the Westminster Confession, as approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1647, is emphatic when it states, “Nothing but adultery or such willful desertion as can no way be remedied by the Church or civil magistrate is cause sufficient of dissolving the bond of marriage.” The offended party in such circumstances is free to remarry, as if the offending party were dead. In Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9, Jesus cites “marital unfaithfulness” as the sole grounds for biblical divorce and remarriage. This word—porneia—is usually understood as sexual sin. However, a better translation would follow the New American Standard Version in rendering it “immorality.” In contrast to moicheia, which is always translated “adultery,” porneia refers to all kinds of sexual immorality that break the one-flesh principle. Jesus emphasized the sanctity of marriage: “What God has joined together, let man not separate” (Matthew 19:6). While the Pharisees and scribes said that the Law demanded divorce under certain circumstances, Jesus said, “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for ‘marital unfaithfulness’ causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:31-32). The Law indeed commanded that if there were to be a valid divorce, a certificate of divorce must be written. But that is a very different thing from saying that they must divorce. God’s call to us is to love and to forgive. Therefore, even adultery does not necessitate divorce. There must always be the possibility of forgiveness and

reconciliation, and this should be seriously pursued. Indeed, married couples who have experienced a break in covenant faithfulness should strive to repair their relationship through forgiveness, reconciliation, and personal transformation before divorce proceedings are initiated. The story of Hosea illustrates God's active role in the marriage covenant, and reflects God's covenant love for His people. In obedience to God's command, Hosea pursued Gomer and accepted her as God restored the covenant relationship. Likewise, the Session should encourage the offended spouse to offer forgiveness and reconciliation with the hope of drawing the offending spouse back to right relationship in the marriage. Pastors who become aware of potential divorce situations within the church—either through the parties involved or from outside sources—should encourage both partners to seek Christian marriage counseling, either from the church staff or from other qualified counselors. God's love, forgiveness, and healing power should be emphasized, especially 6 where the offending spouse (who committed the marital unfaithfulness) is repentant and the offended spouse is reluctant to forgive and unwilling to continue in the marriage. Christ's teaching is that if a divorce takes place on any other grounds than that of marital unfaithfulness, it can have no sanction from God, and any new marriage that follows is an adulterous act, since from God's standpoint the original couple is still married to each other. Matthew 19:9 indicates that a valid divorce (on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness) entails the right to remarry. In 1 Corinthians 7:12-15, Paul cites the case of a man who becomes a Christian after marriage. His wife, however, remains an unbeliever but is willing to continue living with him. The injunction is that he is not to divorce her. If she were to leave him, however, she is to be allowed to do so. Desertion is the destruction of the marriage that the Christian spouse was unable to prevent. The believer in such a case is not bound (that is, he or she is free to divorce and remarry); for Paul says, "God has called us to live in peace" (1 Corinthians 7:15). This implies that in the case of a serious breakdown of a marriage—even when both parties are believers and peace has given way to open warfare, as in the case of extreme incompatibility—it may be better for the couple to separate, temporarily at least, rather than to continue in a relationship that has become intolerable. But in such a circumstance, there should be no resort to divorce, let alone any intention of entering into a second marriage. In the case of such a separation, they are either to remain single or earnestly work toward effecting a reconciliation (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Some would understand Matthew 19:9 to restrict biblical divorce only to cases of physical adultery. However, we agree with John Murray that the issue addressed there is what constitutes legitimate remarriage.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Jesus' point is if an individual remarries without a biblical divorce, he or she is committing adultery. Further, such a restrictive understanding of Matthew 19:9 cannot account for Paul's grounds of desertion in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15. To reconcile these passages, we must search out the overriding principle from which they both derive—the one-flesh principle of the marriage mandate (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:5; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 5:28-29). Both adultery and desertion break the one-flesh relationship.<sup>7</sup> Why is adultery "cause sufficient" for dissolving the bond of marriage? Because it is a radical breach of marital fidelity, violating the commitment of exclusive conjugal love. Why does the departure of an unbeliever in a mixed marriage leave the believer free to remarry? (1 Corinthians 7:15-16). Because it is a radical breach of marital fidelity, violating the commitment of lifelong companionship. The exceptional circumstance common to both instances is willful repudiation of the marriage covenant.<sup>3</sup> Examples of actions that the Session might determine to have violated the one-flesh principle include ongoing physical abuse and attempted murder. If there is "hardness of heart" and the parties are unable to reconcile and so proceed to divorce, the Session must indicate that it strongly disagrees with that action, while maintaining lines of

communication and love to both husband and wife. Even divorce should not preclude continued attempts at reconciliation, until one spouse remarries or refuses reconciliation in such a way as to reveal himself or herself to be, in effect, an unbeliever. Attempts to reconcile are mandatory after an unbiblical divorce—the Session should exhort the spouse(s) under its jurisdiction to continue as long as reconciliation is possible. Reconciliation should be encouraged in the case of biblical divorce as well, that God may be glorified in the healing of relationships among His people. In light of Scripture’s clear teaching on the sanctity of marriage and God’s strong opposition to and restrictions on divorce, surely Christians cannot condone the easy accessibility to divorce in our contemporary society. We must increasingly emphasize the lifelong commitment implicit in the marriage covenant, and especially in Christian marriage that should be a constant witness to God’s order of creation and to the new order of recreation in Christ.

## VI. What About Remarriage?

May those involved in a divorce without biblical grounds ever remarry? Or can the offending spouse in a biblical divorce ever remarry? Jesus explicitly teaches that those who are involved in a remarriage after an improper divorce commit adultery. Although members may come under discipline for remarrying after an unbiblical divorce, there is always the prospect of restoration of that member if he or she demonstrates true repentance. The blood of Christ is sufficient for the sins of all true believers. The Session should actively work towards this end.<sup>8</sup> However, when one of the spouses in a former union remarries, we may conclude that the other is free to remarry because the former marriage relationship has been permanently broken by the remarriage. The Church must be careful not to sanction unbiblical marriages; but, as noted above, when a former spouse has remarried, or refuses reconciliation in such a way as to reveal himself or herself to be, in effect, an unbeliever, remarriage to another person becomes a valid option for the other party in the light of 1 Corinthians 7. Before anyone remarries, even under these conditions, that person should demonstrate “sufficient penitence for sin and failure,” and manifest “a firm purpose of an endeavor after Christian marriage.” The Session should encourage anyone considering remarriage to participate in counseling to ascertain his or her penitence and desire for a Christian marriage. In addition, they should be encouraged to prayerfully consider if God may be calling them to remain unmarried, as Paul encourages in 1 Corinthians 7:8, and in view of that fact that “one failure in this realm raises serious questions as to the rightness and wisdom of undertaking another union” (WCF 24.7). What about those cases in which people have been involved in an unbiblical divorce before becoming believers and have since remarried? Wise and loving pastoral oversight should encourage such individuals to seek God’s gracious forgiveness, in the assurance that He will forgive them and accept their present marriage. Does this mean that in this case God has changed or lowered His standards? Not at all. But it does mean that even divorce and remarriage under such circumstances—serious though they are—are not unforgivable sins, but with all other transgressions are covered by the blood of Christ.

## VII. Affirmations and Conclusions

We feel that further affirmations are relevant to this discussion: 1. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” Such teaching clearly implies that it is not only unwise but indeed sinful for a Christian to enter into a marriage with a person who is not a Christian. It is incumbent upon churches to apprise our young people of the dangers inherent in being

“unequally 9 yoked,” and to encourage them to seek only Christians as potential spouses. 2. While all Christians are admonished to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ (Philippians 1:27), those persons who are called to positions of leadership in the church have an especially solemn responsibility to behave in an exemplary manner in every area of their lives, including their sexuality. It is particularly incumbent upon teaching and ruling elders to set a godly example. Paul insists that the elder “must be above reproach, the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:4-5), which implies that he must be faithful to the “one flesh” marriage covenant. A similar requirement is made for deacons (1 Timothy 3:12). We concur at this point with the position of the Presbyterian Church in America that anyone “who is divorced in accord with biblical principles, whether remaining single or having remarried, may serve as a church officer.”<sup>4</sup> Church Sessions and presbyteries must exercise special care in the case of individuals considered for church office who have divorced or remarried on unbiblical grounds. In such situations, guilt must be acknowledged and repentance for sin expressed. The concerned parties must have been rehabilitated sufficiently in the confidence and respect of other Christians as to be able to fulfill in an exemplary way the requirements of church office with regard to marital and family relationships. Sessions should consider that even when such care is exercised, there may be circumstances in which it would be inadvisable—even though technically permissible—for such divorced or remarried persons to serve as church officers. It should be noted that serving as an officer of the church is a privilege, not a right. Community awareness of the situation might also be considered, so that not even apparent scandal be attached to the church. Above all, Sessions should follow scriptural guidelines carefully in dealing with present or prospective church officers who have been divorced, keeping foremost in mind that the honor of Christ be made manifest in the church and the community. We believe that congregations within the Evangelical Presbyterian Church can take many helpful steps to minister the redemptive love of Christ to their members who go through 10 the tragedy of divorce, and to reach out to those outside the Church who are suffering the aftermath of divorce.

Some effective steps to be considered are:

1. Pastors preaching sermons regularly on topics that will strengthen family life within the church.
2. Churches expanding their educational and fellowship programs to include:
  - a. Regular Bible studies on Christian marriage and the roles and responsibilities of husband and wife;
  - b. Family seminars and marriage enrichment workshops;
  - c. Regular couples retreats;
  - d. Making available books on biblical marriage and family development.
3. Pastors undertaking continuing education in premarital and marital counseling.
4. Congregations requiring effective premarital counseling for all couples.

5. Special counsel being given to those who have been divorced and are contemplating remarriage. In the light of our church's doctrinal standards:

- a. Is God's vocation for them that they remain unmarried "since one failure in this realm raises serious question as to the rightness and wisdom of undertaking another union?" This question should be explored with sensitivity and an earnest desire to help them work through the implication of such a possibility.
- b. Assurance should be received that these persons have come, or desire to come, to genuine faith in Christ, in order that they may demonstrate "sufficient penitence for sin and failure" and manifest "a firm purpose of and endeavor after Christian marriage" (WCF 24:6).
- c. If the Church is satisfied that remarriage is justifiable, the candidates should be offered participation in a divorce recovery program in which past failure in marital relationships is honestly confronted, so that such realities as guilt, resentment, frustration, fear and anger resulting from the first marriage are not carried over as a time bomb to destroy the second marriage.

6. Pastors training mature Christian couples with strong marriages to assist in premarital counseling.

7. Congregations having a support group for those who have gone through a divorce and are seeking to redefine and reestablish their life within the fellowship of the church.

#### Bibliography

Adams, Jay. *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986.

Braun, Michael A. *Second Class Christians? A New Approach to the Dilemma of Divorced Persons in the Church*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1989.

Crabb, Lawrence. *Men and Women*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1993.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Marriage Builder*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1982.

Dobson, James C. *Straight Talk to Men and Their Wives*. Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1980.

Gilchrist, Paul R., ed. "Divorce and Remarriage" in *PCA Digest: Part V, Position Papers, 1973-1993*. Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in America, 1993. pp 182-293.

Hughes Philip E. *Christian Ethics in Secular Society*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983.

Jones, David Clyde. "The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage." *Presbyterian* 16 (Spring 1990): 17-40.

Murray, John. *Divorce*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1953.

Swindoll, Charles. *Striking the Original Match*. Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980. 12

Wheat, Ed. *Intended for Pleasure*. Old Tappan, N.J.: F.H. Revell Co., 1981.

Wright, H. Norman. Communication: Key to Your Marriage. Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1974. \_\_\_\_\_\_. Premarital Counseling. Chicago: Moody Press, 1992. Philip E. Hughes, "Christian Ethics in Secular Society," p. 158.

John Murray, Divorce. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953. p. 40.

David Clyde Jones, "The Westminster Confession on Divorce and Remarriage," pp. 30-31 (emphasis added).

Paul R. Gilchrist, ed., "Divorce and Remarriage" in PCA Digest: Part V, Position Papers, 1973-1993 (Atlanta: Presbyterian Church in America, 1993) 293

**Q: HOW WOULD YOU COUNSEL SOMEONE WHO IS TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE SCRIPTURAL PICTURE OF MARRIAGE?**

**QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISM:**

**Q: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO A YOUNG COUPLE WITH A 3 MONTH OLD INFANT THAT WANTS TO HAVE THEIR BABY DEDICATED INSTEAD OF BAPTIZED?**

**Q: WHAT WOULD BE AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO A COUPLE IF THEY WANTED TO HAVE THEIR INFANT BAPTIZED IN THE PRIVACY OF THEIR HOME?**

**Q: A MEMBER OF YOUR CONGREGATION WAS BAPTIZED AS A CHILD BUT NEVER CAME TO KNOW THE LORD. NOW, AS AN ADULT, THEY HAVE BECOME A BELIEVER AND DESIRE TO BE BAPTIZED. HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND TO THEIR REQUEST?**

**QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DEMONIC:**

**Q: A MEMBER OF YOUR CHURCH TELLS YOU THAT DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE AND THE LIGHTS IN THEIR HOME TURN ON AND OFF ON THEIR OWN. THEY THINK THIS IS DEMONIC ACTIVITY. WHAT STEPS WOULD YOU TAKE NEXT?**

**Q: WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF JESUS' STATEMENT ON DEMONS, "THIS KIND DOES NOT GO OUT EXCEPT BY PRAYER AND FASTING"? HOW DO YOU APPLY THIS TO YOUR MINISTRY?**