

The Gospel as Center



**Renewing
Our Faith and
Reforming
Our Ministry
Practices**

**Edited by
D. A. Carson &
Timothy Keller**

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The Gospel Coalition

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The Gospel as Center: Renewing Our Faith and Reforming Our Ministry Practices

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Preface

When The Gospel Coalition was founded, the members of the Council worked hard to produce what we called our “Foundation Documents.” These consist of a one-page preamble, a statement of faith, and a theological vision of ministry. They are, we hope, full of God-centered joy, abounding in a delighted confidence in the gospel of Jesus Christ and its entailments for how we think and live. These documents are easily downloadable, in several languages, from our website (thegospelcoalition.org) and can also be viewed in the appendix of this volume.

It was not long before various local churches and organizations asked to adopt them as their own, and of course we are always delighted when this takes place. Along with these requests came a rising number of suggestions that we unpack the Foundation Documents in a series of booklets or downloadable files, eventually putting these together to form one book. So we asked a number of our Council members and one or two others to collaborate by writing fourteen chapters that explain the theology reflected in the Foundation Documents.

The result is what you are holding in your hands. The individual chapters, available as booklets and files, have now come together in this book.

We allowed some diversity in form while trying to maintain a more-or-less consistent level of accessibility. At the plenary sessions of our national conferences, we have got used to expositors who vary enormously in their styles as they expound the Word of God; indeed, we delight in the freshness of the diversity. Something of the same diversity is reflected in these chapters, and we are grateful for it.

Once again I am deeply indebted to Andy Naselli who helped with the editing and the indexes. Crossway’s collaboration in this project has been characterized by their usual patience, competence, and courtesy.

—D. A. Carson
The Gospel Coalition

1

Gospel-Centered Ministry

D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller

The Gospel Coalition is a fellowship of churches and Christians from many different denominations that are united not only by belief in the biblical gospel but also by the conviction that gospel-centered ministry today must be strengthened, encouraged, and advanced. What follows gives a bit of the history of how and why we have come together.

Several years ago a number of us began to meet together annually. That group became The Gospel Coalition's Council. For the first three years we sought to do two things.

The Confessional Foundation

First, we sought to identify and strengthen the center of confessional evangelicalism. We believe that some important aspects of the historic understanding of the biblical gospel are in danger of being muddled or lost in our churches today. These include the necessity of the new birth, justification by faith alone, and atonement through propitiation and the substitutionary death of Christ. We sought to maintain and strengthen our hold on these doctrines, not merely by citing the great theological formulations of the past but also through continued, fresh interaction with the Scripture itself, and so we worked together to produce The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement.

Biblical-Theological Categories

Many members told me afterward that working on the Confessional Statement was one of the most edifying and instructional experiences

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they had ever had. About four dozen experienced pastors worked it over line by line. One of our goals was to draw our language as much from the Bible as possible rather than to resort too quickly to the vocabulary of systematic theology. Systematics is crucial, and terms such as *the Trinity*, which are not found in the Bible itself, are irreplaceable for understanding and expressing large swaths of the Bible's teaching. Nevertheless, to maintain unity among ourselves and to persuade our readers, we sought to express our faith as much as possible in biblical-theological categories rather than drawing on the terminology of any particular tradition's systematic theology.

Beginning with God

We also thought it was important to begin our confession with God rather than with Scripture. This is significant. The Enlightenment was overconfident about human rationality. Some strands of it assumed it was possible to build systems of thought on unassailable foundations that could be absolutely certain to unaided human reason. Despite their frequent vilification of the Enlightenment, many conservative evangelicals have nevertheless been shaped by it. This can be seen in how many evangelical statements of faith start with the Scripture, not with God. They proceed from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis in order to build (what they consider) an absolutely sure, guaranteed-true-to-Scripture theology.

The problem is that this is essentially a foundationalist approach to knowledge. It ignores the degree to which our cultural location affects our interpretation of the Bible, and it assumes a very rigid subject-object distinction. It ignores historical theology, philosophy, and cultural reflection. Starting with the Scripture leads readers to the overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth.¹ This can create pride and rigidity because it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason.

We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1) that without knowledge of God we cannot know ourselves, our world, or anything else. If there is no God, we would have no reason to trust our reason.

Evangelical

Also, as part of this process, we gave some time to the question, “Is the term *evangelical* useful anymore?” A good case can be made for the position that it is not. Within the church, the word conveys less and less theological content. The word almost means “all who are willing to use the term ‘born again’ to describe their experiences.” Outside the church, the word has perhaps the most negative connotations it has ever had.

Nevertheless, the term describes our churches and association. Why? We come from different denominations and traditions—Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and charismatic, to name the larger groupings. We do not think the distinctives of theology and ecclesiology that divide us are insignificant—not at all. They shape our ministries and differentiate us in many important ways. (One could say “complementary” ways, but that would be another essay.) However, we are united by the conviction that what unites us—the doctrinal core components of the gospel—is far more important than what divides us. On the one hand, that conviction differentiates us from those who believe that there is no gospel to preach apart from the distinctions of their tradition. They do not think that their denominational distinctives are “secondary.” On the other hand, that conviction differentiates us from those who would rather define evangelicalism only in sociological or experiential terms and who would therefore not make such a robust doctrinal confessional statement the basis for fellowship and cooperation.

So we continue to use the important term *evangelical* to describe ourselves, often adding the word *confessional* to it to denote the more theologically enriched vision of evangelicalism that we hold.

The Vision for Ministry

We have not united, however, merely to defend traditional gospel formulations. Our second purpose was to describe, support, and embody gospel-centered ministry today.

Changes in Our World

Many younger leaders in our churches are reeling from the changes they see in our world. Until a generation ago in the United States, most adults had similar moral intuitions, whether they were born-again believers,

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churchgoers, nominal Christians, or unbelievers. All that has changed. Secularism is much more aggressive and anti-Christian; the society in general is coarsening; and the moral intuitions of younger people radically vary from their more traditional parents.

Many have called this new condition the “postmodern turn,” though others call our situation “late” modernity, or even “liquid” modernity. Modernity overturned the authority of tradition, revelation, or any authority outside of the internal reason and experience of the self. Yet for a long time, relatively stable institutions continued to dominate contemporary society. People still rooted their identities to a great degree in family, local communities, and their work or vocation. That seems to be passing.

The “acid” of the modern principle—the autonomous, individual self—seems to have eaten away all stable identities. Marriage and family, workplace and career, neighborhood and civic community, politics and causes—none of these institutions now remain stable long enough for individuals to depend on them. People now live fragmented lives, no longer thinking of themselves in terms of a couple of basic roles (e.g., Christian, father, and lawyer). Instead, their identity constantly shape-shifts as they move through a series of life episodes that are not tightly connected. They are always ready to change direction and abandon commitments and loyalties without qualms and to pursue—on a cost-benefit basis—the best opportunity available to them.

Responding to Changes in Our World

In the past, many of our neighbors could understand traditional evangelical preaching and ministry, but they met it with disagreement or indifference. During the last fifteen years, people have increasingly met it with completely dumbfounded incomprehension or outrage. The American evangelical world has been breaking apart with wildly different responses to this new cultural situation. To oversimplify, some have simply built the fortress walls higher, merely continuing to do what they have always done, only more defiantly than before. Others have called for a complete doctrinal reengineering of evangelicalism. We think both of these approaches are wrong-headed and, worse, damaging to the cause of the gospel.

PREACHING. Here is one example. Over the last few years there has been a major push to abandon expository preaching for what is loosely called “narrative” preaching. The diagnosis goes something like this:

These are postmodern times, marked by the collapse of confidence in the Enlightenment project and a rational certainty about “truth.” So now hearers are more intuitive than logical; they are reached more through images and stories than through propositions and principles. They are also allergic to authoritarian declarations. We must adapt to the less rational, nonauthoritarian, narrative-hungry sensibilities of our time.

In our understanding, it is a great mistake to jettison expository preaching in this way. But in some quarters, the response goes something like this: “Because postmodern people don’t like our kind of preaching, we are going to give them *more of it than ever*.” They are unwilling to admit that much conventional use of the expository method has tended to be pretty abstract, quite wooden, and not related to life. It is also true that many traditional expository preachers like the “neatness” of preaching through the Epistles instead of the vivid visions and narratives of the Old Testament. But most importantly, expository preaching fails if it does not tie every text, even the most discursive, into the great story of the gospel and mission of Jesus Christ.

JUSTICE AND MINISTRY TO THE POOR. Another example is the issue of justice and ministry to the poor. Many young Christian leaders who are passionate about social justice complain that the classic reading of the book of Romans by Augustine, Luther, and Calvin is mistaken. They say that Jesus did not bear God’s wrath on the cross, but instead exemplified service and love rather than power and exploitation and therefore “defeated the powers” of the world. The gospel of justification, in this view, is not so much about reconciling God and sinners as about including the marginal in the people of God. In other words, they believe that if Christians are going to leave their comfort zones and minister to and advocate for the poor and marginalized of the world, we must deconstruct traditional evangelical doctrine.

All this rightly alarms many conservative Christian leaders, but some wrongly conclude that those who are strongly concerned to minister to the poor must abandon traditional Christian doctrine. Neither group is

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right. You do not have to change classic, traditional Christian doctrine to emphasize that ministering to the poor is important.² Jonathan Edwards, who is hardly anyone's idea of a "liberal," concluded, "Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?"³ Edwards saw a concern for the poor that was rooted not only in a doctrine of creation and the *imago Dei* but also in the doctrine of the substitutionary death of Christ and justification by faith alone.

Since Jesus had to die to appease the wrath of God, we know that God is a God of justice, and therefore we should be highly sensitive to the rights of the poor in our communities. They should not be mistreated because of their lack of economic power. And because we were spiritually bankrupt and received the riches of Christ undeserved, we should never look down on the poor and feel superior to the economically bankrupt. We should be willing to give our funds even to the "undeserving poor" since we are the spiritually undeserving poor who receive the free mercy of God. Edwards argues powerfully and tirelessly for ministry to the poor from classic evangelical doctrines.⁴

Gospel-Centered Ministry Today

The Gospel Coalition is united by the belief that we must not ignore our context and setting, and we must seriously reflect upon our culture so that our gospel-ministry engages and connects with our culture. This is why we developed the Theological Vision for Ministry, which concludes that the gospel should

produce churches filled with winsome and theologically substantial preaching, dynamic evangelism and apologetics, and church growth and church planting. They will emphasize repentance, personal renewal, and holiness of life. At the same time, *and in the same congregations*, there will be engagement with the social structures of ordinary people, and cultural engagement with art, business, scholarship, and government. There will be calls for radical Christian community in which all members share wealth and resources and make room for the poor and marginalized. These priorities will all be combined and will mutually strengthen one another in each local church.

So we in The Gospel Coalition believe that the gospel must always be

defended and that one irreplaceable way to do that is to show the world and the church the power of a gospel-centered ministry. The best way to define and defend the gospel is to love, believe, embody, and propagate it. In our Confessional Statement, the Vision for Ministry, and The Gospel for All of Life, we map out some of the basic features of what a gospel-centered ministry should look like today in Western culture.

During the first three years of our walk together, we sought to unite a diverse group of people around this gospel center. Our meetings were provocative and exciting because they were not dominated by one theological tradition or by a couple of dominant personalities. And as we gave time to these issues, we grew to trust each other more and more and came to greater unity of mind and heart.

Prophetic from the Center

More recently, The Gospel Coalition has moved into a new phase of ministry, and the most visible parts are our national conference, website, and TGC Network. But these are just means to being “prophetic from the center.”

The evangelical “tent” is bigger and more incoherent than ever. As we have noted, one of the main causes of this is the fast-changing Western culture we find ourselves in. One could argue that it is a much more difficult environment in which to minister than Greco-Roman paganism, largely because it is post-Christian, not pre-Christian. Because of this challenge, the Christian church is splintering and fragmenting. There are at least three types of responses, what James Hunter has called “Purity From,” “Defensive Against,” and “Relevant To.”⁵

“Purity From” responses are found among the Christians and churches that think we can have no real impact on culture, that all efforts to influence culture merely pollute and compromise us. By “Defensive Against” Hunter refers to those believers who think we can change culture through politics or through getting control of elite institutions and wielding their power. By “Relevant To” he designates many mainline, “emergent,” and mega-churches that think we can change culture mainly by becoming more compassionate, less combative, and more contextual, thereby winning enough individuals back into the church to make a difference in the culture. Ironically, all of these approaches are still too

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influenced by our “Christendom” past. Even the “Purity From” party, with its strong denunciation of Christendom, is like a man who is so violently committed to being *unlike* his father that his father is still basically controlling his behavior.

What does it mean to be “prophetic” from the center? It means to center our churches on the gospel, thereby producing a series of balances that the other approaches do not have. We should be neither separatist nor triumphalistic in relationship to our culture. Believers (not local churches *qua* churches) should seek both to inhabit the older cultural institutions and to set up new, innovative institutions and networks that work for the common good on the basis of Christian understandings of things.

In our gospel communication, we should neither ignore baseline cultural narratives nor just change the packaging and call that “contextualizing.” We should stand for the irreplaceability of the local church, which has the task of evangelizing and discipling. But we should also encourage Christians to work in the world as salt and light. All these balances, we believe, flow out of a profound grasp of the meaning of the gospel for all of life.

The priority we give to the gospel of Jesus Christ may not immediately seem warranted to those who entertain a different view of what “gospel” means. At least two constraints are commonly imposed on the word. First, some think of the gospel as one important but relatively small part of the Bible’s content. Second, others think of the gospel as what tips us into the kingdom and gets us “saved,” while the life-transforming elements in the Bible’s content are bound up with something rather different—wisdom, law, counsel, narrative paradigms, and small-group therapy, but not gospel.

The response comes in two parts.

Biblical Theology Flowing toward Jesus and the Gospel

The first part is that biblical theology, rightly understood, flows through the Bible toward Jesus and the gospel, which fulfills all the revelation leading up to it, gathering all the strands of biblical thought into itself. Of course, there are irresponsible and misleading brands of biblical theology, just as there are irresponsible and misleading brands of system-

atic theology. The last thing we want is to extol the virtues of one of these two disciplines while emphasizing the weaknesses of the other, for both disciplines at their best bring great strengths to faithful biblical understanding and living.⁶ At their best, both disciplines aim, in their handling of Scripture, to be sensitive to the Bible's different literary genres, not least the various ways the different genres make their appeals (compare, for instance, law, narrative, and wisdom literature).

By and large, however, systematic theology asks and answers atemporal questions. For example: What are the attributes of God? What did the cross achieve? What is sin? Because it aims to synthesize all of Scripture and to interact with the broadest questions, the categories it uses must transcend the usage of individual biblical books or writers. For instance, systematicians speak of the doctrine of justification, knowing full well that the justification word-group does not function exactly the same way in Matthew as it does in Paul; they speak of the doctrine of the call of God, where exactly the same observation about "call" language must be made.

In other words, the theological words and categories that systematic theology deploys often *formally* overlap with biblical usage, but they may *materially* draw their meaning from just one biblical writer. Further, the question, "What are the attributes of God?" is both clear and important, but the fact remains that no biblical book speaks of the *attributes* of God. All readers of systematic theology understand these givens.

By contrast, biblical theology, by and large, asks and answers questions that focus on the contributions and themes of particular biblical books and corpora as these books and corpora are stretched out across the timeline of redemptive history. As much as possible, the categories used are the categories found within the biblical materials themselves. So now we are asking and answering questions of two kinds. (1) What are the themes of Genesis (or Ecclesiastes, Luke, or Romans)? How is the book put together? What does it teach us about the subjects it addresses? What does Isaiah, say, teach us about God? (2) How do these themes fit into the Bible's storyline at their respective points in the history of redemption and take the unfolding revelation forward to Jesus Christ? What are the unfolding patterns, the trajectories that reach back to creation and forward to Jesus and on to the consummation?

The Council members of The Gospel Coalition want to encourage the

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kind of reading and preaching of the Bible that traces out these trajectories so that Christians can see how faithfully and insightfully reading Scripture follows the patterns and promises of the Bible to take us toward Jesus and his gospel. For instance, we cannot deal with what Genesis says about creation as if it were mere datum or mere sanction for ecological responsibility or mere establishment of our embodied existence, though all those things are true and have some importance. Within Genesis, creation grounds the responsibility of God's image bearers toward God and sets the stage for the anarchy and idolatry of Genesis 3 that in turn produces the drama of *the entire Bible*.

Ultimately, the hope of the condemned human race is in the seed of the woman, who comes and engages in a new creation, which culminates in a new heaven and a new earth. Already in Genesis 1–2, however, temple symbolism is bound up with the description of the creation and its garden, which establishes a related trajectory through the Bible: tabernacle and temple, with their priestly and sacrificial systems, interwoven with the fall of the temple at the onset of the exile and the construction of a second temple decades later, rushing toward Jesus' insistence that he himself is the temple, the great meeting place between God and sinful human beings (John 2:19–22).

Along a slightly adjacent trajectory, the church is God's temple. In the culminating vision, the "new Jerusalem" contains no temple, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev. 21:22). Meanwhile the symbolism inherent in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2) is itself picked up and utilized in the culminating vision—but only after Christ himself has passed through a quite different garden, the garden of Gethsemane, to secure the better garden for us. It would be easy to follow these and many other lines as they intertwine to make an entrancing weave of God's purposes in bringing us to Jesus Christ and his gospel.

That brings us to the second part of our response to those who have a truncated view of what the gospel is.

Christian Life and Thought Flowing from Jesus and His Gospel

Not only does the gospel of Jesus Christ gather into itself all the trajectories of Scripture, but under the terms of the new covenant, all of Christian life and thought grow out of what Jesus has accomplished. This

good news not only declares that God justifies sinners so that our status before him is secured but also that he regenerates us and establishes us in his saving kingdom. The gospel deals with more than the judicial, our standing before God, for it is the power of God that brings salvation (Rom. 1:18)—a comprehensive transformation. Everything is secured by Jesus' death and resurrection; everything is empowered by the Spirit, whom he bequeaths; everything unfolds as God himself has ordained this great salvation.

Especially telling are the motive clauses that underlie Christian ethics. We forgive others because we ourselves have been forgiven (Col. 3:13; Matt. 6:12–15; Mark 11:25). We walk in humility because no one has ever displayed more humility than our Savior in abandoning his rights as God and dying our death (Phil. 2:3–8). We hunger to live out the love on display among the persons of the Godhead because it was out of love that the Father determined that all should honor the Son even as they honor the Father, and because it was out of love for his Father that the Son went to the cross to do his Father's will (John 5:20, 23; 14:30–31). Our ultimate model for husband-wife relationships is predicated on the gospel: the bond between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22–33). We hunger for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord, because the Holy One has not only established our status before his Father but is at work to make us holy (Heb. 12:14; Phil. 2:12–13).

As all the wretched malice of assorted idolatries and transgressions is precisely what the gospel of Christ overcomes, we hunger to live as Jesus lived, our Savior and Lord, living another way in our individual lives, in our homes, in our world (Gal. 5:16–26; Eph. 4:17–6:18). We learn obedience through suffering because our Pioneer went this way before us (Heb. 5:8; 12:1–4). These and many similar themes cry out for detailed unpacking in pulpits and Bible studies. Small wonder the proclamation of this gospel with so many transforming entailments is central to our blood-bought existence.

In short, gospel-centered ministry is biblically mandated. It is the only kind of ministry that simultaneously addresses human need as God sees it, reaches out in unbroken lines to gospel-ministry in other centuries and other cultures, and makes central what Jesus himself establishes as central.

2

Can We Know the Truth?

Richard D. Phillips

The well-known Bible teacher James Montgomery Boice was once traveling by plane when the woman seated next to him discovered that he was a Christian minister. She responded by bringing out all of her objections to the Christian faith. First, she spoke against original sin, how it made no sense and how she would not accept it. Boice listened to her and then replied, “I see, but is it true?”

Next, she went on to the idea of judgment and hell, saying how uncivilized and amoral all of it was. “I see how you feel,” Boice answered, “but is it true?”

Finally, she erupted with her great distaste for virtually everything taught in the Bible, how it wasn’t modern or appealing to her way of thinking. As Boice began to open his mouth one last time, she interrupted, “Oh, I know, I know, none of that matters! ‘Is it true?’ you are going to say!”

That conversation took place around the year 1990. I suspect that had it taken place in the year 2010, the ending might well have been somewhat different. Instead of the woman conceding the point that truth is what matters, she likely would have taken the conversation in another direction: “How can you claim that your beliefs are true? No one can really know the truth, so what I feel about it is really all that matters.”

The point is that if Christians are to communicate the gospel truth to today’s postmodern generations, we will likely have to do more than simply state the truth. In many cases, it will not suffice to hold forth our Bible and walk friends down the famous “Romans Road” series of evangelistic verses. In addition, and often beforehand, we will need to

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answer questions such as, “Why should I accept that the Bible is true?” and, “That may be true for you, but why should it be true for anyone else?” These are questions concerning *epistemology*, that is, our beliefs and assumptions about knowledge and truth. Prior to giving our witness to Christian truth, we will often have to present clear Christian views about truth itself.

An evangelical approach to the knowledge of truth will need to incorporate our biblical convictions regarding God, mankind, sin, salvation, and more. Some might object that beginning with our beliefs injects subjectivity into the question, since our theory of truth presupposes certain truths. Our answer is that as Christians we cannot avoid the realities of who and what we are through our relationship to Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is not to present an objective epistemology that anyone—Christian or not—would adopt. Rather, this presents a stance toward the knowledge of truth that reflects the core beliefs of our gospel faith and validates our experience as Christian believers. In other words, this chapter presents how we as Christians answer questions regarding the knowledge of truth.

Wouldn't it be better, some will ask, to meet our unbelieving neighbors on an objective epistemological common ground? The answer is that no such objective common ground exists that does not require Christians to ignore the lordship of Jesus. This we cannot honestly do. So are we left with nothing to say except the missionally frustrating, “You have to be born again to understand”? Not at all! Just as Christians have a gospel message to share with the world, we also have a God- and Christ-centered answer to important questions about knowing and truth.

Today's Crisis of Truth

We happen to be living in a historical moment of tension between two models or theories regarding the knowledge of truth: the *modern* and the *postmodern*. Modernity advanced for generations on the unshakable conviction that unaided human reason would successfully expand knowledge and apply truth. In the same way that Isaac Newton's physics produced knowledge about the truth of gravity, modernity believed in a rational advance toward truth in virtually every domain of life.

This continued until the realities of the twentieth century shook that

unshakeable conviction. Unaided reason did not turn out so well in the “truths” of Nazi Germany, post–World War II Communism, or Western imperialism. Nor did the science of unaided reason treat the Bible and its gospel very favorably; the rationalist dogma replaced the biblical version of Jesus with various portraits in its own image.

Even when modern-thinking Christians have sought to use rationalism to support the Bible’s teaching, thoughtful Christians have found that the rationalist approach to absolute truth lines up poorly with Christian humility, charity, and our teaching about the human problem of sin. As the Christian witness has moved into the twenty-first century, therefore, we have rightly sought to distance ourselves from the rationalism of modernity.

Appreciating Postmodern Insights

In secular thinking, the collapse of confidence in modernity spawned a rebellious adolescent offspring, postmodernity, whose chief aim is deconstructing everything modern. Almost incidentally, postmodernity has also criticized Christian thought. D. A. Carson has catalogued a number of strengths in the postmodern critique, even when it is applied to recent evangelical approaches to theology and apologetics.¹

First, Christians should acknowledge the role that context plays in anyone’s understanding and belief. “Truth” is always held by actual persons, and those persons are deeply shaped by culture, language, heritage, and community. There will be differences, involving both strengths and weaknesses, in how a Westerner will read a certain passage of Scripture and how a sub-Saharan African Christian will read the same passage. For instance, the Westerner is more likely to emphasize the individualist and the African the corporate aspects of the passage.

Regardless of the question of absolute truth itself, postmodernity correctly points out that actual people are finite and therefore have a limited, subjective understanding of truth. As Carson puts it, truth “is necessarily expressed in culture-laden ways and believed or known by finite, culturally restricted people.”²

Second, we should share postmodernity’s concern that truth may become more an object of power than a means for enlightenment. Here is where the Christian doctrine of sin—including *our* sin—requires that we

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qualify our approach to truth. Truth does not necessarily imply oppression, but some have oppressed others with truth.

Third, if postmodern critiques cause Christians (among others) to challenge doctrines and views that have become traditional, we can be thankful for the opportunity to reconsider, reformulate, and restate teachings that may have become stale in our practice. This will be seen especially in confessional church bodies that strive to uphold doctrinal dogmas. Fresh questions and even doubts require church leaders to reexamine the biblical basis for their teaching and may result in genuine advances or some needed reformation.

Fourth, Christians may be cobelligerent with postmodernity's assaults against modernism. Carson compares a Christian's appreciation of postmodern arguments to the Western Allies' pact with Communist Russia against Nazi Germany in World War II. It's not that Christians will ultimately agree with postmodernity any more than the Western democracies approved of the Bolsheviks, but Christians may welcome some postmodern arguments against unbelieving rationalism just as the Western Allies were grateful for all those Russian tanks. Carson writes:

Postmodernity has proved capable, in God's providence, of launching very heavy artillery against the modernity which, across four centuries, developed in such a way that increasingly it taunted confessional Christianity. The irony is delicious. The modernity which has arrogantly insisted that human reason is the final arbiter of truth has spawned a stepchild that has arisen to slay it.³

Given these positive contributions of postmodern epistemology, we should acknowledge its benefits, and in doing so, we may gain a hearing with some who would otherwise tune us out.

The Postmodern Crisis

This appreciation does not mean that Christian epistemology and postmodern skepticism are a well-suited match. We humbly confess that our knowledge of truth is limited, that our context affects how we communicate and receive truth, and that we may need to rethink traditional dogmas. But unlike many postmoderns, Christians believe that truth is real, not merely constructed.

Evangelical Christians, in particular, believe that truth derives from and is revealed by God. Thus, truth is authoritative. Here is where postmodernity parts company with historic Christianity, for the postmodern view rejects the reality of truth, positing an implicit (and in some cases, explicit) relativism in which nothing is really and finally true. Survey after survey shows that this mind-set prevails in Western culture today. “Do you believe in absolute truth, or is all truth relative?” Clear majorities today, even among professing Christians, affirm the postmodern dogma that nothing is really, absolutely true.

Moreover, postmoderns steadfastly insist that even if there is ultimate truth, finite and flawed men and women can never know the truth authoritatively. The postmodern junta now governing Western culture holds this relativism as its sole absolute: no one has the right to say that he possesses the truth absolutely so that others are absolutely wrong. There may be “my truth” and “your truth,” but the postmodern mind dogmatizes against anyone claiming dogmatically to possess the truth (except the postmodern dogma against said dogma). The result is that of W. B. Yeats’s famous poem: “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

The crisis of the postmodern position is that it cannot believe or live out its own claims. Postmodernity has nothing to believe, including its own unbelief, despite the aching need of humans to know and believe. R. C. Sproul tells of meeting a young woman on a train who had spent time at a New Age camp. When an interested lady asked what she had learned, the young woman answered, “I learned that I am god.” Sproul responded with the following sophisticated apologetic question: “You don’t really believe that, do you?” To this, she answered, “Well, not really.” So it is with the entire postmodern denial of truth: their claim against truth is itself a truth that postmoderns do not believe, so that postmodern epistemology becomes a maze in which the builder is himself forever lost.

For this reason, when some postmoderns say that there is no truth and that all truth is relative, Christians can respond with Sproul’s question to the young woman on the train: “You don’t really believe that, do you?” We can fairly easily point out that postmodernists do not live as if truth is relative. After all, the most fervent deconstructionists expect their own words to be understood. They would not write books if they did

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not believe in the possibility of knowing and understanding. If one challenges their argument against truth, they counter with reasons to uphold the truth of their argument!

One professor made this point after his college class had united against him in insisting that nothing is ultimately true or morally wrong in an objective sense. The next day the professor informed the students that regardless of their performance on the exam they were all going to receive an F. The students objected in unison, "But that's wrong!" and the professor's point against relativism was made. No one can live it, and therefore no one really believes it. This is the crisis of truth in our post-modern times: our society dogmatically rejects truth in theory but cannot live that way in practice.

Behind all truth is the God of truth. Yeats expresses this in the poem I cite above. He decries the center not holding, so that "things fall apart." In the previous line Yeats notes the consequence: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer."

Here is the scope of the postmodern crisis: we cannot hear God's voice without truth. Like the young woman on the train, those who are left to construct their own truth must also make their own gods. On the trajectory marked by relativism, reason gives way to irrationality, and irrationality delivers man into the hands of idols.

A Christian Approach to Truth

Defending truth involves more than protecting ourselves from unbelief. Christian epistemology is also a vital component of our ministry of Christ's love for a world in crisis. In practice, this means that Christians must go farther than simply disproving the postmodern denial of truth. We must articulate a distinctively Christian doctrine of truth based on what God has revealed to us in the Bible and consistent with our experience.

Christianity presents a legitimate third way over against the modern and the postmodern. With the moderns we believe that truth exists and is accessible, though we steadfastly reject that we can exhaustively know truth by our unaided reason. With the postmoderns we are skeptical that finite, fallible humans are the agents of truth, though we insist that truth is real and that we can know it. A successful Christian epistemology, then, not only responds to evangelical Christian belief but also enables us to

communicate our doctrine of knowing to a world that both doubts and greatly desires to know truth.

God, Truth, and Reality

An evangelical Christian epistemology begins by affirming that *truth corresponds to reality*. The external world in which every individual lives is not a world we subjectively construct through our narrow experience. Rather, God created reality and upholds it by his ongoing providential rule.

The basis for this Christian doctrine of real truth is that God exists. This presupposition contrasts with the modern rationalist and the post-modern relativist, who both presuppose that God does not exist. It is not the case that modernists and postmodernists develop their theories without presuppositions. Rather, the modern and postmodern unbelievers presuppose that there is no God and as a result end up in the crisis of irrationality. Christians escape the crisis not at the end but at the beginning of their theory of truth by presupposing, as Francis Schaeffer put it, “the God who is there.” Having urged postmodern relativists to consider their crisis resulting from their denial of God, we now invite them to consider the way out of the crisis by presupposing God.

It is, of course, not just “God” that the Christian presupposes, but the God of the Bible. The Holy Scriptures reveal that there is “one God, eternally existing in three equally divine persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who know, love, and glorify one another.”⁴ Each of these statements bears on the Christian belief in truth. Because there is one God, not many, there is a unity to all that God has made. Because this one God exists in three divine persons, there is communication within the Godhead itself. Because of the Trinity, knowing and revealing are intrinsic to God and therefore to all that God has made.

“God is love,” writes the apostle John (1 John 4:8),⁵ and the nature of love is to know and be known. Indeed, according to the Bible, the desire of God is for his glory to be known, and the will of each member of the Trinity is to glorify the other divine persons. God’s purpose in creation, therefore, is the revealing of his glory. David sang, “You have set your glory above the heavens” (Ps. 8:1). According to Paul, the essence of sin is to see God in his creation and refuse to “honor him as God or give thanks

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to him” (Rom. 1:21). This is why The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement asserts, “He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration.”⁶

It is because of our belief in the God of the Bible that Christians believe that truth corresponds to reality. The world is not a mere projection of human minds; rather, God created the world with an objective reality that is grounded in his eternal being. The created things that “declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1) must be real in order to accomplish their designed purpose.

Chief among these created things are humans, whom God made in his image so that we might know God and reveal him to the rest of creation. The biblical teaching that God made humans in his image includes our capacity to reason in a way that is analogous to God’s reasoning; humans image God not in an unknowing way but through the knowledge of God that is the end of both creation and salvation. Jeremiah’s new-covenant promise is that “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD” (Jer. 31:34). Jesus states, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God” (John 17:3).

Since God desires to be known in a world that he designed to reveal him, Christians believe that revealed truth is real. God made a real world, and God reveals real truth about himself in and through that world. In short, truth is part of the real world that God made, a world that includes humans as creatures specially designed to receive truth so as to know God.

But the Bible’s teaching involves more than creation and salvation. The Bible also teaches that humans fell into sin and subsequently corrupted their nature and society. So sin prevents humans from receiving the truth. Here postmodernity prudently points out that even if there is real truth, humans may not be able to know the truth *truly*.

There are two reasons for this limitation. First, humans are finite, even apart from sin; humans can know truth only partially, so their knowledge is subjective, selective, and incomplete. Second, humans are sinful. When we add the problem of sin, humans are no longer able to know truth truly at all. In rebellion against God, sinful humans tend to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18 NASB). Paul went so far as to say that man in his sinful nature “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand

them” (1 Cor. 2:14). How, then, can Christians speak of knowing truth after humans fell into this dreadful condition?

The answer to the problem of sin is the good news that Jesus saves us from our sin. Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37). Jesus called himself “the light of the world” (John 8:12) because he saves sinners out of the darkness of ignorance and unbelief. Not only did Jesus come to reveal the glory of God in his incarnate manhood (see John 1:14; 14:9), but he also sends the Holy Spirit to animate the spirits of sinful men and women to know and believe the truth. Thus, in the same passage where Paul directly states that sinful humans cannot know truth, he reveals that God’s Holy Spirit solves this problem by giving new life to undeserving sinners: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world,” Paul explains, “but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12).

In creation, fall, and salvation, the Christian doctrine of truth flows from the reality of God. God created the world to display his glory, and he created humans to know him and reflect his glory. Sin involves rejecting the truth revealed about God and thus perverts how humans receive truth. Salvation takes place through God’s revealing the truth about Jesus Christ (see 1 Pet. 1:23) and then progressively enables sinful humans to know and accept the truth.

It always remains true, as Herman Bavinck stated, that it is “impossible for God fully to reveal himself to and in his creatures, for the finite does not grasp the infinite.”⁷ For this reason, Christians freely admit the limitations of finitude, in addition to our ongoing struggle with sin, that keep any man or woman from knowing truth perfectly or completely. Yet by virtue of God as creator and revealer, Christians insist that there is truth, that truth corresponds to God and his created reality, and that we may know truth because God has revealed himself to us in his creation.

So how does the Christian answer the postmodern unbeliever who simply denies that God exists and thus denies that truth exists? Francis Schaeffer recounts one answer from a conversation he had with a small gathering of college students. One of the students vehemently insisted that there is no truth. Schaeffer wanted to make him see that however much he said there is no truth, he could not *live* as if his statement was true.

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If there is no real truth, there is no real morality either. “Am I not correct,” Schaeffer asked, “in saying that on the basis of your system, cruelty and noncruelty are ultimately equal, that there is no intrinsic difference between them?” The man confirmed that Schaeffer was correct. Hearing this, another student took a kettle of steaming water that was about to be used to make tea and held it over the unbeliever’s head. When the atheist demanded an explanation, the student reminded him that since he did not believe in any real difference between cruelty and noncruelty, he should not mind having the boiling water poured over him.

The man who denied truth raced out of the room, thus proving Schaeffer’s point: the person who denies God and thus has no basis for the existence of truth simply cannot and does not live out his doctrine. “God shuts us up to reality,” Schaeffer explained. “We cannot escape the reality of what is, no matter what we say we believe or think.”⁸

God, Truth, and Scripture

Since Christians affirm truth based on God’s revelation, it follows that *the Bible—God’s written revelation—conveys truth*. While God reveals himself generally in all creation, God reveals himself specially in the Bible.

According to the Bible itself, “God spoke to our fathers by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1). This statement sums up the Christian view of the Holy Scriptures in which God communicates to humans with propositions. God “spoke” through his human mouthpieces, presenting truth regarding the nature and will of God, the records and meaning of historical, redemptive events, and other truths regarding the creation, fall, and salvation of humans. In the same way that my writing in this paragraph makes propositional truth claims, the written revelation of God’s Word declares, explains, and applies truth from God.

The Bible states that God is its ultimate author, the Holy Spirit having employed the human writers by the process known as *inspiration*. Inspiration does not mean that the human writers were “inspiring” on their own. Rather, the Holy Spirit oversaw their writing in such a way that what the human authors wrote ultimately came from God himself. Peter explains, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21). “All Scripture is breathed out by God,” Paul writes (2 Tim. 3:16),

agreeing with God's assertion: "My word . . . goes out from my mouth" (Isa. 55:11). Consistent with this teaching, the entire Bible presents itself as the Word of God rather than the ideas of humans.

Christians emphasize the truth of God's Word because God is himself true. As the infinitely perfect God, he reveals himself in Scripture without error and with divine authority. Christians uphold the truth of God's Word not because we are able to answer every objection to the Bible's veracity (although good explanations exist for virtually every objection), but by appealing to the perfect nature of the God who reveals himself in Scripture. Since the perfect God reveals himself in the Bible, we can trust the Bible as true and have no need or warrant to set aside portions of the Bible deemed objectionable or too difficult.

As God's true, revealed Word, the Bible speaks with all the authority of God himself. John Calvin stated, "We owe to the Scripture the same reverence which we owe to God, because it has proceeded from Him alone."⁹ With this in mind, Christians affirm the words spoken by the moderator of the Church of Scotland when presenting a Bible to the new monarch in the coronation service of Great Britain: "The most precious thing this world affords, the most precious thing that this world knows, God's living Word."

As God's special revelation containing propositional statements, the Bible is especially valuable in revealing *doctrinal* truths about God and humans. For instance, the deity of Jesus Christ is a doctrinal truth that the Bible plainly declares (e.g., Titus 2:13). Other doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, are revealed in Scripture as a necessary implication of its statements about God. Through the Bible's direct statements and necessary inferences derived from Scripture, believers may know the truth about God, humans, sin, salvation, and all other matters necessary to faith and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3).

This is not to say that the Bible is composed solely of propositional truth claims or that God's message to humans is restricted to propositional truth. The Bible presents God's revealed Word in a variety of literary genres: historical narrative, metaphor, apocalypse, prophetic oracle, epistle, and poetry, to name some of the most obvious. Not all of these genres can be reduced to mere propositions; moreover, the character and will of God is biblically presented in ways other than propositions.

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The truth communicated in Holy Scripture exceeds what merely propositions can convey, as we would expect since its author is the infinite God. Yet the Bible does convey vital truth in propositional form, and doctrinal statements may communicate these truths accurately even if they cannot communicate them exhaustively. The apostle Paul explicitly endorses Christian doctrine, urging Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:13).

While Holy Scripture reveals truth from God in a variety of forms, including much propositional content, receiving truth by Scripture is the farthest thing from a dry, intellectual pursuit. The Holy Spirit brought the Bible into existence through its human writers, and he also enlightens people so that they can understand and believe the Bible. This is why Peter compares reading Scripture with his personal experience of seeing Jesus display his glory: “We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19). This perfectly expresses the Christian belief not only in the truth value of Scripture but of the spiritual value of deriving truth from God’s written Word.

Apart from the Holy Spirit’s work, humans are not only unable to know God; they can’t even know themselves. So daunting is the world around us, coupled with the confusion worked within us by the corrupting influence of sin, that K. Scott Oliphint states, “Unless and until we have a Word from God, *the Word of God*, we simply cannot make sense of the world around us or the ‘world’ within us, not to mention the more important truth of how we can please God.”¹⁰ Only the Bible can help us make sense of ourselves and God’s world.

Truth and the Life of God

Truth exists because God exists, and God’s revelation in the Bible makes this truth known. Furthermore, truth corresponds to God and reality not merely in theory but also in a covenantal relationship that is lived as well as known.

Covenant making is always a function of lordship, so the covenant-making God expresses his lordship over the creation as a whole and

especially humans. In a covenant both parties are always involved. God, for his part, has bound himself to his creation for all time. A famous expression of this commitment is God's covenant with Noah after the receding of the waters from the great flood. God promised, "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11). Furthermore, God's covenants forever bind him with humans, not as an equal but as sovereign and Lord: "I will be your God," he says, "and you shall be my people" (Jer. 7:23).

In a similar manner, God's covenant has committed humans to the creation as a whole. This solidarity between humans and the creation is seen in God's using dust to make Adam, the first man. "Thus we are linked with creation, in one sense, because we are taken from it; we are quite literally a part of it."¹¹ At the same time as man is joined to the creation, he is set apart from it by his special relationship to God: "Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen. 2:7).

God then installed the first man and woman as his vice-gerents over the creation, commanding them to rule and hold dominion, making the creation fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 1:28). God therefore created humans with special duties toward the creation and toward himself. Oliphint comments, "There is an inextricable link between ourselves and the world, a link that is both established by God and is intended to reflect his character. Because of that, we are people who are created to know and to interact with our world, all to the glory of the triune God, our Creator."¹²

Because of the covenantal nature of creation, the knowledge of truth carries with it obligations toward God and to others in the world around us. To receive God's truth is therefore to live God's truth. As Moses explained to Israel long ago, "The things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

It is not surprising, then, that when God sent his Son into the world, Jesus was revealed as truth incarnate. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men," wrote John (John 1:4). "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus declared (John 14:6). God's Son came to incarnate the truth

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of God, to live out God's truth in his obedient life, and to establish God's truth for salvation through his sacrificial death and saving resurrection.

"Truth, then, is correspondence between our entire lives and God's heart, words, and actions, through the mediation of the Word and Spirit."¹³ Christians thus regard the Bible as revealing important doctrinal truths through propositions. But through the Scripture's story of the truth of Jesus and his life, Christians also come to know him who is truth, to love him, and to obey his truth. As a friend inscribed in a Bible he gave me, Christians are to "know the truth, live the truth, and tell the truth," knowing above all else that "Jesus is the truth," both as the way to God through faith in him and as the one who gives true life to all who receive his gospel word in faith.

Christian Truth in Practice

As I have stated, Christians must stand for truth in a world that is bent on denying it. Christians must take this stand for truth—and the knowledge of truth—for God's sake, for our own sake, and for the sake of the unbelieving world. In declaring that truth is real, we affirm the existence of God, who alone can ground reality, truth, and knowledge.

Chastened Proclamation of Scripture

The best way for Christians to hold forth truth is with a Bible in our hands since, as David rejoiced, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps. 19:7). Yet in proclaiming our biblical message, we Christians should never set ourselves forward as the arbiters of truth. Even as we set forth Jesus Christ as the final and truest revelation of God, we do so only as servants of our hearers (see 2 Cor. 4:5). Listening to the critiques of our postmodern neighbors and admitting that the arrogance of modernity has sometimes influenced our own heritage, Christians should speak truth with a chastened repentance that is less triumphalistic than may previously have been the case. We are finite and fallen, so the message we proclaim should be compared constantly to the Bible.

Yet for all our humility in holding forth truth and our charity in critiquing the claims of others, Christians must still insist that what we proclaim from God's Word is truth. We reject the notion that our doctrine

consists of nothing more than the subjective experience of our own faith community, since the Bible we proclaim presents truth revealed from God. Thus guarded, we remain committed to the authority, power, and unique revelation of the Holy Scriptures through which God speaks to people today.

A Passion for Truth and Life

Just as Christians should strike a balance between boldly proclaiming and humbly presenting truth, we should also seek a balance between the sound grasp of biblical doctrine and a personal passion for a life yielded to Jesus Christ. We believe that “while truth is propositional, it is not only something to be believed, but also to be received in worship and practiced in wisdom.”¹⁴ Christian truth never involves merely a transfer of information but a personal relationship of faith and love. Therefore, in our preaching and discipleship, we are zealous for sound doctrine with a passion for changed living. For this reason, the community of God’s people most soundly conveys Christian truth. The practices of prayer, sacraments, fellowship, ministry, and witness shape how we receive and respond to the truth of God’s Word.

The point is not that Christians must labor to make truth relevant to godly living but rather that God’s purpose in revealing his truth always involves a transforming process of love and holiness. What God has thus married, Christians must never separate! Love divorced from truth is not love, and truth divorced from love is not truth. This is why Paul wrote of his teaching, “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). Christian truth never involves mere externals, for “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Judy Telchin won over her traditional Jewish parents to Christianity when she was fervently committed to gospel truth *and* demonstrated Christian love and holiness. A friend at college had given Judy a Bible and helped her to study it, and Judy believed in Jesus Christ. She knew that her Jewish family would bitterly oppose her conversion, but she courageously spoke the truth. She told her father, Stan Telchin, “I believe that the Bible is the Word of God, and I believe that Jesus is the Messiah.” At

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first, Stan felt utterly betrayed. It would have been better, he said, if she had gotten pregnant or been kicked out of school rather than become a Christian.

Judy continued to affirm biblical truth with humility and conviction, and she backed it up with a life changed through love and holiness. She gave her parents New Testaments, saying, “Read it for yourself to find out whether it’s true or not.” Softened by Judy’s example of love, Stan took up her challenge, determined to prove his daughter’s new faith false. Instead, he steadily came to the same conviction as his daughter, through God’s revelation of truth in the Holy Scriptures. When Stan finally gained the courage to share with his wife his belief that Jesus really is the Savior, she admitted to the same belief through her own study of God’s Word.¹⁵

To be effective as a witness, even in the face of such outraged opposition as her traditional Jewish family, Judy did not have to back off from her witness to the truth of the gospel. Yet it was necessary for her to combine her witness with authentic humility, love, and godliness in order to gain a hearing from people who cared about her. All Christians should prayerfully labor to do likewise, holding together truth and love in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that our witness to the Bible will be attended with, as Paul puts it, a “demonstration of the Spirit’s power” (1 Cor. 2:4 NIV).

The Spirituality of Truth

Since the Holy Scriptures convey God’s truth, knowing truth is always a spiritual matter. In defending and declaring truth, “what we proclaim is not ourselves” (2 Cor. 4:5). We are not superior to others, nor should we be obstinate toward those who oppose our tradition. We are grateful that God made himself known to us in love. Our knowledge of God remains partial, even when it is accurate, yet by the Spirit’s witness we can know that we have received saving truth in full assurance. Because of the Spirit’s role in revealing God’s truth in our hearts, we “have certainty concerning the things [we] have been taught” (Luke 1:4). The gospel truth of the knowledge of God has come to us “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5).

This reflection about the spirituality of truth—truth ultimately conveyed to our spirits by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and by means of the Spirit-inspired Word—answers how we might take up the conversation

that opens this chapter. James Boice had answered the objections of his airplane seatmate by insisting, “What really matters is what is true.” In light of today’s relativist hegemony, non-Christians are no longer likely to accept truth as a common ground. How, then, are Christians to proclaim truth in a world that no longer even believes in it?

The answer to the challenge of our times is surely not to turn aside from our biblical witness to argue complicated theories of epistemology and hermeneutics. A better approach is for Christians humbly to answer:

God has provided for our need of truth by sending his Spirit to give us this book, the Bible. In this book, God introduces the truth in the form of a person, God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus promises that his Spirit will give understanding to anyone who sincerely seeks the truth in God’s Word. May I give you a copy of the Bible that you can keep? Here is a card with my phone number, as well. I would be very happy to interact with you—to answer any questions and listen to any objections you may want to give—but I sincerely believe that you can find the truth here if you really are interested. And I will be praying that God will send you his Spirit to lead you into truth.

Will our postmodern friends and neighbors respond to this kind of testimony regarding truth? According to the Bible, they may or may not, depending on how God is pleased to use our witness. But Christians can trust that many people, even unlikely ones, will accept a bold yet humble witness to the truth of God’s Word. How can we know this? Because we know that Jesus spoke the truth when he promised to send “the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father” and that through our witness of truth and love from the Scriptures, the Spirit himself, Jesus said, “will bear witness about me” (John 15:26).

Because Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), our calling is to know the truth through his Word, to live the truth in holiness and love, and to tell the truth through a Spirit-led witness to his Word. Will such a witness make any impact on our world today? Jesus himself says that it will. Indeed, Jesus gives us great confidence in the power of his truth today as it is lifted up, as once Jesus was lifted up on the cross. He says in truth, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

3

The Gospel and Scripture

How to Read the Bible

Mike Bullmore

Christians intuitively agree that there is a necessary and deeply interpenetrating relationship between Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The exact nature of that relationship is a more challenging matter. While many lines of connection could be (and have been) productively explored, this chapter suggests and unpacks two particular connections between Scripture and the gospel: the gospel is a *cause* of scriptural revelation, and the gospel is an *effect* of scriptural revelation. In other words, God's great, eternal purpose of redemption (what is expressed in the gospel) gives rise to the Bible, and the Bible serves to accomplish God's purpose in the gospel.

The Gospel as Both Cause and Effect of Scriptural Revelation

Cause

If we think of the gospel, broadly speaking, as God's eternal good purpose to redeem a people for himself (1 Pet. 2:9) and to restore his fallen creation (Rom. 8:19–21), then this "good news" precedes and gives rise to biblical revelation. All of Scripture is marked by this sense of being born out of some great divine initiative. In this sense, the gospel is a cause of biblical revelation. While Scripture itself is not the gospel, all Scripture is related to the gospel, and the gospel is Scripture's reason for being. The gospel is the Bible's main and unifying message.

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God's purposes in revelation can never be separated from his purposes in redemption. In eternity past God planned to redeem a people for himself:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3–6)¹

God's plan lies behind and brings into being his spoken communication to humans, which is preserved in Scripture.

Inherent in the idea of revelation is the idea of intention. God means to accomplish something by revealing himself:

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. (Isa. 55:10–11)

God sends his word to accomplish his eternal purpose to redeem a people for himself, and God speaks through Isaiah of gathering a people to himself:

Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you. (Isa. 55:3–5)

The New Testament frequently spells out this purpose of revelation with great clarity. Paul writes of the Old Testament, “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). Hope of what? Hope of the full redemption that the completion of God’s good purposes will bring about (cf. Rom. 8:18–25). This, says Paul, is why God wrote the Scriptures. Scripture is essential to reveal God’s redeeming purpose and activity. In this sense, the gospel is the cause of Scripture. But the gospel, in at least one crucial sense, is also an effect of biblical revelation.

Effect

We speak of the gospel in the sense of its effective proclamation. In this sense revelation necessarily precedes the gospel, and the gospel flows effectively from scriptural revelation. The gospel is the Bible’s main message, and preaching the content of the Bible—that is, the prophetic anticipation of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ from the Old Testament and the apostolic witness to the accomplished work of Christ in the New Testament—unleashes the power of the gospel message and achieves its God-ordained end.

Paul captures this so compellingly in Romans 10. Speaking of God’s purpose to redeem a people for himself, he writes:

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? . . . And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Rom. 10:12–14)

A few verses later, Paul makes this summarizing statement: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (v. 17). In other words, Scripture faithfully proclaimed accomplishes God’s good purpose to redeem.

Peter makes the same point: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23–25). John echoes this theme when he says that he wrote his Gospel

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“so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). This is simply another way of saying that biblical revelation exists to accomplish God’s great purpose to redeem a people for himself in Christ.

So the Bible exists both *because of* and *for* the gospel. The key is that the gospel is the message of Christ. The Bible in all its parts points to and explains Christ in some way. Therefore, the Bible in all its parts contributes not only to our understanding the gospel but to our “hearing” the gospel with the goal that we might believe and that God will fully accomplish his good purpose of redemption. This then requires that we appropriate Scripture in keeping with God’s good purpose.

Foundational Convictions Necessary for a Right Reading of Scripture

If the Bible is going to exercise the particular effectiveness that God intends, certain foundational convictions need to be in place and functioning.

Scripture Is God-Breathed

Paul reminds his dear son in the faith, “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul is saying that Scripture originates in the mind of God and is spoken out (“breathed out”) from that mind. That God really spoke Scripture is a conviction that Christians must hold deeply so that their lives are shaped by it. When we use the phrase “God’s Word” to refer to our Bibles, we shouldn’t miss what that term communicates. God has spoken something objective. There is something specific he is saying. He is speaking. He is communicating. God has really spoken, and the Scripture is that word in written form.

The primary implication of this conviction is that the Bible is trustworthy and true. “Every word of God proves true” (Prov. 30:5). Holding to this conviction will profoundly impact both our personal reading of the Bible and our response to it. It will set us free from always questioning and wondering. Conversely, if we do not hold this conviction, we will find ourselves second-guessing, double-minded, and unstable when we face difficulties in life or in the Bible.

Scripture Is Understandable

Paul tells Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). There is such a thing as rightly handling God’s Word. In other words, not only has God said something objective and specific, but he also means for us to get it. God is not some cruel deity toying with us in revelation. He did not say something that he knows we will never understand, like some uncrackable code. He did not give us a communication designed to frustrate. No, he spoke for a purpose. The very concept of *revelation* indicates an intention to make known. God is accomplishing a greatly desired end, so he means for us to understand what he has said.

We do need to remember, however, the early part of 2 Timothy 2:15. Paul tells Timothy that he must do his best and be a worker. Nobody drifts into understanding. But we need to hold deeply to the conviction that Scripture will yield to believing study. God means for us to understand what he has spoken.

Scripture Is Useful

God’s people live and flourish only by believing and obeying his Word. It is uniquely useful and profitable. Scripture is useful not by some mystical operation but through the very ordinary means of teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). By these means the Bible shows itself very profitable.

Scripture Is Effective

Scripture claims to be useful, but what does it actually accomplish? Consider again the words of Isaiah:

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. (Isa. 55:10–11)

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Add to those words these from Hebrews: “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” (Heb. 4:12). When the writer of Hebrews speaks of the Word of God as “active,” he is speaking of its efficacy, that is, its ability to accomplish its purpose, and he says it does so with penetrating ability.

Consider some of the very specific things God’s Word claims to do:

- 1) It initiates faith: “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).
- 2) It gives new spiritual life: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23).
- 3) It helps us grow spiritually: “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2).
- 4) It sanctifies: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).
- 5) It searches the heart and convicts: “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” (Heb. 4:12).
- 6) It liberates: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32).
- 7) It refreshes and renews: “Give me life according to your word!” (Ps. 119:25).
- 8) It revives and enlightens: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7; see also vv. 8–11).

This is only a representative sample of what the Word says it can do. Is it any wonder that David says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked . . . but his delight is in the law of the LORD” (Ps. 1:1–2)? Such a person will be “like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither” (v. 3). Simply put, God intends to nurture his people by his Word. Scripture is the primary means through which God feeds us, nourishes us, causes us to flourish, and intends to accomplish his good purpose.

If these four convictions are present and operating in a Christian’s

life, then that Christian will anticipate and expect God's transforming grace in the gospel mediated through his Word. But another characteristic is absolutely essential.

A Necessary Posture of Heart: Humility

In order for us to appropriate Scripture as God intends, we must actively, eagerly, and willingly place ourselves under its authority. Too often, because we like to think highly of ourselves, we are tempted to place ourselves over the Word as judges or critics.

I've heard the story of a man who was in Paris visiting the Louvre. He was particularly interested in seeing Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. After examining the painting for some time with a critical eye, he announced, "I don't like it." The guard stationed there replied, "Sir, these paintings are no longer being judged. The viewers are." It is the same with God's Word, which is not what is being judged. Its readers are. The question is whether the hearts of readers are humbly postured to submit to the absolute authority of God through his Word.

Part of submitting to the authority of Scripture is being willing to place ourselves under the scrutiny of Scripture. We ought to be in the habit of regularly examining our hearts. But this examination must not take place independently or in a vacuum. It must be done very consciously under God's Word. God declares, "I the LORD search the heart" (Jer. 17:10). In response to this, our prayer should echo that of David's: "Search me, O God, and know my heart!" (Ps. 139:23).

Hebrews reminds us that it is with his Word that God discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). We ought to regularly and seriously place ourselves under the scrutiny of Scripture with the purpose of changing in light of what Scripture reveals. And this purpose should not be merely a duty; we should joyfully anticipate its being the very means by which God accomplishes his redemptive purposes in our lives.

Too often, when confronted by God's Word, we have a ready explanation for why it doesn't apply to us, and in the process we have talked ourselves out of the very thing that God intends for our good. We would do well to attend to the words of Thomas Watson, a seventeenth-century Puritan pastor:

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Take every word as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus: “God means my sins”; when it presseth any duty, “God intends me in this.” Many put off Scripture from themselves, as if it only concerned those who lived in the time when it was written; but if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourselves: a medicine will do no good, unless it be applied.²

Humility is absolutely necessary—an active, eager, humble, even joyful anticipation of God’s Word working its purpose in our lives.

An Indispensable Hermeneutic

With these foundational convictions and this necessary posture of heart in place, we come now to the matter of interpreting Scripture. The New Testament sets forth two key principles.

Christ-Centeredness

There is probably no passage of Scripture more compelling regarding the Christ-centeredness of Scripture than Luke 24. Jesus is engaged incognito in a conversation with two of his disciples as they are walking on their way to Emmaus. They have just summarized for him the happenings of the last days during which, they say, Jesus, in whom they had put their hope, had been killed, and three days later there had been unconfirmed reports of his resurrection. In response Jesus says, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Then Luke tells us, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25–27).

Later in that same chapter Jesus speaks to the gathered Twelve and says, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (v. 44). Once again Luke adds, “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (v. 45). What is clear from this passage is that Jesus understood the entire Old Testament as speaking in some real way of him.

Jesus communicates much the same thing in John 5. Speaking to the religious leaders in Jerusalem, he says, “You search the Scriptures because

you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (v. 39). Again Jesus understands the Old Testament to speak of and point to him.

It is self-evident that the New Testament is about Christ. The apostolic authors are extremely careful that their readers not abstract any part of their writings from the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Bible is *all* about Jesus in some specific and God-intended way. In his very helpful book *Christ-Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chapell summarizes the point well: “Every [scriptural] text is predictive of the work of Christ, preparatory for the work of Christ, reflective of the work of Christ, and/or resultant of the work of Christ.”³ This, of course, means that if we are going to read the Bible rightly, we must see it in all its parts as it relates to Christ.

However, we are not called to import some artificial connection to Jesus whenever we read or teach a passage of Scripture. The opposite is true. We are called to understand and exposit the specific ways in which passages point to Christ, but Jesus’ words presuppose that every passage does indeed point to him. For our reading of the Bible to be gospel-centered, as it should be, it must always look to and focus on Jesus, and it is just as possible to fail to do this when handling the New Testament as it is when handling the Old Testament.

Spiritual Interpretation

It is not sufficient merely to recognize that Christ-centeredness is essential for rightly interpreting Scripture. Our handling of Scripture must be accompanied by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is qualitatively different from every other book and requires that we read it in keeping with its nature.

Paul speaks to this in his first letter to the Corinthians. Having just described his recent ministry of “proclaiming to [them] the testimony of God” (1 Cor. 2:1) and reminding them that his preaching to them was not a matter of human wisdom but of the power of God (vv. 4–5), he says:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age un-

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derstood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:6–14)

Four things clearly emerge from this passage in 1 Corinthians 2. First, there is a wisdom from God that he has revealed to humans (vv. 10, 12). Second, that revealing is done through the Spirit (v. 10). Third, since the revealing is done through the Spirit, it requires that the Spirit interpret it (v. 13). Fourth, God has given the Spirit to believers so “that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (v. 12). This applies both to those teaching (v. 12) and to those hearing (vv. 13–14). We cannot rightly understand the Word of God apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. It is he who gives people the ability to know that Scripture is true and to understand its truth.

Two Ways to Read the Bible

We come now to the actual practice of reading God’s Word. We are speaking here not of the skill of publicly reading Scripture but of personally appropriating it, whether in private study or in exercising discernment when others teach the Bible. What does “rightly handling the word of truth” look like (2 Tim. 2:15)?

The Bible is endlessly interesting because it is God’s story, and God by nature is himself endlessly interesting. The Bible is an ever-flowing

fountain. The more you read it, the more you find its truth and beauty to be inexhaustible.

There are actually many methods of reading the Bible, and because the Bible is inexhaustible, many methods can prove fruitful. However, we are not so much concerned here with what might be called “methods” as we are with what we can call “approaches.” Two main approaches to the Bible usefully unlock its treasure, which is the gospel.

Reading the Bible as Continuous Narrative (or History)

The Bible is a historical account. It is firmly anchored in real space-time history with regular and very intentional references to known historical figures, events, and locations (e.g., Luke 3:1–3). Without question the Bible reliably recounts the historical events it presents. One could think of reading the Bible from a historical perspective as reading “along” the biblical narrative. The Bible compiles many writings by many different authors, and this can challenge readers who are trying to relate to all the parts of this history.

But the Bible is more than a narrative recounting human history. There is a larger story behind the story. The real biblical narrative is the unfolding of God’s purpose and plan. The Bible is God’s story, and its storyline is the gospel: God’s plan to redeem a people for himself and restore his fallen creation through Christ.

Reading the Bible as a Compendium of God-Inspired Perspectives (or Theology)

The Bible not only recounts history; it also interprets history. Scripture comes to us in the forms of declarations, laws, promises, proverbs, summons, and the like, but every part is a God-inspired perspective. We could think of reading the Bible from a theological perspective as reading “across” the Scriptures. Approaching Scripture along this line, we gather these perspectives into categories of thought and arrive at a coherent understanding of what the Bible is saying cumulatively. This way of reading necessarily gives more attention to the contours of individual books and passages, but it is wise to remember that the meaning of any Scripture text is related to the meaning of all other texts, given that they are all part of one unified word from God.

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The Singular Message of the Bible

Whichever of these two ways the Bible is read, its message is the same. If read as a continuous narrative, its storyline is creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. If read as a collection of theological perspectives, the themes that emerge are God, sin, Christ, and faith. The message of both readings is the triumph of God's eternal, redemptive purpose. These two ways of reading the Bible are not at all contradictory. On the contrary, they are both necessary to fully understand and "hear" the biblical gospel and to help us see how all the parts of the Bible hold together and point us to Jesus.

An Illustration from Matthew 12

We can briefly illustrate how these two approaches are complementary by applying them to a particular passage of Scripture:

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." (Matt. 12:1-8)

Reading this passage from a narrative approach focuses on how the incident with David and his cohorts in 1 Samuel 21 foreshadows Christ. What precisely is the connection that Jesus is making between the present situation and the story about David? Did this incident in David's life happen on the Sabbath? We simply don't know what day David entered the house of God. If that is why Jesus referenced this incident, it seems he would have mentioned that correspondence, but he did not.

So what's the connection? Is Jesus saying, "Hey, if it was okay to break the law once, it's okay to break it again"? We can confidently say that is

not the connection based on Jesus' earlier words about his commitment to the Law (cf. Matt. 5:17).

Jesus indicates that they are not breaking the law; they are "guiltless." The connection is not in the when or the what of the story. The connection is in the who of the story, and attention to the narrative flow of Scripture is what enables us to see that. Only the priests were to eat the bread of the Presence unless, of course, someone with greater authority than the priests came—someone who had already been anointed as king and had authority over the law.

Is Jesus, by recounting this bit of Old Testament history, suggesting that someone as great, or perhaps even greater, than David was present and that the Pharisees should have, like Ahimelech back in 1 Samuel 21, recognized that greater authority? That truth, implicit in verses 3 and 4, is made explicit in the following verses when Jesus announces his superiority over both priest and temple. It all boils down to who Jesus is, and it is the narrative line proceeding from David that points us there. This approach highlights the Davidic line to Christ, pregnant with all the implications of kingship and authority that Matthew's recounting of Christ's words brings forth.

But where will reading this passage according to a more thematic, theological approach take us? This approach calls our attention to the theme of the presence of God, which is so richly present throughout the Old Testament. The temple in all its significance emerges with greater profile, and Jesus' referring to himself as "something greater than the temple" takes center stage and sets forth Christ as God's new presence in the world, particularly among his people. In this connection, the sovereignty of Jesus over both the Sabbath and those observing the Sabbath makes the most sense.

In the end, both approaches lead us to Christ. Everything points to Christ and urges us, as Christ himself does, to come to him: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matt. 11:28–29). In this way, both approaches contribute to hearing the message of the gospel.

With passage after passage, the effect of reading the Bible should be, at least, a doubly reinforced hearing of the gospel. In every passage there

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is, at least, a double emphasis on the gospel, one narrative and one thematic, each combining with the other to strengthen and make more vivid the truth and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: The Gospel as Both Cause and Effect of Scripture

We conclude as we began. The great eternal redemptive plan of God is what scriptural revelation is all about. It is what gave rise to Scripture, and it is what God designed Scripture to bring about. The good news is the singular and majestic theme of Scripture: through the sinless life, substitutionary death, resurrection, present ministry, and triumphant return of Christ—when all things, “things in heaven and things on earth,” will be united in him (Eph. 1:10)—God will accomplish his perfect purpose with humans and all creation (Rom. 8:21).

This then is what should inform and control all our “handling” of God’s Word, both in our own personal appropriation of that Word and in our joyful proclamation of it, for the glory of God and the good of all the redeemed.

For Further Reading

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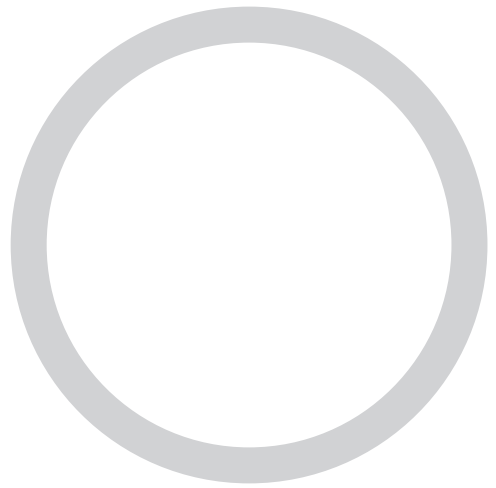
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4

Creation

Andrew M. Davis



There are two categories into which everything in the universe fits, and there is an infinite distance between the two: the Creator and creation. God alone had no beginning; he is self-existent and depends on nothing for his continued existence. Everything else in the universe was created by God and for God. In this chapter, we have the delightful work of considering the doctrine of creation, understanding its significance, and applying its truths to our lives.

The Nature and Purpose of Creation

All the information we have concerning the creation of the universe comes by revelation from God. The two great sources of this knowledge are the physical creation around us and the Scripture, which describes it accurately to us. From the very beginning, God crafted a universe that reveals his existence and true nature so that we would know him and worship him. Romans 1:20 asserts, “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (NIV).¹

God made the universe to display his glory. It was certainly not for any lack on God’s part, as though God needed anything, but rather for a desire to give generously from the greatness of his being. The twenty-four elders who surround the throne in the book of Revelation are fulfilling the purpose of creation when they use it for the praise of God’s glory: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

As God created the universe, he poured his glory into every atom and complex system, whether in the cosmos or in the ecosphere. As Psalm

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19:1 puts it, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” The creation is not waiting to display the glory of God; it already does. The seraphim flying around the Lord’s throne proclaim this constantly: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isa. 6:3).

The Purpose of Humanity: Knowing God’s Glory

A prophecy by Habakkuk declares the purpose of humanity (and of redemptive history): “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab. 2:14). Since the earth already displays the glory of God, all that is left is for the earth to be filled with the *knowledge* of that glory. This task cannot be performed by the earth’s atmosphere, the majestic cedars of Lebanon, the towering Himalayas of Nepal, soaring eagles, or powerful elks. Though all these created beings *display* the glory of God, they cannot *know* the glory of God. That vital task of worship was assigned to the human race, created in the image of God to search out both the obvious and hidden displays of God’s glory in every aspect of creation.

But the immeasurable tragedy of Adam’s rebellion in the garden of Eden is that the human heart, which should have delighted in God the creator, worshiped the creation instead (Rom. 1:25). So while the human race has been fruitful and multiplied and in a large measure filled the earth with the image of God, the Lord’s original intention—an earth filled with the knowledge of his glory—still awaits fulfillment.

There is only one force in the universe with the power to transform the idolatrous hearts of humans into those that will know the glory of the Lord as displayed in creation: the gospel of Jesus Christ. By this gospel our hearts of stone are transformed, made alive to the glory of God shining all around us. The fulfillment of this grand overarching promise awaits the new heaven and new earth, when the glory of God will illuminate every created thing and the righteous themselves will “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43).

A Personal and Global Education in Theology

Our education in theology—God’s existence and attributes—began from the moment we were conceived in our mother’s womb and continued

day by day long before we learned language. We were educated by the sound of our mother's heartbeat, the sensation of warmth, the tastes in our mouth, the blinding flash of light at birth, the brilliance of colors, and the aromas of our bassinette and clothes. David says in Psalm 22:9, "Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb; You made me trust when upon my mother's breasts" (NASB). When David was a nursing infant, God taught him how to trust as his mother provided for his physical needs. God was preparing David to put his trust in God for the salvation of his soul. Thus, physical creation prepares us for saving faith.

As we walked as children through the beauty of a forest in the splendor of fall, breathing in deeply the musty smells of the forest floor, feeling the warm breezes of a late fall afternoon on our faces, having our breath stolen by the fiery glory of a sudden scenic vista—a magnificent mountain valley, splashed with vivid reds and golds of trees preparing for the impending winter—our hearts were being shaped for the central reality of the universe: Almighty God.

This education is going on around the world; it is not unique to one nation or one region of the earth. Psalm 19:3–4 speaks of the way the heavens are declaring the glories of God in a wordless universal language: "There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." Physical creation is a personal education in theology for people all over this globe.

All Things Created by Christ and for Christ

Everything in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, was created by Christ and for Christ:

All things were made through [Christ], and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:3)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. (Col. 1:15–16)

In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:2)

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In some mysterious way God spoke the universe into existence out of nothing, and Christ was the word by which God did this powerful creative speaking (John 1:3). The universe was created *for* Christ (Col. 1:16), and God appointed Christ “heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). So, in some astonishing way, every atom in the physical universe and every entity in the spiritual realm belongs to Christ by rights.

Even more amazing, the universe God created *depends* on Christ moment by moment for its ongoing existence: “He [Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). This pictures a needy universe that would cease to exist if Christ didn’t exert his powerful will to keep it in existence. That much of this physical world can be analyzed and understood in strictly physical terms does not, in the Bible’s view, vitiate the sovereign sway of God over every part of it. Biblical writers know about the water cycle, but frequently they prefer to speak of God sending rain, for the two modes of speaking do not cancel each other out. Owing to the force of gravity, a wounded bird falls to the ground, but no sparrow tumbles out of the heavens, according to Jesus, apart from his heavenly Father’s sanction. Modern physics has identified four fundamental forces that bind everything together, but this does not prevent us from recognizing that Jesus upholds everything by his powerful word.

The Threat of Naturalism

In the final analysis, there are only two explanations for the existence of the universe: special creation by a divine being and naturalistic evolution by impersonal forces. In this strong sense of the terms, creation and evolution are mutually exclusive. The fact remains, however, that neither “creation” nor “evolution” is always used in these strong antithetical senses, and this helps to make discussion of the issues more than a little complex.

According to the Bible, God insists that sinful humanity, despite being surrounded by plain evidence of the existence and nature of the invisible God, suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). In other words, we make a willful effort to hold down what we consider to be an ugly truth: there is a holy and all-powerful Creator to whom we are eternally accountable. Rather ironically, the point is sometimes

acknowledged by atheists. Richard Dawkins asserts, “Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.”² In other words, one has to suppress the urge to notice that this or that was designed for a purpose!

It is worth recognizing that both scientists and interpreters of the Bible are far from agreed *within their own domains of inquiry*. In other words, they hold to somewhat diverse interpretations of both the scientific data and the Bible. To add to the confusion, not a few people occupy *both* roles—i.e., they are both scientists and Christian interpreters of Scripture—and such people do not always agree with their fellow scientists or with their fellow Bible interpreters.

Some examples may help. On the side of the Bible, some Christians hold to the gap theory (there is a gap of indeterminate length between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2); some hold to a day-age theory (each day of Genesis 1 represents an age); some hold to young-earth theory (each day is a twenty-four-hour day, and creation took place no more than ten thousand years ago); some hold to what might be called a literary week (each day is a twenty-four-hour day, but the entire week is meant to be a literary creation that does not pretend to tell us exactly “what happened” but aims to order the account for symbolic and theological reasons, variously understood).

Several of these theories are compatible with “theistic evolution,” but that expression is itself more than a little ambiguous. In the thought of some, it presupposes evolution that is indistinguishable from a naturalistic accounting of evolution, except for the assertion that God was sovereignly if benignly presiding over evolution’s unfolding (in much the same way that he providentially presides over sunshine and rain today, making it possible to say that God sends the sunshine and the rain). In the thought of others, while evolution by some kind of “natural” selection takes place (presided over by God), at various points God intervened miraculously to bring about results that could not have happened naturally (e.g., God made human beings qualitatively different from other primates: they are his image bearers, destined for eternal life).

Frankly, many Christians view one or more of these options as outside the pale and are open to only one or two of the options. For example, it is frequently argued that there is no compelling *biblical* reason to see

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billions and billions of years in Genesis 1. The reasons some Christians change their interpretation of that text come from outside the Bible: geologists and other scientists tell us that the evidence that the earth is billions of years old is overwhelming.

Because of these arguments, some Christians reinterpret Genesis 1 to fit the prevailing scientific stance, adopting interpretations that would never have been “found” in the text had it not been for the claims of science. This result, they argue, domesticates the Bible and distorts its plain sense. Yet the issue is complicated. Long before the rise of modern science, Augustine (fourth century) asserted that the interpretation of Genesis 1 is difficult, but he argued, for what he thought were compelling biblical and theological reasons, that the universe was created instantaneously and that the creation week of Genesis 1 is a symbol-laden literary creation designed to make an array of theological points, not least the ordering of the human week and the establishment of Sabbath. In other words, some sort of literary-week theory antedates the rise of modern science.

The stakeholders of The Gospel Coalition are not on the same page with respect to all the details, but all of us insist that God alone is self-existing, that he is the creator of all, that he made everything good, that Adam and Eve were historical figures from whom the rest of the human race has sprung, and that the fundamental problem we face was introduced by human idolatry and rebellion and the curse they attracted. The reasons for holding such matters to be nonnegotiable are bound up with many passages of Scripture, not just the opening chapters of Genesis. For example, Paul tells us that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

On the side of science, as on the side of biblical interpretation, there is more uncertainty and diversity of opinion, at least on some of the issues, than is commonly acknowledged. Although the vast majority of scientists hold to the big bang theory, which asserts that everything in the universe was compacted into one incredibly dense body that at some point exploded in a “singularity” (i.e., an event in which the known laws of physics do not prevail) to produce, after about fifteen billion years, the universe as we know it, a minority of scientists remain suspicious. More importantly, there is no widely accepted theory about how that incredibly dense body came to exist in the first place. One theory postulates an alter-

nately expanding and contracting universe, but the speculations involved are so extravagant that the theory has gained little traction.

If we sidestep questions about how that dense body came to be and focus instead on planet earth, we see that theories regarding the development of life along evolutionary lines have undergone repeated modification. The fossil record preserves so many gaps in the expected sequence of transitional forms that it is now common to follow the proposal of the late Harvard evolutionary theorist Stephen Jay Gould. He suggests that instead of smooth evolutionary development by natural selection, one must posit “punctuated equilibrium”; that is, evolution takes place in periodic surges of activity that were so brief they could not be captured by the fossil record. Moreover, despite the most valiant research efforts, the path from inorganic matter to a functioning and reproducing cell is still remarkably opaque on the assumptions of philosophical materialism.

Equally complex are recent debates over intelligent design. Over the past two decades or so, a small group of scientists and philosophers have argued that many biological structures are characterized by “irreducible complexity.” By this they mean that for such structures to operate and be sustained (such as the eye), so many evolutionary developments would have had to take place at the same time that the statistical likelihood approaches zero. The components of the structure could not have developed piecemeal since they have no useful function apart from their place and role in the entire structure. This they take to be evidence of intelligent design.

A majority of scientists responds that this sounds like the outmoded “God of the gaps” theory: whenever science cannot explain something, we appeal to God, but the sad effect is that as science explains more and more of the “gaps,” God becomes smaller and smaller. Those who defend intelligent design insist that what they are arguing is quite different: we do understand a great deal about these structures, and the evidence from these structures, from the science itself, is that one must factor intelligent design into the explanation.

Increasingly it has become clear that behind this debate is a fundamental dispute over the very nature of science. One side thinks of science as the set of disciplines, testable theories, repeatable procedures, measurements, and necessary inferences that enables us to make sense of and

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increasingly understand the nature of physical reality. Those who oppose intelligent design think of science as the set of disciplines, testable theories, repeatable procedures, measurements, and necessary inferences that enables us to make sense of and increasingly understand the nature of physical reality *not only on an exclusively materialist basis but also on the assumption that such methods and results cannot speak to the existence of anything or anyone outside the material order.*

In other words, this view of science is committed to functioning philosophical materialism. God is excluded by definition. Many scientists who hold this view are not atheists, of course, but they think that what may be known of God has no intersections with the material order, which must be allowed its investigative disciplines and results unchecked by anything outside itself.

Irony surfaces, of course, when many scientists, not a few of them atheists, speak of the order and beauty of science and numbers in reverential terms filled not only with awe but also with worship. Relatively few scientists who write on these matters treat the material order as utterly cold, the result of the statistical bumping of molecules and of atomic and sub-atomic particles.

These reflections pave the way for more focused reading of biblical texts.

The Unfolding of Creation Week: Genesis 1

The first statement in the Bible is foundational to everything that follows: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). This teaches at least three significant truths:

- 1) God preexisted the universe. God was there at the beginning and acted to bring everything else about.
- 2) The universe had a beginning. It is not eternal (as some scientists teach) or cyclical (as some Eastern religions teach).
- 3) God personally created everything in the universe. Nothing arose by merely impersonal physical forces, as atheistic evolutionists teach.

The doctrine of creation is the foundation of everything that follows chronologically and theologically, and redemptive history depends on its truths.

“The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep” (Gen. 1:2 NASB). This needy universe required the ongoing work of God to bring it to full order and beauty. The fact that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” gives a first insight into the life-giving role of the Spirit, a role progressively unpacked throughout the Bible.

Then God spoke the words of sovereign power: “Let there be light, and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). Here we are introduced to the central force and power of God in the universe: his powerful word. It is by words that God creates and by words he rules over his creation. “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). Then God organized the rhythms of earthly life in a cycle he labeled “day” and “night”: “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day” (Gen. 1:5). This rhythm of evening and morning and the counting of days throughout Genesis 1 established a pattern of the unfolding of time as we human beings know it.

One of the foci of contemporary discussion regarding the interpretation of Genesis 1 is the meaning of the word “day.” While the Hebrew word *yōm* (day) can refer to an extended period of time, such as an epoch of history, by far the most common meanings are either the twenty-four-hour period or the period of sunlight versus the period of darkness (“day and night”). Certainly in Genesis 1 the rhythm of the repeated “And there was evening and there was morning, the first [second, third, etc.] day” argues for ordinary twenty-four-hour days. This understanding is confirmed by another passage: “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex. 20:11). Of course, one must also acknowledge that if the symbol-laden theory of Augustine is adopted, or one of its contemporary equivalents, these days in Genesis 1 may well be twenty-four-hour periods as part of a literary-rhetorical structure by which creation is being interpreted.

What is clear is that intrinsic to the first three days of creation was the principle of separation—this from that: light from darkness, water above from water below, and sea from dry land. God established a seemingly fragile boundary line between the mighty ocean waves and the dry land, as anyone who has visited the beach can testify. There are sometimes

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signs that forbid us from walking on the sand dunes lest the dune grass be trampled and perish. The dune grass prevents erosion of the fragile shoreline, and the shoreline protects us from the raging waves. The same sort of reflection is found in God's self-disclosure to Job:

Who shut up the sea behind doors
when it burst forth from the womb,
when I made the clouds its garment
and wrapped it in thick darkness,
when I fixed limits for it
and set its doors and bars in place,
when I said, "This far you may come and no farther;
here is where your proud waves halt"? (Job 38:8–11 NIV)

Once dry land had been cleared, God had a blank canvas on which to paint the marvels of life. He spoke forth the plant life of the earth, the seed-bearing plants of every kind. The words *seed* and *kind* speak of the genetic recipe for each kind of vegetation and the power to reproduce and spread throughout the surface of the earth. Who can fail to notice the majestic variety of the vegetation on the earth? God spoke forth mighty redwoods, frail ferns, fragrant orchids, and spectacular wildflowers. God wove every living and growing thing with which he beautified the dry land into a complex biological system of plant life that would take nutrients from the soil, carbon dioxide from the air, and energy from the sun to live and grow and provide food for the animals and humans that would come later.

On the fourth day of creation, God began to spread his glories through the cosmos. Though he had created light at the very beginning, now he desired to delegate the responsibility of giving light to the earth to created entities—the sun, the moon, and the stars. All that we know of light today ultimately comes from the sun and other stars, but in the Genesis account the celestial bodies are added later. The sun is an astonishing creation—a raging inferno of power that in some ways displays God's transcendence to an arrogant human race.

There is nothing humanity can do to the sun, good or bad. We cannot make it brighter or dimmer, larger or smaller, nearer or farther, hotter or cooler. If we decided as a human race that we wanted to destroy the sun, there would be nothing we could do to it. If we amassed all our thermo-

nuclear weapons and sent them as intergalactic rockets to explode on the surface of the sun, they would never make it but would be incinerated millions of miles away from their destination. NASA is presently planning a solar probe mission that will be able to get only within 3.5 million miles of the surface.

The sun burns on day after day without any visible diminution of its power, so bright we cannot look at it steadily without being blinded. The sun glorifies God by its astonishing power and brightness, and yet the sun was designed with human beings in mind, shining in the sky “to give light on the earth” (Gen. 1:17).

God created the moon for the same human-centered purpose, but unlike the sun it gives a borrowed light to the earth. The moon reflects the sun’s light to the earth, just as in a metaphorical sense we believers will one day shine with the light of Christ in heaven. And then comes this laconic statement: “He also made the stars” (Gen. 1:16 NIV). Recent advances in cosmology, such as the Hubble Space telescope that orbits the earth and projects back absolutely stunning images of the starry host, have shown us how immense is the universe that God has made.

On the fifth day, God filled the seas with swimming creatures and the skies with flying creatures. The incalculable variety of species of fish and birds boggles the mind to the glory of God. God created whales to be the largest living creature on earth and then opens his hand to feed them as much as 2,600 pounds of plankton every day. There are spectacularly beautiful tropical fish, sporting vivid designs that radiate with every color in the spectrum. And there are grotesque-looking fish called brotulids that can exist almost five miles below the surface of the ocean. The birds also display the staggering creativity of God, for some of them—like eagles—soar on thermals, hardly ever flapping their wings, and others—like hummingbirds—flap their wings at as many as eighty beats per second. Peregrine falcons are the fastest creatures in nature, traveling up to 240 miles per hour in vertical dives.

God blessed the fish and the birds, commanding them to fill the sea and sky.

On the sixth day, God turned his attention to the dry land and brought forth the beasts of the earth—livestock, wild animals, and creatures that crawl along the earth. The complexity and variety of these species are

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clear testimonies to the wisdom and goodness of God. Some of the creatures are mighty and powerful, like the elephant, which can lift more than six hundred pounds with its trunk. Some are timid and tiny, like the rock badger, which dwells on mountain ledges and sucks moisture from the lichens growing on the cliffs. It was God who created the mighty lion to roar, the otter to swim, the hippopotamus to dominate the African rivers, and the cheetah to run like the wind.

The Climax of Creation: The Image of God

Having set the magnificent stage, a completed universe fully equipped with God's loving provision, the time had come for the climax of creation: the fashioning of human beings, male and female, in the image of God:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:26–27)

Humans are unique because God created them in his image. Human beings were created not to be God but to be God's image. In what does this "image" consist? There are at least two significant ways in which humanity stands as the image of God. (1) *In our nature*. We are like God in certain capabilities (ability to think, reason, plan, love, choose, desire, communicate, etc.) and attributes (righteousness, holiness, mercy, compassion, wisdom, and so forth). (2) *In our position in the world*. God established the human race as the rulers of the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28).

God's creation also establishes the pattern of gender. God created humans male and female, each equally in his image yet with distinguishable emphases and roles—all by God's design. Homosexuality and other forms of gender confusion blur the distinctions between male and female. God intended gender distinction as a good thing from the very beginning; it is a very good thing for a man to be a man and for a woman to be a woman.

God intended for the human race to multiply and fill the world with

the image of God and that this multiplication be the result of his personal blessing. As God blesses male and female (i.e., husband and wife, as we learn to call them in Genesis 2), children are born, and the image of God spreads. Thus, children are a blessing from God, not the expensive and inconvenient curse some selfish people in our society think them to be.

God's loving provision for the human race and for all animals is laid out at the end of the creation account—seed-bearing plants and trees for man and green vegetables for the animals. This establishes so beautifully the sovereign providence for ongoing life. As we have mentioned, God created a needy universe, and God is greatly glorified in the creature's dependence. The goodness of God in provision of food is the theme of the psalmist's meditation in Psalm 104: "These all look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things" (vv. 27–28 NIV).

The Goodness of God in the Goodness of Creation

God completes the account of his creation of the universe with this sweeping assessment: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). This is a vastly important declaration, for it asserts the essential goodness of physical matter. Greek philosophers and Eastern mystics have denied the goodness of the physical world and especially of the human body. God declared that everything he had made was good. Even more important than this, however, is that the creation showed God himself to be good.

We live in a universe that was intelligently and lovingly crafted by a God who is good and who loves what he has made. We live on a planet that is uniquely prepared for human life in particular. The earth travels at precisely 66,600 miles per hour as it orbits the sun. This speed is exactly what is needed to offset the sun's gravitational pull and keep the earth the proper distance from the sun for life to thrive. It was the goodness of God that set the angle of tilt of the earth's axis—23.5 degrees relative to the sun—to give a beautiful variation of seasons to the hemispheres. If the tilt were increased to 25 degrees, summer would be much hotter and winters much colder, resulting in devastation of the plant life of earth. So the speed and position of the earth were "very good" for human life.

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God also finely tuned the earth's atmosphere unlike any other in the solar system. Far above our heads, ozone blocks the potentially cancer-causing radiation from the sun. The atmosphere shields the earth from meteors, burning up as much as 70,000 tons of space debris a year. It contains 78 percent nitrogen and 21 percent oxygen—just perfect for life. Without oxygen, all animate life would be unable to survive, but if the amount were increased to, say, 25 percent, fires would break out instantly all over the earth, and it would be nearly impossible to put them out. The nitrogen not only dilutes the oxygen but also provides an essential fertilizer for plant life. Amazingly, during electrical storms all over the earth, lightning bolts combine nitrogen and oxygen into compounds vital for plant life, and these compounds are then carried into the soil by the rain. And so the atmosphere is “very good” for human life.

Just before his death in May 1543, Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus published his seminal book, *On the Revolution of the Celestial Spheres*. He demonstrated that the sun, rather than the earth, is the center of the solar system. Science has vindicated his views physically, but Genesis 1 still carves out a central concept that cannot be controverted biblically: the earth is the center of God's purposes for the universe. According to Genesis 1:14–18, all of the reasons that God created the sun, the moon, and the stars were earth-centered reasons: to give light to the earth, to separate day from night, to mark seasons, days, and years. The earth-central viewpoint of the cosmos is also vindicated in the book of Revelation when, as events on the surface of the earth and in human history come to a climax, the stars fall from the sky to the earth like figs shaken from a fig tree (Rev. 6:13). The earth is the centerpiece of God's plan for the universe.

The Sabbath Rest

The Genesis account of the seven days of creation closes with God's taking his Sabbath rest and establishing the Sabbath as a blessed and holy day (Gen. 2:1–3). Of course, it should never be understood that God took his Sabbath rest because his work in creating the universe had worn him out and he needed to replenish his strength. Isaiah 40:28 makes this very plain: “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary.”

Neither should we imagine that God ceased from exerting energy toward the universe that he made; God created a needy and dependent universe that relies on him at every moment for its existence. Rather, God's Sabbath rest is two things: (1) a display of his sovereign right to rule over the universe, like a king walking through his throne room who climbs the dais, turns and faces his court, and with great solemnity sits on the throne to rule; (2) a display of his kindness to human beings, giving them an opportunity to enter God's rest in this present age, one day in seven, as well as for eternity in heaven through faith in Christ (Heb. 4:1–11).

The Special Creation of Humans: The Details of Genesis 2

Some commentators have had difficulty reconciling the different accounts of creation given in Genesis 1 and 2. However, as Charles Spurgeon once said about a different theological issue, "I never try to reconcile friends!" Genesis 2 is a perfect complement to Genesis 1. Genesis 1 gives the grand, overarching account of God's creation of the cosmos and especially his purposes in creating humans as male and female in the image of God. But Genesis 2 zeroes in with indispensable detail on the formation of the first man and woman and his special purposes for each. Genesis 1 and 2 are like a map of California with an inset map of Los Angeles on the same page.

A Glorious yet Needy Earth Waits for Its Caretaker and Ruler

Genesis 2 depicts an earth all decked out with the glory of God and yet needy and awaiting its caretaker and ruler. Although the earth was declared "very good" in Genesis 1, that doesn't mean it couldn't be developed and improved. And so Genesis 2:5 speaks of a certain category of plants that need human cultivation and husbandry to reach its full potential. Where would the first man get such skill? It would come from his heavenly Father's direct instruction; God intended to train his offspring Adam in the ways of the earth. A remarkable passage in Isaiah 28 shows the direct intervention of God in the agricultural education of man:

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When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually?

Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil?

When he has leveled the surface,

does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin?

Does he not plant wheat in its place,

barley in its plot,

and spelt in its field?

His God instructs him

and teaches him the right way.

Caraway is not threshed with a sledge,

nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin;

caraway is beaten out with a rod,

and cummin with a stick.

Grain must be ground to make bread;

so one does not go on threshing it forever.

Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it,

his horses do not grind it.

All this also comes from the Lord Almighty,

wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom. (Isa. 28:24–29 NIV)

The First Man Created a Living Creature

Genesis 2:7 relates the special creation of the first man from the dust of the earth: “The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” I remember seeing an exhibit in the Boston Museum of Science that showed the outline of a man, and inside the outline were a series of chemical bottles of varying sizes filled with dry compounds. It represented a human body from which all water had been removed (the human body is over 60 percent water), and what was left were a bunch of chemical compounds and minerals, all of which can be mined from the earth! The first man was of the earth, earthy (1 Cor. 15:47 KJV), and after the fall into sin, God told Adam that he would die and return to the earth, since from it “you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

Yet as earthy as we are, it is still staggering to the mind to meditate on the complexity of the human body, which God fearfully and wonderfully fashions from those various earthy compounds (Ps. 139:14). Modern genetic science tells us that the DNA found in the trillions of cells in a single human being, if unraveled from that complex double-helix found

in every cell and placed end-to-end, would travel 10 to 20 billion miles. How much more astonishing is the marvel of the human brain, which is the most complex physical thing God ever created, having one hundred billion neurons (approximately the same number as trees in the Amazonian jungle)?

The Special Commands of God

Though God had fashioned a whole world filled with his glory, the Lord had specially prepared a place for Adam and his wife to begin their thrilling journey of exploration and development. It was “in the east, in Eden” (Gen. 2:8 NIV), and there God placed the man he had formed. God had richly supplied the garden of Eden with every kind of fruitful tree, beautiful to the eye, pleasing to the palate. In the center of the garden was the tree of life. Also in the garden was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These trees were the focus of the special commands God was about to entrust to Adam.

Genesis 2:10–14 describes four rivers, the origin of which was in the garden of Eden (and rather surprising archaeological discoveries continue to be made concerning these rivers). Genesis 2:15 follows: “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” The Hebrew verbs “work” and “keep” are very common words in the Old Testament, and their root meaning is something like “serve” and “protect.” Adam was to serve the garden of Eden by his labor, exerting himself to bring it to its full potential under the tutelage of his heavenly Father. The herbs and other cultivated plants mentioned in Genesis 2:5 would receive the care they needed to grow. The second command, to protect, implies that impending danger threatened the beauty and peace of Eden. This danger is made obvious in Genesis 3, where Satan comes in the form of a serpent to tempt Eve and Adam and lead them (and the garden of Eden) into death.

Having placed Adam in Eden, God then gave him this clear command: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). Here God places Adam under a restriction. This is law, warning, limitation. Adam is given charge of the whole earth to rule it, but Adam himself must submit to God.

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The Creation of Eve and Marriage

Male and female humans are each created in the image of God and charged to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Gen. 1:26–27). But Adam is created alone and walks alone for a time. Though God declared that it was not good for Adam to remain alone (Gen. 2:18), it was no accident that God created him first and allowed him to be alone for a brief period. God did this to establish Adam as the head of his wife and to display her role as a “helper suitable for him” (Gen. 2:18 NIV; see 1 Cor. 11:2–16; Eph. 5:22–33; 1 Tim. 2:11–15).

After Adam names the animals (Gen. 2:19–20), it is clear that among them there is no helper suitable for him. Adam could not be fruitful alone, nor could he love and relate to another as one in the image of God was designed to do. So God caused a deep sleep to come on Adam, and he took a rib from that man and formed a woman from the rib while the man was sleeping. God brought her to the man and presented her to him to be his wife. In poetic voice, Adam rejoices: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, for she was taken out of Man” (v. 23).

In naming her, Adam shows his authority in marriage, but in his celebration of her essential sameness with him, he shows the partnership they would have as created equally in the image of God. This was the origin of marriage, the first human relationship in the Bible, and the pattern of all future marriages. It is also a picture of Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). Before they sinned against God, they were so free that they “were both naked and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25); neither had anything to hide, so unlike the wretched situation that prevails once sin has conquered them.

A Tragic Fall for Creation

The creation that surrounds us is very different from the perfect world that surrounded Adam and Eve in Eden. Adam, representing the human race, failed *to serve and protect* his wife or the garden of Eden. He stood idly by while Satan tempted his wife, and then he followed her into open rebellion by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:1–7).

God came as the judge of all the earth and confronted first Adam, then

Eve, then the Serpent. He cursed all three in turn, and with Adam's curse the earth itself was cursed: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field" (Gen. 3:17–18).

Since that time, creation has groaned in bondage to corruption and futility, longing for the glorious completion of human salvation (Rom. 8:18–22). We see the evidence of that groaning, bondage, corruption, and futility every day, and we ourselves yearn for the day when creation will be free to be perfect and glorious again.

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The gospel of Jesus Christ has unleashed the power of God to bring that day about. A new era in human history began with Christ's resurrection. Christ's resurrection body—a "spiritual body"—is the prototype for a new universe. He is the "firstfruits" from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). As the gospel of Christ's redeeming death and glorious resurrection makes its way around the world, sinful descendants of Adam are repenting and believing in Christ and finding redemption in him. At that instant they are made "new creations" in Christ spiritually (2 Cor. 5:17), and they begin to long to be made new creations physically as well.

So both Christians and the universe groan inwardly as we await eagerly our final redemption, the resurrection of our bodies (Rom. 8:23). At the second coming of Christ, this fervent hope will be fulfilled, and the creation itself will be made new. The universe, spiritual and physical, will in some sense be resurrected like our bodies, so there will be continuity and difference. And that new universe has a glorious name, "a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13).

Applications of the Doctrine of Creation

The doctrine of creation should open our eyes to the glories of God around us and should enable us to have an endless stream of reasons to praise and worship God. We should be ready to give God thanks for the beauty of the earth, for its display of his goodness and love, for its variety, for its sweet provision of all of our needs, despite all the signs of the curse that afflict it.

Not only does all creation display the power of God the creator, but,

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like David in Psalm 139, we should marvel that God personally wove *us* together in our mother's womb and sustains *us* every moment of our lives. We should understand that in God "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We should know that God holds in his hand our lives and all our ways (Dan. 5:23). This should move us to the kind of awe-struck intimacy with God that David displays in Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart!" (v. 23).

Our regeneration is like what God did at the very beginning of creation: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). This clearly displays the absolute sovereignty of God in our conversion. Just as God spoke into the dark nothingness at creation saying, "Let there be light," and there was light, so God spoke into the dark nothingness of our hearts to create a new spiritual light—the light of Christ. That is what regeneration is, and only the sovereign God can do it. And when God wills to do it, no power in the universe can stop it!

Creation is the simplest and clearest starting place for parents to teach little ones about the existence and attributes of God. Parents should saturate their own language with words of praise and thanksgiving to God the creator constantly and then seek those spiritual analogies mentioned in the previous point to teach their children the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Many books of the Bible begin their presentation of gospel truth with the doctrine of creation (e.g., Genesis, John, Romans, Colossians, Hebrews). This is a point of contact we can make with a biblically illiterate world. As we seek to take the gospel to the ends of the earth to unreached people groups, inevitably the starting point of our proclamation will be creation. This is increasingly true in our own culture as well, as fewer and fewer people in the Western world know the Scriptures. Also the gospel message itself should be tied intimately to creation.

The earth was entrusted to us by its Creator, and we are therefore merely stewards of someone else's possession. We should respect the earth as a creation of our heavenly Father and take care of it lovingly. We should *serve* and *protect* the earth, bringing it to its full potential under God, without worshipping creation.

All believers called to study science should do so as worshipers above

all else. Scientists should see their work as uncovering the marvels of God the creator, making those marvels available to their brothers and sisters for the purpose of worship and for the benefit of humanity. Scientists should not surrender their commitment to the truth of the Bible while they uncover new truths in creation.

The Bible is the greatest and clearest revelation of God's mind to the human race, but the Bible itself is unintelligible apart from the creation that surrounds us. The Bible speaks to us in the language of this world, using physical analogies to teach us spiritual truths. Jesus does this all the time: "Consider the lilies of the field" (Matt 6:28); "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it. . . . So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8); "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough" (Matt. 13:33 NIV).

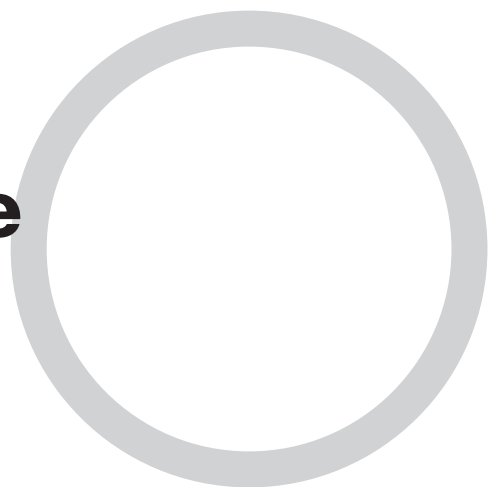
As we go through life in this sin-cursed world, we can easily become weary and discouraged. Psalm 23 says, "He restores my soul" (v. 3). So often God does that by the refreshing power of his creation. Make excursions into nature a regular part of your walk with Christ. Go to the seashore and listen to the pounding surf. Climb a mountain and watch the soaring eagles ride the thermals. Travel to the Grand Canyon and have your breath taken away by its immensity and dazzling colors. Let God's creation refresh your soul.

Romans 8 speaks of a Christian's hope in the resurrection of the body and by implication of the universe, as well. Live your life in fervent hope for the coming new creation. Yearn for it, pray for it, live for it, and speed its coming by evangelizing the lost.

5

Sin and the Fall

Reddit Andrews III



Something is severely wrong with humans and their world. People of all religious and nonreligious persuasions recognize this. For example, while humans in the modern era have achieved massive technological and medical breakthroughs, they have also created a terrible mess. An estimated 188 million people died by war and oppression alone in the twentieth century,¹ and many of them were raped, mutilated, or tortured before dying. Christopher Wright reports:

The world was horrified by the attack on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, in which some three thousand people died. Africa suffers the equivalent of two 9/11s every day. . . . The tsunami in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 carried off some 300,000 people in a single day. HIV/AIDs inflicts the equivalent of a tsunami on Africa every month.²

What exactly is wrong with humans?

Answering the Human Predicament

Many people—including leaders in science, education, politics, and religion—analyze the human predicament while assuming that the theory of naturalistic evolution is true. This theory concludes that evil is part of the original cloth from which human history is woven. For example, Paul Ricoeur, a French philosopher, wrote:

We sense that evil itself is part of the economy of superabundance. . . . We must therefore have the courage to incorporate evil into the epic of

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hope. In a way that we know not, evil itself cooperates, works toward, the advancement of the Kingdom of God. . . . Faith justifies the man of the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment], for whom, in the great romance of culture, evil is a factor in the education of the human race, rather than the puritan, who never succeeds in taking the step from condemnation to mercy.³

Islam, in some sense, also sees evil as a natural and inevitable part of human progress. This was expressed by Nomanul Haq:

The human exit from the Garden, then, was . . . akin to natural birth—a baby coming out of a mother’s womb, a bird breaking out of an egg, or a bud sprouting forth from a branch. Indeed, like nature, Adam had to evolve, morally, spiritually, intellectually—just as a baby grows into adulthood, and a seed grows into a lofty tree.⁴

Thus the human condition in Islam does not involve the recovery from a fall so as to regain some original state of glory, but rather entails the fulfilling of a set of obligations given by God in the Qur’an.

Christianity, on the other hand, uniquely analyzes the human predicament. Christianity analyzes evil by placing it under two interrelated categories: sin and the fall. Evil exists because of sin, and sin exists because of the fall that occurred in early human history. In his great treatise on original sin, Jonathan Edwards contends that Adam’s sin brought evil into the world:

I look on the doctrine as of great importance; which everybody will doubtless own it is, if it be true. For, if the case be such indeed, that all mankind are by nature in a state of total ruin, both with respect to the moral evil of which they are the subjects, and the afflictive evil to which they are exposed, the one as the consequence and punishment of the other; then doubtless, the great salvation, must suppose it; and all real belief, or true notion of the gospel, must be built upon it.⁵

Blaise Pascal writes:

It is an astonishing thing, however, that the mystery which is furthest removed from our knowledge—the mystery of the transmission of sin—is something without which we can have no knowledge of ourselves!

For there is no doubt that there is nothing that shocks our reason more than to say that the sin of the first man was the cause of the guilt of

those who were so far from the source of infection that it seems impossible that they should have been contaminated by it. The transmission of sin seems to us not only impossible, it even seems very unjust; for what could be more contrary to the rules of our sorry justice than the eternal damnation of a child incapable of will-power for a sin in which he seems to have played so small a part, and which was committed six thousand years before he was born? Nothing, to be sure, is more of a shock to us than such a doctrine and yet, without this mystery, which is most incomprehensible of all, we should be incomprehensible to ourselves. The tangled knot of our condition acquired its twists and turns in that abyss; so that man is more inconceivable without the mystery than the mystery is to man.⁶

Only Christianity adequately analyzes the human predicament. Evil exists because of sin, and sin exists because of the fall. And sin originated not on earth but in heaven itself.

Sin did not break out on earth in the first instance, but in heaven, in the immediate presence of God, and at the foot of His throne. The thought, the wish, the will to resist God arose first in the heart of the angels.⁷

The Entrance of Sin

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).⁸ The angels responded with joyful singing: “On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:6–7). After creating the universe, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). The angels later sinned and were cast down (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). Adam, who has a parallel relationship to Christ (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45–49), represents the human race.

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

Sin entered the race when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit.

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—for sin

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indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. (Rom. 5:12–14)

Satan approached Adam through Eve his wife.

When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. (Gen. 3:6–7b)

Original Righteousness

God created Adam upright. He possessed what we might call original righteousness. This was a probationary period in which Adam and Eve were exposed to temptation and capitulated to it. It was possible for them not to sin, and it was also possible for them to sin.

God gave to man the power of contrary choice. Man of his own will, by no external compulsion or determination, used that power in the commission of sin. There was no necessity arising from his physical condition, nor from his moral nature, nor from the nature of his environment, why he should sin. It was a free movement within man's spirit. To use Laidlaw's words, "It arose with an external suggestion, and upon an external occasion, but it was an inward crisis."⁹

Adam's temptation was reasonable, but his capitulation was not. God had blessed Adam with dominion over the earth, a wife corresponding to him, and fellowship with God himself. God put the entire creation—except for a single tree—under Adam's dominion. God's benefits were extreme, and his threat for eating the forbidden fruit was extreme.

Evil and the Will of God

God sovereignly decreed that sin would enter the world, and Adam was responsible for freely sinning.

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 of-

ferred to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. (Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1)

Many people question whether God was wise and just to ordain evil. God, who is holy and not the author of evil, did not merely “permit” evil. It is not as though God did not ordain evil but allowed it to occur. The view that God merely permits evil fails to provide an answer that removes the tension that comes from affirming that God ordains evil, because in both cases God is ordering the entrance of sin. Bavinck observes:

He [God] did not fear its [sin and evil] existence and power. He willed it so that in it and against it He might bring to light His divine attributes. If He had not allowed it to exist, there would always have been a rationale for the idea that He was not in all His attributes superior to a power whose possibility was inherent in creation itself. For all rational creatures as creatures, as finite, limited, changeable beings, have the possibility of apostatizing. But God, because He is God, never feared the way of freedom, the reality of sin, the eruption of wickedness, or the power of Satan. So, both in its origin and development, God always exercises His rule over sin. He does not force it, nor does He block it with violence but rather allows it to reach its full dynamic potential. He remains king yet still gives it free rein in His kingdom. He allows it to have everything—His world, His creatures, even His Anointed—for evils cannot exist without goods. He allows it to use all that is His; He gives it opportunity to show what it can do in order, in the end, as King of kings, to leave the theater of battle. For sin is of such a nature that it destroys itself by the very freedom granted it; it dies of its own diseases; it dooms itself to death. At the apex of its power, it is, by the cross alone, publicly shown up in its powerlessness (Col. 2:15).¹⁰

The First Sin and Its Outworking

The effects of Adam’s sin are profound. And they affect every one of us.

Sin Is Lawlessness, Which Brings Judgment

Sin is breaking the law of God, king of heaven and earth.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. (1 John 3:4)

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And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

In response to Adam’s rebellion, God cursed both humans and their world (Gen. 3:16–19). Physical and spiritual death set in. And with an eye toward the ultimate redemption of the created order, God cursed the world: “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20–21). This explains natural evil, because there would be no earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, or hurricanes apart from the fall.

Sin Results in Alienation from God

Adam’s sin broke the fellowship he had enjoyed with God. An individual sin may seem insignificant to humans, but not to the holy God, who is “of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong” (Hab. 1:13). So God “drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24).

Humans are God’s enemies, but when Jesus saves people, he reconciles them to God: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19). “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Rom. 5:10).

Sin Is Universal

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. . . . Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:12, 18–19)

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (1 Cor. 15:21–22)

Christ and Adam inhabit parallel representative roles.

Christians disagree on the manner in which Adam's guilt and corruption were transmitted to humans. Some don't think we can know. Others believe that Adam is organically connected to all humans, who were present in Adam when he sinned (see Heb. 7:9–10). More persuasive is that Adam is humanity's federal representative.¹¹ His sin was imputed to all his physical posterity.

Sin Is Depravity

Sin pervasively penetrates and radically corrupts people. Some people call this "total depravity," a term easily misunderstood. It doesn't mean that people are as wicked as they could possibly be or that they can't do any sort of good. It means that sin affects the total person: "All human beings are alienated from God, corrupted in every aspect of their being (e.g., physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, spiritually)."¹²

When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately experienced a sense of shame and attempted to cover their nakedness. They also felt guilty, so they hid themselves. They had never felt this way before, but now they would never rid themselves of guilt, shame, and corruption (see Gen. 3:8–13). Satan promised that they would gain knowledge of good and evil, but he didn't tell them that they couldn't handle it. Bavinck notes:

According to contemporary science, illness is not a particular substance of matter, but rather a living in changed circumstances, in such a way, in fact, that the laws of life do indeed remain the same as they are in a healthy body but the organs and functions of that life are disturbed in their normal activity. Even in the dead body the functioning does not cease, but the activity that begins then is of a destructive, disintegrating kind. In this same sense, sin is not a substance in itself, but that sort of disturbance of all the gifts and energies given to man which makes them work in another direction, not towards God but away from Him. Reason, will, interests, emotions, passions, psychological and physical abilities of one kind or another—these all were once weapons of righteousness but they have now by the mysterious operation of sin been converted into weapons of unrighteousness. The image of God which

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man received at his creation was not a substance, but it was nevertheless so really proper to his nature that he, losing it, became wholly misshapen and deformed.¹³

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18). Dabney explains:

The seat of this vicious moral *habitus* is of course strictly speaking, in the moral propensities. But since these give active direction to all the faculties and parts of soul and body, in actions that have any moral quality, it may be said that, by accommodation of language, they are all morally defiled. The conscience (the highest department of rational intuitions) is not indeed destroyed; but its accuracy of verdict is greatly disturbed by evil desire, and the instinctive moral emotions which should accompany those verdicts, are so seared by neglect, as to seem practically feeble, or dead for the time. The views of the understanding concerning all moral subjects are perverted by wrong propensions of the heart, so as to call good evil, and evil good. Thus “blindness of mind” on all moral subjects results. The memory becomes a store of corrupt images and recollections and this furnishes material for the imagination; defiling both. The corporeal appetites, being stimulated by the lusts of the soul, by a defiled memory or imagination, and by unbridled indulgence, become tyrannical and inordinate. And the bodily limbs and organs of sense are made servants of unrighteousness. Thus, what cannot be literally unholy is put to unholy uses.¹⁴

Sin Results in Inability

Total depravity describes the universal human condition. Total inability describes the result of that condition: apart from God’s own gracious intervention, humans are unable to remedy their condition. Dabney explains:

Every moral act has some tendency to foster the propensity which it indulges. Do you say it must be a very slight strength produced by one act; a very light bond of habit, consisting of one strand! Not always. But the scale, if slightly turned, is turned: the downhill career is begun, by at least one step, and the increase of momentum will surely occur, though gradually. Inordinate self-love has now become a principle of action, and it will go on to assert its dominion. . . .

Native depravity is total, in this sense; that it is, so far as man's self-recuperation is concerned, decisive and final. Original sin institutes a direct tendency to progressive, and at last, to utter depravity. In a word: it is spiritual death. Corporeal death may leave its victim more or less ghastly. A corpse may be little emaciated, still warm, still supple; it may still have a tinge of colour in the cheek and a smile on its lips: it may be still precious and beautiful in the eyes of those that loved it. But it is dead, and a loathsome putrefaction approaches, sooner or later. It is only a question of time.¹⁵

It's not as if humans want to submit to God but can't. Their will is corrupt so that they don't want to do what's right. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Rom. 8:7). Humans continue to resist God—which is exactly what they want to do—until God changes their will so that they want to submit to God.

Sin Results in Satanic Bondage

When Adam sinned, the dominion of the earth transferred from Adam to Satan. Satan leads a vast, organized, powerful force of demons opposed to God and committed to destroying God's people. He accuses and tempts humans (see Job 1; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zechariah 3).

The title Satan means "adversary." He is also called the Devil (which means "slanderer"), the Evil One, the accuser, the tempter, Belial (which means "worthlessness"), Beelzebub (a name given to the fly-god in Ekron), the prince of the devils, the prince of the power of the air, the prince of this world, the god of this age, the great dragon, and that old Serpent. He is the god of this world, blinding the minds of unbelievers until God shines the liberating light of Christ into their hearts (2 Cor. 4:1–6). "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). This is why Paul writes:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

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Bavinck observes:

[An] organic view is applicable also to the sins, which manifest themselves in particular areas of human life. There are personal and individual sins, but there are also common, social sins, the sins of particular families, nations and the like. . . . As it happens we take notice of only a very small portion of the sins of our limited group, and of that only superficially. But if we could penetrate through the essence of appearances, and trace out the root of sins in the hearts of people, we should very probably come to the conclusion that in sin too, there is oneness, idea, plan, pattern—in a word, that in sin too there is system. . . . In principle and essence it is nothing less than enmity against God, and in the world it aims at nothing less than sovereign dominion. And every sin, also the smallest, being as it is a transgression of the divine law, serves this final objective in connection with the whole system. The history of the world is not a blindly operating evolutionary process, but an awful drama, a spiritual struggle, centuries long in duration, a warfare between the Spirit from above and the spirit from below, between Christ and anti-Christ, between God and Satan.¹⁶

How Then Shall We Live?

Modern politicians, philosophers, scientists, psychologists, and sociologists often propose remedies for the ills of our world. But remedies that don't take into account this understanding of sin are mere child's play because they have not begun to understand the depth of the human predicament. Humans can't solve their deep, universal problem of sin. Only God can.

Such is the problem with which we are confronted. There is in us, in man, this terrible, mighty power called "sin" which alienates us from God and leads us to hate Him, and at the same time debases us and leads to conduct which can only be described as disgusting. How idle it is to think of these matters and to discuss them theoretically. How criminal to look at life through rose-coloured spectacles. It is only as we face the facts, and realize the true nature of the problem, that we shall come to see that one power alone is sufficient and adequate to deal with it—the power of God.¹⁷

We are entirely at God's mercy.

When we understand that our need is this extreme, we had better appreciate God's great love, compassionate mercy, and glorious grace

that delivers us from sin. This compels us to worship God for so great a salvation.

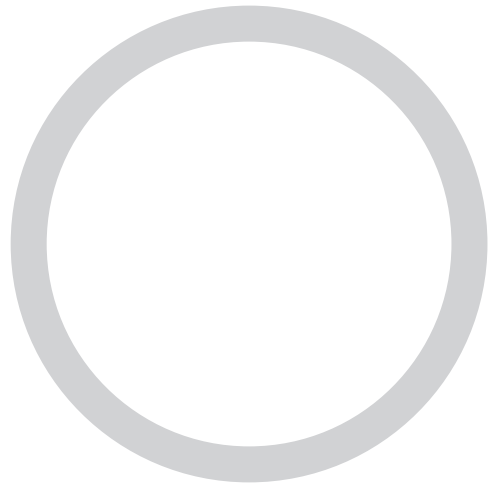
Sin's capacity to destroy is as close to infinite as is possible for the finite. We must dread and detest it. It's so great that only the death of God's Son could deliver us from it. So let us remember:

If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:26–31)

6

The Plan

Colin S. Smith



Some people have the idea that God had a marvelous plan for the world but that things went terribly wrong and that God had to come up with a costly initiative to sort out the mess. This is not what the Bible teaches.

God is not like the government, responding to unforeseen circumstances and making adjustments for unintended consequences. He is not like a scientist, experimenting to see what works, or a business entrepreneur who succeeds by finding new ideas that respond to emerging needs.

Bringing sinners to eternal life through Christ has always been God's plan. God promised eternal life "before the beginning of time, and at his appointed season he brought his word to light" (Titus 1:2–3).¹ Before he created the world, God saw the joy that would come from redeeming a vast company of sinners from every circumstance of life, every continent of the world, and every generation of history. And knowing the cost, he determined to do it.

This is why the Bible describes Christ as "the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). Christ's death on the cross was not something that God came up with in response to Satan's triumph in the garden of Eden or as a last resort when it became evident that men and women couldn't live up to the Ten Commandments. Redeeming sinners from all nations through Jesus Christ was God's plan from the beginning.

God's plan is very different from our plans. When I say, "I'll meet you for breakfast next Tuesday," I mean, "Assuming that I'm alive, that I have transportation, that I don't have some other emergency, and that the restaurant is open and serving breakfast, I will see you on Tuesday."

Our plans are contingent. They depend on how events unfold and

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whether we have the ability to bring them about. Many things in life are beyond our control.

But God is sovereign. He fulfills his own plan in his own time by his own power, and no one can stop him. God knows exactly what he is doing at every point in history in every nation of the world and through every event in your life.

This should be a great comfort to you. Nothing you have ever done has taken God by surprise. Nothing that has happened to you has caught him unaware. Nothing you do and nothing that happens to you can stop God from fulfilling his plan or even slow him down. That is what it means for God to be sovereign.

God knows exactly what he is doing. You can have confidence in knowing that the events of your life are not spinning out of control or settled by random chance but that they are in the hands of God, who plans for you in love. Christians find joy in knowing that God's plan will lead to the greatest possible display of his glory and the greatest possible joy for his people.

I invite you to join me on a whistle-stop tour through the Bible's storyline, where God reveals the splendor of his breathtaking purpose that sweeps from eternity past through the ages of human history into eternity future.

We begin with the Old Testament, where God lays out the blueprints for his plan. Then, in the Gospels, we look at how Jesus Christ achieves all that is needed for the plan to be accomplished. And finally we look at the New Testament letters and rejoice in how the Holy Spirit delivers all that God has promised and all that Christ has accomplished in the lives of all God's people.

God Makes a Promise: The Story of the Old Testament

God unfolds his plan through seven initiatives that are full of promise for all his people.

Creation

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Try to imagine nothing. It's almost impossible! But before the creation there

was nothing, except God. God created all things, and all things belong to him. “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it” (Ps. 24:1).

Take a fresh look at what God has created today. Look at the sky; it proclaims the work of God’s hands. Listen to the birds; they testify to God’s gentle care. Every snowflake bears witness to his majesty. Every sunrise speaks of his faithfulness. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. . . . There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard” (Ps. 19:1–3).

The whole creation reflects the glory of God, but God did something of a different order when he made the first man and woman. We know this because God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:26).

God made the man and the woman in his image. This is why you are different from a plant, an animal, a fish, or a bird. They were all made by God, but only humans were made like God. That gives human life unique value.

God chose to bring you into being. He has never made anyone quite like you before, and he will never make anyone quite like you again. You are not an accident. Your life is not a product of random chance. You were made by God, and you were made for God. The ultimate purpose of your life is that you should radiate a unique reflection of Jesus Christ. You were made to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

What does God promise? *God promises to give life to people who reflect his glory.*

The Bible never fully explains the origin of evil; it simply tells us that God placed the man and the woman in a garden where everything was good. Their food was provided on the trees; their work was fulfilling; their union and joy in marriage was complete; and they lived in fellowship with God, who appeared to them and walked with them in the garden.

There was a tree in the garden called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” and God told the man and the woman not to eat from the tree (Gen. 2:17). Since everything they knew was good, the only thing they could gain by disobeying God was the knowledge of evil.

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A serpent came enticing them with the knowledge of evil, and that is what they chose. In the act of disobeying God, they got the knowledge of evil, and we have all been stuck with it ever since. But God took the initiative and made another promise.

Destruction

God said to the Serpent, “Cursed are you” (Gen. 3:14). To curse means to assign to destruction. God was saying to the Serpent, “What you have done will not stand. You will be destroyed, and all that is evil will be destroyed with you.” God’s curse on the Serpent opens the door of hope for us.

Then God said to Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen. 3:17). The ground hadn’t done anything wrong! Adam deserved the curse because of his sin. But God diverted the curse away from the man and woman and onto the ground so that instead of being destroyed with the Serpent, they might be reconciled to God.

What does God promise? *God promises to destroy evil and rid the world of its curse.*

How would this happen? God said to the Evil One, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15).

The human race would always be in conflict with evil. That has proved true for every person in every culture in every generation. But God speaks of an offspring, someone who will come into the line of human history, born of the woman. He will be on our side. He will stand with us in this great conflict and act for us against all the powers of evil. Satan will strike his heel, but even as the Serpent bites his feet, our Champion will crush the Serpent’s head.

Life continued for Adam and Eve outside the garden of Eden. God’s grace had saved them from immediate judgment and given them the hope of eventual restoration, but they soon discovered that the evil unleashed through their disobedience brought devastating changes within them and around them.

The first human family was torn apart when Cain murdered his brother Abel and then spent the rest of his life in fear that his deed would be avenged (Genesis 4). The knowledge of evil was already proving a

liability. It had already separated the man and the woman from God. Now it was tearing up a family.

As violence increased, people came together to build a city, hoping that collective security would be the answer (Genesis 11). But what started with great hope ended in disappointment as people dispersed to the north, south, east, and west, driven by fear and divided by language.

Then out of all the emerging tribes and nations of the world, God chose one man.

Election

“I will bless you . . . and you will be a blessing. . . . All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen. 12:2–3). Abraham knew absolutely nothing about God. He was an idolater, living in complete spiritual darkness (Josh. 24:2). But God swept into his life uninvited and changed him forever.

If God waited for you or for me to seek after him, he would still be waiting. No one seeks God (Rom. 3:11). No one! By nature we run from God. If we seek him, it is because he has taken the initiative to seek us and to draw us to himself.

God made it clear to Abraham that this was precisely what he intended to do in the lives of people from every nation on the planet. God would gather a people from every race and language, every level of education and income, and bring them into the full knowledge of his blessing.

What is God promising now? *God promises to bless people from all nations.*

This blessing would not come to people from all nations through Abraham himself or through his descendants in general, but through one child called the “seed,” who would be born into Abraham’s line (Gal. 3:16). That is why the Old Testament follows the story of Abraham’s descendants.

Abraham and Sarah were getting old, and they had no children. But through a miracle of God’s grace, Sarah conceived in her old age and gave birth to a son, Isaac. Isaac’s son, Jacob, had twelve sons who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel.

God cared for this extended family in a special way. When famine threatened their lives, God provided food for them in Egypt. In the years that followed, God blessed them by multiplying their number so that the

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extended family of about seventy grew to a community of about two million people over a period of about four hundred years.

God's people were despised as they grew in number. They were treated with great cruelty and became slaves in Egypt. But God saw their suffering and had compassion on them.

Redemption

The Lord said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. . . . So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them [into] a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:7–8). God raised up a man called Moses and sent him to Egypt's pagan king with this command: "Let my people go" (Ex. 5:1). The king did not recognize God's authority, so he refused God's command and came under his judgment. God sent a series of plagues that led to a devastating judgment in which death came across the whole land.

Before God sent this judgment, he gave his people a command and a promise: each family was to slaughter a lamb and take the blood and paint it on their doorframes to indicate that death had already come to their house (Ex. 12:7). Then God said, "When I see the blood, I will pass over you" (Ex. 12:13).

On the night of the Passover, God's sacrifice brought his people out of slavery and delivered them from his judgment. After this, God made a covenant with them: "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" (Lev. 26:12).

God gave his people commandments and sacrifices. We need the commandments because God calls his people to walk in his ways. Those who bear his name must reflect his character. But God's people need more than commands. We need the sacrifices, because at our best we are still sinners who fall far short of the glory of God.

God's people had been delivered from judgment by the blood of a slaughtered lamb. In the same way, their fellowship with God would be sustained through a sacrifice offered for their sins. What is God promising now? *God promises to reconcile sinners to himself through a sacrifice.*

God's people were not satisfied with this arrangement—they wanted a king. God gave them the kind of king they wanted, and he turned out to

be a disaster. Then God gave them another king, and to this man God gave an extraordinary promise.

Dominion

“I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam. 7:12–13).

God’s people had a taste of his blessing in the time of King David that surpassed anything they had known before. With their enemies subdued and their borders secure, God’s people prospered. But what would happen after David?

Every father wants the best for his son, so God had David’s attention when he spoke about David’s offspring: God promised to raise up David’s own son and establish his kingdom. David’s son would fulfill David’s dream to build a house for God’s name.

Then God gave a promise so great that David had to sit down to take it in. God promised to establish the kingdom of David’s son forever, and he said, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sam. 7:14). The first son in view is David’s immediate son Solomon, who follows his father to the throne. But the promise of an eternal dynasty of David (2 Sam. 7:16) anticipates a son who will outstrip both David and Solomon. How can any kingdom last forever? And in what sense will this son of David also be the Son of God?

As we travel through the Old Testament story, we’re building a picture of God’s plan and of the person who will deliver what God promises: God promises to give life to people who will reflect his glory, to destroy evil and rid the world of its curse, to bless people from all nations, and to reconcile sinners to himself through a sacrifice for sins.

The one who fulfills this promise will be born of a woman; he will be the seed of Abraham and a descendant of David, a king who will bring the blessing of God’s rule. God will be his Father, and he will be God’s Son. God will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. What is God promising now? *God promises that his people will live under the blessing of his rule forever.*

After David there followed a line of kings; some were good, but most were bad. God’s people worshiped other gods and walked in their ways.

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God sent messengers called “prophets” to call his people back to obedience. Their message was largely ignored. So God, whose word never fails, moved to discipline and correct his people.

Correction

“This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jer. 29:10–11).

The land God had given to his people was overrun by enemies, and God’s people became exiles. They lived in Babylon under the discipline of God and wept their way through seventy years of sorrow and repentance.

But even in this most severe discipline, God was advancing his purpose for his people. God receives us in our sin, but he never leaves us in our sins. He is relentless in calling us to follow his ways and in correcting us when we depart from them. What is God promising now? *God promises that all his people will walk in all his ways.*

When God’s redeeming work in your life is complete, you will love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, you will love your neighbor as yourself, and you will share the joy of this love with all the people of God forever.

Until that day, God will not rest content where his people cling to sins that he has clearly told us to forsake. God is not in the business of ferrying unchanged, self-centered sinners into the joys of eternal life. God calls us to obedience, and when we resist his call, we should expect to come under his loving discipline that refuses to let us go.

After seventy years, God brought his chastened people back to the Promised Land. This restoration was a miracle of God’s grace that had seemed impossible. But then God gave one man a vision of what he was about to do.

Restoration

“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring

you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD” (Ezek. 37:11–13).

God’s promises are so great that faith staggers before them. That’s how it was for God’s people in the time of Ezekiel. Jerusalem lay in ruins; most of its people had fled or died; and those who survived were exiles in Babylon under a regime that had no intention of letting them go.

God’s people knew his promises, but the destruction of evil, God’s blessing on all nations, and the joys of the Davidic kingdom seemed like another world from their daily grind. God’s people found it hard to sing his praises in this strange land.

Then God gave the prophet Ezekiel a vision in which he saw a valley of dry bones. This picture fitted the mood of God’s people, who were saying, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off” (Ezek. 37:11). They had come to feel that their situation was hopeless.

In the vision, Ezekiel spoke God’s word to the bones, and as he did, the bones came together. Then they were covered with tendons, flesh, and skin, and the Spirit of God breathed life into the corpses, just as he had breathed life into Adam. God was bringing new life from the grave. What is God promising now? *God promises new life from the grave.*

Conclusion

The Old Testament is the story of God’s amazing promises. Step back and try to take it in:

- 1) God promises to give life to people who will reflect his glory.
- 2) God promises to destroy evil and rid the world of its curse.
- 3) God promises to bless people from all nations.
- 4) God promises to reconcile sinners to himself through a sacrifice for sins.
- 5) God promises that his people will live under the blessing of his rule forever.
- 6) God promises that all his people will walk in all his ways.
- 7) God promises to bring new life from the grave.

By any standard, these are amazing promises. Only God could make them, and only God can fulfill them. To find out how he has done that and to see what these promises can mean for you, we turn to the New Testament.

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Christ Fulfills the Promise: The Story of the Gospels

God makes promises so great that only God himself could deliver them, so God took human flesh in Jesus Christ. The Creator entered his own creation. God came and stood with us, acting for us, to fulfill his own promise. The Word who was with God and was God and by whom all things were made became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:2, 14). The Gospels tell us what Jesus Christ has accomplished for his people.

Incarnation

“The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

The angel announced to Mary that Jesus would be “the Son of the Most High” and “the Son of God” (Luke 1:32, 35), and Matthew records that he is “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). John describes him as the speech of God who became flesh (John 1:14).

God spoke his promise in words. Then when his Word became flesh, God’s promise was delivered. Only God can deliver what God has promised. That is why Christian praise and thanksgiving are so intimately tied up with the confession that Jesus Christ is God and that Jesus Christ is a human being. As we are born, so also was Christ born—to live our life and to die our death. He came to us and stands with us to act for us. As God, he delivers what God has promised; as man, he delivers what God has promised to us.

The angel also announced that Jesus is holy: “the holy one” (Luke 1:35). Here’s something that has never been seen before in the history of the world, nor will it ever be seen again: a *man* who is holy by nature. This man belongs in heaven by right and, because he is God, has the capacity to bring others there with him.

The union of God and man in Jesus Christ, the Holy One, opens the door of hope for us. John Calvin says this beautifully:

In short, since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us.²

This is the purpose of the incarnation. Only the God-man could deliver the promises of God to men and women. The birth of the Holy One of God led to the perfect, sinless life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Temptation

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:1–2). Christ confronted Satan when he was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan, and Christ triumphed where Adam failed. The Serpent tempted Jesus three times, just as he had done with Eve and Adam. The parallels are obvious, but we must not miss the differences.

The environment was clearly different. Eve and Adam faced temptation in a garden with food supplied on the trees all around them. Christ faced temptation in a desert where there was no food, and he was hungry.

The initiatives were different. Satan came looking for the woman in the garden. But Christ went after Satan in the desert. The Holy Spirit led him into confrontation with the Devil. Christ stalked Satan, drew him out into the open, and initiated the confrontation.

The greatest difference was the outcome. Where Adam failed, Christ triumphed. Having plied Christ with his most exquisite temptation, Satan was forced to retreat “until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). Overcoming the Holy One by temptation was clearly not an option.

Christ’s triumph over temptation has huge significance for us. Adam’s failure brought misery for us. He passed on the effects of his failure to all who derive their life from him. By nature we belong to Adam, who failed. We share in his failure. We are “under sin” (Rom. 3:9).

But Christ’s triumph brings hope for us. As Adam passed on the effects of his failure to all who derive their life from him, so Christ passes on the effects of his triumph to all who draw *new life* from him. By grace and through faith we belong to Christ who triumphed. We share in his triumph. We are “under grace” (Rom. 6:14).

The weakness of Adam, who failed, is in you, so be on your guard against temptation. But the strength of Christ, who triumphed, is also in you by the Holy Spirit, so when we are tempted, we can stand firm.

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After his triumph in the desert, “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside” (Luke 4:14). What happened next will help you to understand our experience of life in the world today.

Rejection

“‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this” (Luke 4:18–19, 28).

Picture the small crowd gathered in the synagogue as Jesus reads the Scripture and explains its meaning. His words are full of hope, but the people respond not with joy but with fury. They were “furious.” In some circles of the ministry of Jesus Christ, who comes to our aid, he was rejected from the beginning, and this theme runs right through the Gospels.

On another occasion, Jesus healed a man whose hand was paralyzed. It was an amazing miracle, but notice the response: the Pharisees “were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:11). Another time Christ cast demons out of a man who had terrorized his community with violence. But when the people saw the man who had plagued them sitting dressed and in his right mind, they asked Jesus to leave the region (Luke 8:37).

This pattern of rejection culminated in the crowd calling for Jesus to be crucified. Pilate tried to intervene, but “with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed” (Luke 23:23).

We live in a Christ-rejecting world. You cannot understand the world in which we live until you grasp this: Christ “came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:11).

When natural disasters happen, people ask, “Why doesn’t God do something about that?” But when he came and calmed the storm, we rejected him. When gunmen terrorize schools, we ask, “Why doesn’t God do something about that?” But when he came and cast out demons, we asked him to leave. When cancer comes we ask, “Why doesn’t God do

something about that?" But when he came and healed the sick, people rejected him.

"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." Thank God it doesn't end there. "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Here's our position as Christians: we live in a Christ-rejecting world with all its sin and death, but we belong to a Christ-exalting family with all its life and joy. We experience both the pain of this fallen world *and* the hope of all who are in Christ *at the same time*.

While the world was rejecting him, Jesus went up a mountain with three of his disciples.

Transfiguration

"As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning" (Luke 9:29). Peter, James, and John saw the glory, brightness, and splendor of Jesus Christ. They saw what the angels see in heaven and what one day every human eye will see. How bright is a flash of lightning? Jesus, whom these men had come to know as a friend, was and is the brightness of the Father's glory (Heb. 1:3).

But there's more: "Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus" (Luke 9:30–31). Moses and Elijah had lived and died hundreds of years before. Now they appear, large-as-life, sharing the glory of Jesus.

Then the voice of the Almighty spoke from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). The world today rejects Christ. But God calls you to listen to him. God has chosen him, and he is able to bring dead men into glory!

The disciples did not stay on the mountain. The cloud vanished; Moses and Elijah disappeared from view; and Jesus' face became as they had known it before. The disciples had to live by faith, just as we do, and when they came down the mountain, they walked back into a world filled with great evil and profound need.

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Crucifixion

“When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified him” (Luke 23:33). Our sin reached its full horror and found its most awful expression in the cross. We all disobeyed God’s commands; then we crucified God’s Son. God’s judgment had to fall on the human race, but God diverted the judgment we deserve to another place.

As the soldiers were nailing Jesus to the cross, our Lord prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). When Jesus said this, he was isolating himself under the judgment of God. He knew that judgment would come that day, and it did. But he cried out to the Father, “Don’t let it come on them. Let it fall on me.”

That is what happened at Calvary. The punishment due to your sin was poured out on Jesus. Christ became the lightning rod for your judgment, and forgiveness was released through his suffering and death on the cross for you. The curse fell on Jesus because he “bore our sins” (1 Pet. 2:24). The weight of our guilt was “laid on him” (Isa. 53:6), and he became the sacrifice for our sins.

Christ’s death changes death for all his people. When you die, you will not carry your sin and guilt into your death because he carried it into *his* death for you. If you are in Christ, you will never know what it is like to die a sin-bearing death.

When our sin reached its full horror, God’s love was displayed in all its glory. If you doubt God’s love for you, look at the cross. No other love can match this. Nothing else in our experience can come close. God’s love for us in Christ is greater than we ever dared to dream.

Resurrection

“He is not here; he has risen!” (Luke 24:6). On Easter morning a group of women went to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid and found it empty. The good news that they heard was not “Jesus is alive” but “He has risen.” The Son of God was alive in heaven before he took human flesh. He could have returned to heaven, leaving his crucified body in the tomb. The angels could have said, “His body is in the tomb, but don’t be afraid; his Spirit is with the Father in heaven.” But that would not have fulfilled God’s plan of redemption for us.

When God created the angels, he made them souls without bodies,

and when he created animals, he made them bodies without souls. But he created us as a unique integration of body and soul together.

Death separates what God has joined. It is the undoing of our nature, and that is why death is such a terrible enemy. But Christ went through death, triumphed over death, and came out of death. He came to redeem your life—soul and body—and to present all of you, without fault and with great joy, to your Father in heaven (Jude 24).

Then Christ opened the minds of the disciples so they could see that the whole message of the Bible leads to and flows from his death and resurrection. He told them, “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:45–47).

Christ was crystal-clear about the message the apostles were to preach: repentance and forgiveness of sins. Repentance means that you completely change your mind about your sin and your whole position toward Jesus Christ. You separate yourself from the world’s rejection of Jesus, and you take your stand with him, trusting in his mercy and placing yourself under his authority.

Forgiveness means that Jesus Christ embraces you in love. He cleanses your guilt, reconciles you to God the Father, and enters your life through his Spirit—giving you power to live the new life of faith and the obedience to which he calls you.

Ascension

“He lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven” (Luke 24:50–51). The last glimpse the disciples had of Jesus was with his hands raised, blessing them. Christ’s atoning work on the cross was finished. But his work of blessing the disciples continued even as he ascended into heaven. This wonderful reality must have been sealed in their minds and hearts by the manner of Christ’s ascension.

Today at the right hand of the Father, Christ continues to bless his people. His hands are not raised against us, but for us. He does not speak condemnation to us but blessing. His words are life. When you are “in Christ,” everything that is his becomes yours. His sin-bearing death is

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yours, his resurrection life is yours, and one day you will share in his ascension too.

The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ [i.e., believers who have passed through death into the presence of Jesus] will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. (1 Thess. 4:16–17)

When Christ comes in glory, all his people will share in his ascension. The bodies of those who have died will be raised. The bodies of those who are still alive will be changed, and God’s people, redeemed in Christ, will be with him forever.

Conclusion

Here is the breathtaking sweep of what God promises us in Jesus Christ. Jesus came and lived and died and rose again so that:

- 1) We might become a new creation fully reflecting the image of God.
- 2) We might be delivered from the curse of evil.
- 3) We might enjoy the blessing of God together with a vast company of redeemed people from all nations.
- 4) We might be reconciled to God through Christ, who offered himself as the sacrifice for our sins.
- 5) We might live under the blessing of God’s rule forever.
- 6) We might walk in God’s ways, loving him with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves.
- 7) We might receive new life from the grave.

God seals all his promises with his own “yes” in Jesus (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus is the green light on all of God’s promises, and you can have full confidence that everything God has promised is yours in him.

Next we turn to the New Testament letters, where we see how the Holy Spirit applies all that Christ has accomplished in the lives of his people.

The Church Communicates the Promise: The Story of the Acts

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to his disciples. Christ was returning to the Father in heaven, but his presence and power would be with them and in them by the Holy Spirit.

Christ's promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. Peter spoke to a large crowd of people from all nations gathered in Jerusalem. He described the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and then, filled with the Holy Spirit, he declared, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

The people clearly believed what Peter was telling them. If they didn't, they would have argued or simply walked away. But that was not their reaction. "When the people heard this [i.e., Peter's message about Jesus], they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

Peter replied, "Repent" (Acts 2:38). That's important. True faith is shot through with repentance, and true repentance is shot through with faith. Faith and repentance are like two sides of a coin; you can't have one without the other. Faith and repentance are birthed together when you see the love and mercy of God for you in Jesus Christ.

Peter continued, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38). Peter tells them to publicly identify themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and receive the mark, the sign, the seal, of God's promise. God promises the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit to everyone he calls (Acts 2:38–39). God will forgive you. He will reconcile you to himself. Christ will give you new life by the Holy Spirit, whom he will give to you.

It's worth remembering that Peter was speaking in the same city where Jesus had been crucified just fifty days earlier. Some who were there on the day of Pentecost would also have been in the crowd that called for him to be crucified, crying, "Let his blood be on us and on our children" (Matt. 27:25); it is to *these people* that Peter speaks about Christ's forgiveness and the gift of his Holy Spirit: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

The promise is for "you." If you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and

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turn from your sin, God will forgive you for all that you have done. He will give you his Holy Spirit, making it possible for you to break free from old ways and live a new life.

The promise is for “your children.” That means it is not limited to one generation that lived two thousand years ago. It is not locked in the past. This promise is never outdated. It spans the centuries, and it is for us today.

The promise is for all who are “far off.” The promise of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ is for people from every background. If you feel far from God today, this promise is for you.

God promised that through the seed of Abraham, people from every nation on earth would be blessed. Forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ is God’s promise for people in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, Australia, and Antarctica. The mission of the church is to take this good news of Jesus Christ to every person.

The promise is for “all whom the Lord our God will call.” He calls through the gospel. God was calling those people right there, as Peter was speaking about Christ. God is calling you today, as you read the good news of the gospel. There is forgiveness and new life for you in Jesus Christ today.

The Holy Spirit Delivers the Promise: The Story of the New Testament Letters

What does this new life in Christ look like? What happens when the Holy Spirit delivers God’s promise in a person who repents and believes? What has God done for you and in you through Jesus Christ?

The New Testament letters take us inside God’s promise to show us all that is ours in Jesus Christ. I want you to see the sweep of God’s redeeming work in a human life. It begins with regeneration.

Regeneration: You Have New Life

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . . For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:3, 23).

When God created the heavens and the earth, our planet was formless and empty—a dark, watery chaos. The Spirit of God hovered over the waters (Gen. 1:2); then God spoke light into darkness and brought life to the world. God formed the beauty of the earth.

The same Spirit who hovered over the waters at creation is like a wind blowing into human lives (John 3:8). He gives light to people who cannot see Christ's glory (2 Cor. 4:4), and he brings new life to people who are dead toward God (Eph. 2:1).

Jesus says, "The Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6). When the Holy Spirit regenerates you, he changes your soul so that with a new mind and a new heart you love Christ, trust him, and follow him freely. Jesus describes this miracle as being "born again" or "born of the Spirit" (John 3:7–8). Behind all believing lies this miracle of God's regenerating grace.

The interface of regeneration and faith is a mystery that should lead you to worship. God's children are known and distinguished by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

But why have you believed when others have not? Why did you come to faith when you did and not before or after? God took the initiative in regenerating you. God opened your eyes to see the glory of Christ. The Holy Spirit hovered over the dark chaos of your life and made you a new creation in Christ.

Do you see that God has done something amazing in your soul, giving you new life from above? God has given you a new heart. He has put his Spirit in you. He has given you new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3).

Union: You Are in Christ

"Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom. 6:3–4).

When I baptize people, I plunge them down into the water. When a person is baptized in the Holy Spirit, he or she is plunged "into the Spirit," and is thus united with Christ. This union with Christ is the wonderful reality to which baptism in water points.

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Taking his cue from the New Testament, Martin Luther describes the believer's union with Christ using the analogy of marriage:

Faith . . . unites the soul to Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. By this mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul become one flesh. And if they are one flesh and there is between them a true marriage . . . it follows that everything they have, they hold in common. . . . Accordingly the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own.³

I was thinking recently about folks in the church we served in England and how little I have done to keep in touch with them. I was also thinking about some other projects I'm behind on, and I was having an "O wretched man that I am" kind of day. The following morning, my wife, Karen, was sitting at our dining room table working on Christmas letters. She sends over one hundred cards to England—each one with a handwritten note—and she signs them: "From Karen *and Colin*."

There I was, thinking about my wretched failure to keep in touch with these people, when actually I have written to them every year for the last fourteen years! In isolation I have done a wretched job, but when I see that I am united to my wife, I have joy because I share in what she has done. A letter has gone out in my name every year!

Christ has done for us what we have failed to do for ourselves. He has lived the life that we have not lived and cannot live. But when we are "in Christ," all that he has done is ours—his life, death, and resurrection have our name on them as though they were our own.

That's union with Christ. What it meant for him was being nailed to the cross. What it means for us is justification.

Justification: You Are Declared Righteous

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). "Justified" is a legal word that describes a verdict. When God justifies, he pronounces a person righteous. When he condemns, he declares a person guilty. Justification and condemnation are about recognizing something that is already true.

When justice prevails, a guilty man will be sentenced and an innocent man will be acquitted. Being acquitted does not make a man innocent; it

is the man's innocence that leads to his being acquitted. In the same way, being sentenced does not make a man a criminal; it is the man's crime that leads to his being sentenced.

As a matter of simple justice, we should expect God to condemn sinners and justify the righteous. But here is something truly amazing: God justifies sinners. Try to let that massive contradiction sink into your mind. God justifies *sinners*! How can he do that?

God presented Jesus as a propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:25). That means when Jesus died, all the anger and hostility that God rightly has toward sin, wickedness, and evil was poured out on him. Like a cup filled with God's judgment, Jesus drank all of it until it was empty. At the cross Christ absorbed God's judgment that was due to our sin.

Faith unites us to Christ, and when we are "in Christ," God counts all our sin as his and all his righteousness as ours. He bore our condemnation, and we are justified in him. Through the cross, God demonstrated his justice so as to be just and at the same time the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26).

If God justified only the righteous, how could we have any hope? The good news is that God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). As faith unites us to Jesus Christ, the power of his atoning sacrifice becomes ours. We are freed from the fear of condemnation due to our sin and guilt and brought into his marvelous love.

Adoption: You Are Loved

"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (Gal. 4:4-7).

Through Christ, God adopts us into his family and loves us as his own sons and daughters. No other experience of love can compare to the love God has for you in Christ. Someone may pledge to love us "as long as we both shall live," but God pledges his love to us in life, through death and for eternity. No one else can say to us, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

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God loves us with an everlasting love. That means that God loved us before we were born and even before the creation of the world. Christ had us in view when he came into the world, when he hung on the cross, and when he rose from the dead.

It is the special work of the Holy Spirit to convince us that we are a dearly loved child of God. “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit makes God’s love real in our experience. He connects us to the reality of God’s love for us that was demonstrated conclusively at the cross.

One of the challenges you will face in the Christian life is to wean yourself off the habit of discerning God’s love on the basis of feelings or circumstances. Our natural instinct is to feel that God loves us when we are healthy, have a good job, and life is going well. But when the wheels start to come off, our first instinct is to question God’s love and assume the worst.

What we ought to do is remind ourselves of the incalculable demonstration of God’s love in the cross. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

Sanctification: You Will Be Holy

“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it” (1 Thess. 5:23–24).

Sanctification is the progressive work of the Holy Spirit in a believer by which we grow in the life God is calling us to live. It is the desire and longing of every Christian’s heart. Bishop Ryle says:

Most men hope to go to heaven when they die; but few, it may be feared, take the trouble to consider whether they would enjoy heaven if they got there. Heaven is essentially a holy place. . . . What could an unsanctified man do in heaven if by chance he got there?⁴

To paraphrase John Owen on this same point:

There is no idea more foolish or pernicious than this—that a person who is not sanctified, not made holy in this life, should afterwards be taken into the blessedness that consists in the enjoyment of God. Such

a person cannot enjoy God, nor would God be a reward to them. Holiness is perfected in heaven, but it is always begun in this world.⁵

Justification and sanctification are always found together in Christ, and grasping how they interrelate is crucial to understanding the gospel. The two most common errors are to confuse or separate them. Confusion happens if you slide into thinking that your standing with God depends in some way on your performance in the Christian life. It doesn't. You are justified by faith in the finished work of Christ.

Separation occurs when a Christian gets the idea that since we are justified by faith alone, obedience to Christ really doesn't matter. It does. Christ holds the blessings of justification and sanctification *in himself*. When we embrace Christ by faith, these gifts become ours together. Nobody has the one without the other.

That's why the Bible says, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). This doesn't mean that we are saved by being holy but that the pursuit of holiness is evidence that we are in Christ, who justifies us by his blood.

Paul prays for the sanctification of believers, "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through"—and we should pray for our sanctification too. But sanctification is also a promise: "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it" (1 Thess. 5:23–24).

Hold on to that promise when you are discouraged over your lack of progress in the Christian life. What God's grace has begun in you will be completed for his glory and for your joy. God will give you the desire of your heart. You will be conformed to the likeness of his Son, forever (Rom. 8:29).

Glorification: You Will Reflect Christ's Glory

"When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:4). Our lives remain a mass of contradictions. This is true of every Christian. We love Christ, but we feel the pull of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. We trust Christ, but we struggle with many doubts and fears. We have new life in Christ, but at the same time our bodies are subject to sickness, aging, and death.

Christians are a mass of contradictions, but it will not always be so. Your love for Christ will be complete, your faith will be turned to sight,

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and you will experience the joys of everlasting life in a resurrected body. You will be with Christ in glory forever.

Not only will you be in Christ's glory, but his glory will be in you. Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18). Your Christian life is like a tree in winter. It looks bare, but it is alive; and when the spring comes, it will flourish. Its full glory is still to be seen.

Learning to anticipate your future glory is of great benefit in the Christian life. We must use this truth to our advantage when it seems that everything is against us. That's what Paul did: "Therefore we do not lose heart. . . . For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor. 4:16–17). The apostle is telling us from his own experience how to make sure that we don't lose heart.

God works through the debilitating trials of your life to form a unique reflection of Christ in you that will endure for his glory and to your joy forever. On that day, all that God promises will be ours:

- 1) We will fully reflect the image and likeness of God.
- 2) We will be delivered from the curse of evil.
- 3) We will share the joy of eternal life with redeemed people from all nations.
- 4) We will enter the presence of God redeemed by the blood of Jesus.
- 5) We will live this life under the blessing of Christ's rule in his kingdom forever.
- 6) We will love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and we will love our neighbor as ourselves.
- 7) We will rejoice forever in this new life from the grave that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Consummation: We Will See God

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea" (Rev. 21:1). John saw a new heaven and a new earth—not a different earth, but a new earth. This earth will finally be redeemed from the curse and liberated from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:21).

Then John saw "the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev. 21:2). The city has gates facing north, south, east, and west, indicating that God has fulfilled his promise to gather a

vast community of people from every nation on earth and to bring them into the joys of life in his everlasting kingdom.

One picture is never enough to capture the glory of what Christ has prepared for us. So alongside the city John sees the image of a bride beautifully dressed for her husband (Rev. 21:2). Christ is the center of heaven's joy, and all our joy will be in him.

John heard a loud voice from heaven's throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev. 21:3). Everything that separates us from God is gone. God shares eternal life with all his redeemed people.

God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. Sorrow will be beyond the experience of God's people. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

Conclusion

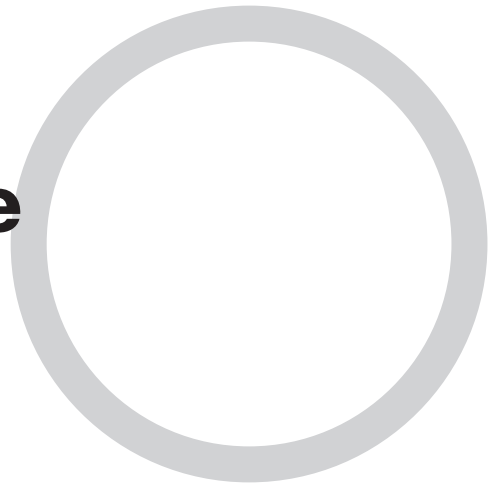
God has made amazing promises that only God could deliver. They are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. These promises include regeneration, union with Christ, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification, and the promise of everlasting joy in the consummation of God's redeeming purpose.

All this belongs to those who are in Jesus Christ. It can be yours. The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off. Repent. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. By believing you will have life in his name (John 20:31).

7

What Is the Gospel?

Bryan Chapell



The events that led to his arrest had been years in the making. When he was growing up, the polite phrase our family used to describe my brother's mental capability was, "He has a harder time learning than most." Though his mind stayed undeveloped, David became increasingly strong in body and will as my parents aged. Stresses of dealing with him, as well as with their own issues, led to their separation and to greater difficulties with my brother. As an adult, David's desire for independence and his developmental disabilities were constant concerns. For friendship and thrills, he developed relationships that spelled trouble. The obvious resulted.

His arrest and confinement were more than his mind could process. He knew only the overwhelming fear that someone with a young child's mental ability would experience in a jail cell. He huddled in a corner and trembled.

My brother's obvious fear rekindled something in the heart of another man in that cell. And despite his own difficulties, he shared with David the message of God's mercy: "Jesus can help you. Trust him."

The truths of Sunday school lessons in special-needs classes that David had attended as a child rushed back to him. He prayed for God to forgive him and trusted in Jesus as his Savior.

David will be in jail for a long time. He will also be with Jesus forever—forgiven, restored, treasured, and transformed. This is the gospel for my brother and for all who trust in Jesus.

Gospel simply means "good news." The Bible uses the term to refer to the message that God has fulfilled his promise to send a Savior to rescue

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broken people, restore creation's glory, and rule over all with compassion and justice. That's why a good summary of the gospel is "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).¹

God's rescue, restoration, and rule apply to our spiritual condition but are not limited to spiritual realities. Through Jesus Christ, our God delivers his people from the eternal consequences of human sin that have touched everything. Our salvation includes us, but it's also bigger than we are.

Before we further explore these amazing truths, we need to recognize that the Bible does not trumpet them just to dazzle us. God reveals these truths so that sinners such as David and you and me can forever be free of the guilt and power of sin by trusting the good news that Jesus is the Lord who comes to save us. Following are key aspects of that good news.

What God Requires, He Provides²

We may not like the idea of someone identifying us as "sinners," especially if we use that term to refer only to ax murderers and child molesters. But the Bible says that God is absolutely holy and that all who do not match his perfection are "sinners," a term that simply means missing God's standard. If we sin to any degree, we become something other than what God intended (Rom. 3:23; James 2:10). He made us to reflect his holy nature (1 Pet. 1:16). So our faults not only hurt us but also mar our relationship with God (Eph. 4:30).

God's Image

Our relational problems with God began when our human nature was corrupted by our first parents' sin (Rom. 5:12). Since Adam and Eve, every human knows what it means to fail loved ones, hurt others, and abandon one's own ideals. All of us know shame and remorse. These actually reflect a spiritual reality we may not have recognized: we feel guilt because we were made to be like God, but we fail to live so (Rom. 3:10).

We were made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27). He designed us to be like him so that we could love him and others made in his image. When we sin, we are going against our original nature, and something deep inside of us winces. The guilt we feel is an echo of the pain our heart registers any time sin distances us from the relationship we were designed to have with our God.

God requires holiness for us to have a close relationship with God, but both our nature and our actions distance us from him. How can we fix this? We can't. We are imperfect creatures and can't make ourselves holy any more than a muddy hand can wipe a white shirt clean.

God is the only one who can fix our relationship with him, and he does so by providing the holiness he requires. God takes the initiative (1 John 4:19). Through Jesus, our God rescues us from the consequences of our sin. He provides what we cannot, and that's why we sometimes refer to his provision as "the gospel of grace." *Grace* means "gift"—something given to those who cannot provide what they need—like a clean shirt given to those who have muddied their own.

God's Holiness

Jesus Christ's name communicates much about how he makes us holy. The name Jesus means "deliverer"; his mission was to deliver (or save) us from the consequences of our sin. The added word, *Christ*, is more a description of Jesus' purpose than an actual name. It is a title that means "anointed one." God the Father anointed Jesus to be his special envoy to provide his holiness for humanity. For many centuries God promised through his prophets that he would send his anointed one to rescue his people (Acts 3:18–20). Still, most people were surprised when the anointed one turned out to be God's own Son.

Jesus came as the perfect bearer of God's image. Though he was divine, Jesus took on human qualities (Gal. 4:4–5; Phil. 2:6–11). He became God incarnate (the word *incarnate* means "in the flesh"). Jesus was like us in every way except one: he was without sin (Heb. 4:15). Not only did Jesus do no wrong, but because he was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, he also had no natural corruption, which other humans share (Matt. 2:20–23).

Christ's holiness does two things for us. First, it shows us how to live for God. If a life were full of love and empty of selfishness, then it would look like Jesus' life (1 John 3:16). Through him we learn how to live to the fullest, to be as God made us to be—fully human and yet in full fellowship with God. But what if such conduct and fellowship elude us? What then? Then we need the second provision of Jesus' holiness. That provision

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moves beyond showing us how to live *for* God and actually enables us to live *with* God by satisfying his standards.

God's Justice

Jesus' holiness made him the perfect sacrifice for our sin. This sounds strange to modern ears, but it's the message the Bible presents from beginning to end. Our sin is not just an annoyance to God. The sin of humanity has resulted in inestimable suffering. God does not overlook the anger we unleash, the abuse we inflict, the suffering we disregard, the injustice we ignore. A holy God cannot simply hide his eyes or cover his ears to such sin. Its victims scream for justice, and God's compassion provides what his righteousness requires through Jesus' sacrifice.

Since the Son of God had no sin, his willingness to suffer on a cross and accept the penalty we deserve is far beyond any recompense that humanity could provide. Christ's righteousness so overbalances our unrighteousness that his sacrifice is sufficient to compensate for the sin of the entire world and of all ages (Rom. 5:15–19; Heb. 9:26–28; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 John 2:2). God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as a substitute for our punishment (1 Pet. 2:24). He paid the debt to justice we could not pay (Ps. 47:7–9; Titus 2:11–14). His suffering atones for (covers) our wrongs (1 John 4:10). His death rescues us from the hell we deserve (Gal. 3:13–14).

For those of us who wrestle with guilt, Christ's provision is amazingly good news. In prison my brother David cannot pay the debt for crimes he has committed any more than we who are guilty of sin can clear the debt we owe a holy God for our breaking his law. Yet because Jesus came to pay our spiritual debt despite our spiritual destitution, David and you and I can live with hearts free of shame.

Christ's Righteousness

Christ's sacrifice satisfies divine justice (Rom. 3:20–26). My spiritual status becomes just-as-if-I-had-never-sinned (Isa. 1:18). Theologians refer to God's declaration of this new holy status as "justification." Justification results from an amazing exchange that took place on the cross of Christ. He took our sin on himself and consequently provided us with his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18). He became like us (sinful), so that we could become like him (holy).

Christ's great provision for sin allows me to confess the magnitude of my brother's sin—and mine and yours. All people—regardless of the monstrosity of evil in their lives—can also have their sin atoned for by the sacrifice of Jesus.

One of the proofs of this good news is the rest of the verse that was quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The apostle Paul writes, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim. 1:15). Earlier in life Paul had blasphemed Jesus and murdered his followers. But now the apostle can exult that Christ's atonement fully compensates for these wrongs—not because of the insignificance of Paul's sin, but because of the enormity of the cross. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was sufficient to atone for the greatest of sins and the greatest of sinners.

God's Love

But how do we make sure that the provisions of Christ apply to us? Even Jesus talks about some people going to hell (John 3:18; Matt. 23:33), so we know that Christ's atonement—though it is sufficient for everyone—does not apply to everyone. What assurance do we have that it applies to us? The answer lies in the reminder that God provides what he requires.

God does not require us to earn his pardon. He does not tell us to do some great spiritual task or to feel especially deep remorse to compensate for our sin. Instead, the good news is that God provides his pardon by grace alone (Rom. 3:23–24). He gives his love to us rather than requiring us to gain it.

If we had to earn God's love, then it would be very hard for us to obey his greatest command: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). Whenever people make their love conditional upon our service, we may serve them but we cannot love them. If a parent says to a child, "I will love you only if you get an A in math, mow the lawn, and feed the cat," then the child may obey but ultimately will not love the one whose love is so manipulative.

So also the Lord, who requires that we love him, provides for us to do so by making his love an unconditional gift. The Bible says, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). God takes the initiative to demonstrate his unconditional love.

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Covenant Faithfulness

The Bible teaches us more about God's taking-the-initiative love by recording the covenants he makes with his people. By such covenants God promises to love his people unconditionally. These covenants are not contracts. A contract can be broken when its stipulations are not met, but lack of performance does not annul God's covenant. That's why God's people can say, "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful" (2 Tim. 2:13).

Israel's exodus from slavery is one of the best examples of this covenant love. Centuries earlier, God had promised to love Abraham and his descendants. Yet time and again these people failed God. They became slaves in Egypt until God sent Moses to deliver them. Only after their deliverance did God give the commandments that would enable the Israelites to live holy lives.

The order of these events is crucial for our understanding of God's covenant love. God delivered the people *before* he gave the law to them. He did not wait for them to obey him before he saved them (see Deut. 5:6). He did not say, "Obey me, and then I will love you." In covenant faithfulness he said, "I have already loved you and rescued you, and that is why you should follow these laws that will bless your lives."

God's grace toward us—loving us even before we loved or obeyed him—is an essential part of the gospel's good news (Rom. 5:8). If God were waiting for us to straighten out our lives before he loved us, then there would be no hope for someone like my brother in that jail cell. David's life was a mess. There was no way that he could correct the wrong he had done. He had neither the physical freedom nor the mental capacity to reverse the damage he had done to others. But when he acknowledged the truth that Jesus loved him and would help him, then Christ's grace applied to David despite years of sin and a lifetime of inability.

All his adult life David had spoken to his family in simple sentences and grunts. But when he trusted Jesus' love for him, David began to send letters to us. We did not even know he could write. The spelling and grammar were childlike, but they improved over time—as did David's ability to describe his faith. He wrote from prison, "God can do miracle things for everyone that believes in him. I believe in God. He sent his Son Jesus to die for our sins. God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son. Anyone who believes in him will not die but have eternal life."

By making the words of John 3:16 his own, David told everyone he knew about the gospel of Jesus Christ: it's big enough for all the world; it's big enough for all our sins; and it's available to all who believe in him.

Faith in Christ

The gospel applies to all who *believe* in Jesus. God does not say that he will save those who climb mountains or clean up their addictions or relieve poverty or reach some designated level of goodness. He saves those who simply believe in Jesus as their Savior (John 3:16).

David's situation helps us understand the nature of such faith. We should not be swayed by misconceptions that faith in Jesus identifies something good in us that makes him love us. According to this thinking, faith just makes us a little bit better than other people. But such definitions of faith make no sense at all. How could doing a little thing like acknowledging that Jesus died for sin possibly compensate for the apostle Paul's blasphemy and murder? How could my brother's simple belief in Christ's sacrifice make up for past crimes? If God were balancing the scales of justice with our faith, then he would not be just. We must understand that Christ's sacrifice, not our faith, is the work that balances the scales of divine justice.

If our faith earned God's grace, then we are responsible for our salvation. We could take the credit. But the Bible is clear: Jesus saves. Our faith does not earn God's love or merit his grace. Think how strange it would be for a man who had been rescued from drowning to strut down the beach boasting, "I'm alive because I was good enough to call for the lifeguard to save me." Everyone would recognize that the saved swimmer had no cause for boasting. His rescue was entirely a result of depending on the good will and ability of the lifeguard.

Depending entirely on another is the antithesis of a second common misconception about saving faith: it's made sufficient by its strength. People think that by a sufficient degree of psychological effort or theological study they will pump enough faith into their hearts to warrant God's love. But thinking that salvation depends on our having superior faith is just another way of making faith a work we need to do better than others. This is like the swimmer boasting on the beach, "I am saved because I held on to the lifeguard with greater strength than others have."

To understand biblical faith, we must think of ourselves as entirely

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exhausted from trying to survive spiritually and relying entirely on the strength of the lifeguard (Jesus) to save us. Our hope cannot be based on the strength of our faith—the waves of weakness and doubt are far too strong for that—but rather on Jesus’ provision alone.

Picturing my brother cowering in a jail cell with limited mental capacity, exhausted emotions, and great guilt, I do not want the basis of his hope to be the strength of his faith. I want his hope to be based on the strength of Jesus’ love. David has no strength of mind or heart for anything else. His hope must be the same as that of the apostle Paul, who knew what it meant to come to the end of his wisdom, zeal, and strength as the basis for God’s approval. Paul wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9).

Faith is not a work or a mental exercise or an emotional experience. We cannot boast that we have sufficient faith to merit God’s love. Saving faith expresses human yieldedness and confesses that there is nothing about us that should make God love us. We rely on Jesus alone to save us from our sin. We do not trust that anything we do is sufficient to make God love us—not our good works, not our wise thoughts, not even the strength of our faith. We simply trust that Jesus saves.

Faith in Christ alone—a forsaking of the self as the basis of divine approval—is the effect God works in our hearts as he uses all our desperations and disappointments to bring us to complete dependence on him. When we have no basis of hope but Jesus, we turn from everything else to him. That is one reason Paul says that even the faith we have is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8–9). Saving faith cannot be something we conjure by our efforts. If God did not make our hearts beat for him, then we would be spiritually dead (Ezek. 36:26; Eph. 2:1).

Rest in Christ

Biblical faith is not so much trusting in the degree of our knowledge, fervency, or self-reproach as simply relying on Christ’s work. We do not depend on the strength of our faith to hold us to him but on the strength of his love to lift us to himself. As a strong man who enters an elevator does not rely on his muscles but on the cables above to lift him, so also biblical faith is not about the spiritual effort we exert but the spiritual

dependence we exhibit. We do not so much rely on our great faith in Jesus as we rest in his great love for us (Isa. 30:15; Heb. 4:9–11). We trust the infinite and unwavering mercy of an omnipotent God rather than the meager and mixed efforts of our humanity.

As we open our hearts to the reality of God's unconditional love, we discover a sweet and surprising peace (Rom. 5:1–2). Rather than worrying endlessly about satisfying God's expectations or placating his anger, we find unending divine acceptance (Eph. 2:17–19). We also discover that entrusting our souls to Jesus is not living in daily dread of the frown of God. Because our faith is in Christ's saving work alone, the Christian life is not a wearying treadmill of trying to stay on God's good side. We rest in the grace that covers our sin, overcomes our failings, and grants us the righteousness of Jesus.

No longer are we striving and scratching to make God love us. He loves us! And if the King of Heaven smiles upon us, then we need not despair that some of his creatures may not or that our circumstances seem disappointing. Whether our sin is monstrous or ordinary, whether we believe our lives are futile or too full, whether we live in a fine house or a jail cell—God's grace makes us as righteous as Jesus before the face of God. He loves us as much as he loves Jesus. For all who have grieved their guilt, regretted their failures, and feared their future, this love is wonderful comfort in which to rest. But there is even more good news in the gospel.

What God Provides, He Perfects³

Being justified by grace is wonderful, but that's not all there is to God's plan. Jesus Christ not only rescues us from past sin but also secures our eternity with him. This is why Jesus said that whoever would believe in him "shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's salvation is not like being saved from a tiger attack one day only to be cast back into the jungle the next day. The gospel includes the ways that God keeps us spiritually safe forever.

Union with Christ

God not only loves us as much as he loves Jesus, but God's grace actually makes us his children. The apostle John writes, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And

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that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). But how can any of us be a child of God when we have been born of natural parents? Vast implications of grace are contained within the answer: we have been adopted by the heavenly Father (Eph. 1:5–6).

How does this adoption process work? The essence of the process we have already described: we rely on Christ for our spiritual life with God. We do this by confessing that we need Jesus to make us holy, acknowledging our sin and the inadequacy of our thoughts, words, or deeds to make us right with God. God then justifies us by his grace alone, and we become to him as righteous and loved as Jesus.

We have not yet discussed the full implications of such total spiritual dependence. If all of our striving is not what produces spiritual life with God, then by the standards of human achievement, we are as good as dead. As strange as it may seem, the gospel says that this conclusion is exactly right. And this death is actually the door to a new life in God’s family.

UNITED TO CHRIST’S DEATH. After he concludes that no amount of doing good can justify a person before a holy God, the apostle Paul adds, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live” (Gal. 2:20). As horrible as these words sound, they are the obvious conclusion of what it means to stand before God on the basis of Jesus’ sacrifice rather than our saintliness. What he did rather than what we do is our hope. Our spiritual standing—our identity—is wrapped up in his.

It may sound awful to be united to the death of Christ, but it’s actually a good thing. If all that is true of us is nailed to the cross, then that means all our sin, shortcomings, and failures are on that cross, too. Because everything that could spiritually separate us from God is on the cross, he can draw us close to himself. But what good is such intimacy if we are spiritually dead? Paul answers by reminding us that our spiritual life—our identity before God—now comes from a different source.

UNITED TO CHRIST’S LIFE. Not only are we united to the death of Christ, but we are also united to the life of Christ. Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, *but Christ lives in me*” (Gal. 2:20). These words not only assure us of new life with Christ, but also touch on a key aspect of the gospel we have scarcely mentioned so far: the resurrection.

When Jesus suffered on the cross for our sin, he also canceled the

penalty that came when humanity first abandoned God's ways. God told Adam that if he disobeyed, Adam would surely die (Gen. 2:17). Adam's sin broke the intimate bond of life between a holy God and the human heart. God responded by raising Jesus from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit to show that the effects of this original sin were really canceled by Christ's sacrifice (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:15–20).

Jesus' life after death proves that God's promise of canceled sin and eternal life is real for us. Our sin does not terminate our relationship with God, and the end of our life on earth does not terminate our relationship with God. When our mortal bodies fail, our spirit continues in fellowship with the Lord forever. There will also come a time when God will raise our bodies, just as he raised Jesus, so that we will be reunited in body and spirit with Jesus, but that's more of the good news that we will discuss a bit later.

For now it is important to realize that, as a result of Jesus' resurrection, the spirit of every believer is already united to Christ. Though he died, he lives again, and he lives within us—in spiritual union with our spirit. Remember that the apostle Paul says, "Christ lives in me." If we are as good as dead (because nothing we do offers us spiritual standing with God) and Jesus is alive in us (because his spirit is united with ours), then we have Jesus' identity. All that is true of him—his wisdom, holiness, and righteousness—take the place of our stupidity, sin, and rebellion (1 Cor. 1:31). The apostle appropriately rejoices that Christ is our life (Col. 3:4) and "to me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). By our spiritual union with Christ, all that shames us is dead, and all that honors him is ours.

Family Privileges

Because we share Christ's identity, we are members of God's family (Heb. 2:11). It does not matter that we have terrible backgrounds. The old is gone; we have new lives in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Everyone who is united to Christ is as much God's child as he is. Through this "adoption" God gives us special assurances in order to help us honor the Christ whose identity we share.

UNCHANGING STATUS. The first assurance is of unchanging status. When my brother was sentenced for his crime, my family was allowed to gather with him in a holding cell before he was taken to prison. Through

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tears my father quoted an old hymn to my newly saved but prison-bound brother:

And prisons would palaces prove,
If Jesus would dwell with me there.⁴

With the tender expression of these words, my father affirmed his love, as well as the comforts of the Lord's love, for David. Although he had terribly humiliated and betrayed my father, David was still his son. Nothing David did could change that relationship.

In the same way, our actions do not change our relationship to God (Heb. 10:14). Even when we sin and betray his love, we do not stop being his children. Our spiritual status is not determined by what we do but by what Christ has done. Since Christ indwells us, God loves us. Assurance of his infinite kindness gives us the desire to honor him and the willingness to return to him when we have sinned (Rom. 2:4).

God may discipline us to turn us from more harmful consequences of our rebellion, but this spiritual correction is not because he loves us any less. The aim of the heavenly Father's discipline is to help us, never to harm us. Even when we are in the throes of the worst discipline God administers, we are loved infinitely and being protected spiritually (Heb. 12:5–11). As God's children, our status never changes.

PERPETUAL PROTECTION. Because of our unchanging status, we also have God's assurance of his perpetual protection. Although this promise of perpetual protection may cause a guffaw from those who know about Christian martyrs or about ordinary believers who have experienced pain and tragedy, God's protection is real and trustworthy.

How can those who constantly experience life's trials possibly believe in God's perpetual protection? The answer lies in remembering that this life is not the end of our existence or the most important part of it. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

God is much more concerned to make our eternal state secure than to make our temporal existence easy. For this reason he puts a spiritual hedge around our lives so that nothing can enter that would destroy our eternal status with him. After all, how could God love us as much as he

loves Jesus if he ever allowed us to do or to experience something that would result in our eternity in hell? We will face many difficulties in this fallen world (Gen. 3:17–19), but God will never allow anything that would sever our relationship with him (Rom. 8:35–39).

We are unlikely to know the specific reasons for any particular trial until our Lord explains them in heaven, but we already know God's general purposes. The apostle Paul writes, "In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom. 8:28). This is an amazing promise: the events of the universe are not random. God works all things for the good of his people. Paul goes on to describe what that "good" is. He says that all things work together to make us more like God's Son "that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29).

God is in the daily business of maturing and expanding his family so that heaven will be populated with a vast number of Jesus-like children. To build in us (and display to others) Christlike character and compassion, our God allows us to experience the trials of this world. These trials wean us from excessive love for temporal things and help us understand and live for the greater worth of God's eternal priorities (2 Cor. 4:17). Still, he never allows more than we can endure (1 Cor. 10:13), never removes his loving presence (Heb. 13:5), and amid the trials that stretch our faith, more frequently gives blessings to strengthen our heart (Lam. 3:23).

God measures both the tears and laughter that are necessary in the recipe of our (and our neighbors') eternal good. That's why it was not naïve for my brother David to write from prison one night, "I am so sad when I think about mom and dad [hurting]. I am going to cry for a while before I pray and go to bed." A sophisticate might scoff at prayer to a God who allowed the causes for such tears. Yet David's tears were not a denial of God's hand in his life but the very reason he needed to pray. David believed God would work past his rebellion and pain to accomplish a greater good. At that time, David could not have known the greater good God was accomplishing, but he would know it very soon as God also revealed the power of such prayers.

PERSONAL POWER. A third assurance of our adoption is personal power. Even more amazing than God's promise to work all things together for good are the means he uses. For example, the promise of all things working for our good comes within a discussion of prayer. The apostle

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first acknowledges, “We do not know what we ought to pray for” (in stark contrast to some contemporaries who pretend they know exactly). Then Paul adds, “But the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. . . . Because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Rom. 8:26–27). Wow! Even though we can’t know enough to direct God to do what is best, the Holy Spirit translates our prayers into perfect petitions for God’s will to be done.

As we offer our petitions in the context of a greater desire for God’s will to be done (cf. Matt. 6:10), he responds by making *all things* work together for our good. God reshapes the world about us so that what is spiritually best for us occurs. By our prayers, we are co-creators with God of a new reality. Everything changes because we pray—not because our prayers are so powerful or good, but because the God to whom we pray is.

The frequent gospel claim of the New Testament writers was simply that Jesus is Lord. This was not mere rhetoric but the actual announcement that the One who created all things had come as God had promised in order to deliver his people with divine power (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:36; 10:36). That power will know its full expression at the consummation of all things, but it is even now transforming all reality by our prayers.

My family has discovered that such gospel promises are not empty (Isa. 65:24; Eph. 3:20). One of the reasons that my brother David cried for my mother and father was their separation from each other. Decades of tensions had pushed them away from each other and made my brother’s trial even more difficult to handle. So, after his conversion, David began to pray for my aging parents, who had been separated for almost fifteen years, to get back together. I didn’t have the heart to tell him how futile I thought his prayers would be. But I was about to be reminded of biblical truths my heart needed to reclaim.

A few weeks before my oldest daughter’s wedding, my mother called to say that she and my father had made arrangements to come. She added, “We will be staying in the same hotel—in the same room.” And into my shocked silence, she whispered, “It’s not a scandal. Remember, we are still married.”

I asked, “Mom, are things better between you and Dad?”

She replied with tears, “Through dealing with your brother’s difficulties, your father and I learned to lean on each other again.” Then I

wept—and marveled at the God who works all things for good and uses the simple things of the world to shame the wise (1 Cor. 1:27). I should have expected more of my Lord than I did. But my mentally limited, crime-convicted, prison-confined, little brother simply believed God's Word and prayed for God's help, and God answered as he knew was best.

Now when my seventy-nine- and eighty-two-year-old parents visit my brother in prison, they walk through barbed-wire gates holding hands. And I say to all who will dare to believe with me, "The gospel is real; it changes the world." I will not promise that God will answer precisely as we ask or that we will always see the results of our prayers in our lifetime, but I will promise—because Scripture does the same—that God will work everything for the good of those who love him.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH. The personal power assured by our adoption does not only apply to the world outside of us but to our inner being as well. Believers do not pray for anything more earnestly than that their lives would bring glory to their Savior. Yet we remain besieged by temptations and too often defeated by our spiritual weaknesses. For these struggles the gospel brings a fourth assurance to God's children: God gives us the inner resources to battle sin.

The process by which we grow in Christlikeness is called "sanctification." There are a number of practical ways God's Word helps us mature in this way. First, the Bible tells us what God expects. God doesn't make us guess. Instead, God gives us instructions that keep us spiritually safe and fulfill our desire to glorify him. While the world thinks of God's laws as party stoppers, Christians understand that God's commands actually lead us in the paths most pleasing to him and satisfying to us.

So that we don't get swept into the deceptions of the world, God also tells us to learn from his Word, commune with him in prayer, worship with his people, and seek counsel from those mature in his ways. Through regular use of these "means of grace," we grow in godliness. To some degree these means of grace are effective simply because we are natural beings who respond to natural processes of learning and behavior. If we are thirsty, we are helped by a drink of water; and if we are struggling with a temptation, biblical counsel helps us stay away from it.

But our sanctification is not simply a natural process. The Bible says our spiritual battles are not against flesh and blood but against spiritual

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evils—within and without us (Eph. 6:12). These require more resistance than human resolve can provide. So the Lord also uses the means of grace to provide us with supernatural power for the spiritual victories we need.

Spiritual power enters our lives with the faith that we are what God's Word says: new creatures in Christ Jesus. Prior to Christ's presence in our hearts, we were *not* able *not* to sin. But Jesus transforms us. He provides his Holy Spirit in our heart to convict us of sin (i.e., convince us it really is wrong) and to empower our resistance. We are not helpless against Satan (Col. 1:13). The apostle John writes, "The one who is in you [the Holy Spirit] is greater than the one who is in the world [Satan]" (1 John 4:4). The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead indwells us and provides sin-conquering power.

Satan will still try to convince us that it's only natural to fail and that we cannot resist sin. Yet God's Word says we can resist because we are no longer dependent on natural powers alone (Rom. 8:11). Of course, if we don't believe victory is possible, then we have already lost the battle. That's why simple faith in the truth of God's Word is the beginning of spiritual victory. Regular use of the means of grace bolsters the faith by which we act on the reality of our power.

SPIRITUAL SECURITY. The means of grace are also meant to plant deep within us the profound conviction that even if we do not win every battle, we are loved no less. With great wisdom a friend of mine writes, "The only people who ever get better spiritually are those who know if they never get better, they are loved no less." This sounds impossible and backwards. If people know that their failing doesn't diminish God's love, then won't they persist in their sin? Yes, some rebellious or insensitive souls will take advantage of grace, but not those yielded to the Spirit of God.

Before we can understand how God's unswerving love actually promotes holiness, we need to consider a key question: "What gives sin power in your life?" The answer is, "Sin has power in your life because you love it." If sin did not attract you, then it would have no power to tempt you. Now another question: "What is the only way to displace love for sin?" The answer is: "With a greater love." When we love Jesus more than the sin, we want to please him more than we want to indulge the wrong (John 14:15). Love for Jesus drives the love for evil, which gives sin its power, out of our lives.

And now one final question: What makes you love Jesus? Again the

Bible answers simply: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Now finally we understand why it really isn’t true that “if God loves us despite our sin, then we will ‘party hearty.’” When we truly love him, we want to please him. And what makes us most want to please him is the knowledge that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases (Lam. 3:22–23). His persevering grace toward his children is the motivating power for holiness in our hearts (Rom. 12:1–3).

Soon after he was in prison, David began to mail us scrawled copies of Bible verses and the words to worship songs his prayer group was singing. He also began to sign each of his letters, “God bless you.” Even though he is in prison—with temptations and trials beyond what I can know—he sees himself as an instrument for proclaiming God’s glory. He wants his life to reflect the grace he has experienced. No one forces him to write the words; no one could. But his love for Jesus has become a compelling force in his life, as is always true for those who know Christ’s unconditional love and unending grace.

ETERNAL INHERITANCE. A fifth assurance of God’s children is their inheritance (Eph. 1:14; 2:7). The Bible says that God’s adopted children are co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). Only a few essentials of this good news can be mentioned in this brief space. The first is eternal life, which is not endless years of playing harps in the clouds. When believers die, their souls immediately enter the glorious presence of our heavenly Father (1 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:21–24). Full acceptance, full joy, and full peace are immediately ours, but that’s not the full story (Luke 23:43). One day Christ will come and renew the earth that he originally made so good (Isa. 65:17–19; Rom. 8:21–23). All the benefits that humanity originally enjoyed in Eden will be restored—a world full of God’s provision and absent of suffering (Rev. 21:4).

Creation will be restored, and we will be renewed in spirit, body, and mind (1 Cor. 15:52–54). Not only will my imprisoned brother David know God’s full forgiveness, but his body will be pure again and his mind healthy and whole for the first time. My brother will be more glorious than the angels (1 John 3:2–3). He will walk about freely in the new creation with his head up, his eyes bright, and his heart rejoicing in the beauty that surrounds him. My family, those who have already departed and those yet to enter heaven, will have a reunion with him and all those

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who love Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14–18). We will feast at our Lord’s table, delight in his goodness, and forever enjoy a world made perfect by the grace of our God. The One who came to save sinners provides a salvation so grand that it restores the whole earth, involves our whole being, and lasts for eternity (Rev. 21:1).

Whom God Perfects, He Uses⁵

Individual Purpose

Christ’s expansive love for his people and their world—made apparent by his redemption of both—has a profound effect upon all who love him. Because we love him, we also love *what* and *whom* he loves. Soon after his commitment to Christ, my brother David—formerly profane in word and deed—wrote, “I love Jesus so much [that now] I can’t stand it when people take his name in vain. I want them to know how good he is.” When Jesus indwells our heart, his heart becomes our own (Rom. 6:4–11).

Individuals who love him want to please him by loving those he loves. We delight to be his ambassadors to the lost, his hands to the needy, his voice for the oppressed, and stewards of the creation he made as provision for all people. We rejoice that his family extends beyond human boundaries of race, region, class, and culture, and we delight to love accordingly. And as we express Christ’s love in us, we who were once in need ourselves ultimately discover a final aspect of Christ’s salvation: a divine purpose.

We have been rescued from empty lives, as well as from sinful ones (1 Pet. 1:18). Jesus makes the broken useful. Jesus was not done with the man whose failures placed him in a jail cell with my brother. As that man shared his faith with my brother—a man of another race—both knew Christ’s love and became spiritual brothers for eternity.

Time and again my developmentally disabled brother has been aided in prison by men whose race or background would have separated them in ordinary society, and as David has learned of a love greater than his prejudices, he has become an instrument of Christ’s love also. His simple trust of and friendship with those unlike himself inaugurates within prison walls the glory of an eternal brotherhood in heaven.

Corporate Purpose

We participate in Christ's transforming purposes as individuals but also as gathered people. Through the church, we proclaim Christ's good news in word and deed so that his rule spreads from heart to heart across all nations (Col. 1:22–2:4). His ultimate kingdom is the story the Scriptures unfold from their first pages. Our God would not leave a hurting creation in its pain. Despite the betrayal that led to the brokenness of the world and its inhabitants, our God has never abandoned either. He redeems people so that they will know and extend his grace. Thus, the salvation he brings is both for and through sinners. In the church we gather together to praise him for this goodness, to encourage one another in living for him, and to help others understand and experience his transforming love.

The ancient, unfolding story of salvation is for us, includes us, and enfolds us in a larger embrace. We have purpose beyond ourselves and, in fulfilling it with others, we celebrate our corporate identity with the body of Christ. Collectively he grants us fulfillment and participation in the furthering of his kingdom that transforms all things for his glory (Eph. 1:21). As we live in community encouraging, instructing, strengthening, and forgiving one another, we become transformative salt and light for the world in which we live (Matt. 5:13–16; Eph. 3:10–21).

Redemptive Purpose

For the great privilege of participation in Christ's transforming work, we have been saved, and for this great purpose, we honor our King and reflect his grace in every dimension of our lives—our relationships, our occupations, our recreations, and our worship. We keep no aspect of our lives from reflecting his glory as he extends his reign over the whole of life.

Sacred and secular distinctions cannot be used to isolate the concerns of Christ from any sphere of life. He is the Lord who has come and will come to extend his gracious reign over all. He saves us in order to place his claim on us. As we find our greatest satisfaction in dedicating every aspect of our lives to him, he delights to use us for eternal purposes and to redeem the world through our individual and corporate efforts.

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When the Gospel writers declared the gospel of Jesus, it was typically with the declaration that the Lord of all had come. No joy could accompany such a pronouncement if it marked only the beginning of a despotic rule. However, if the King comes to save sinners and if their salvation includes a renewed heart, empowered life, and transformed world, then his purpose and theirs is truly good news. The news is so good that even the angels long for it, and we who love him who provides this gospel also cherish its proclamation (1 Pet. 1:10–12). Whether we have known an imprisonment of body, mind, habit, guilt, relationship, or circumstance, Jesus Christ comes to save us eternally from it all. This is great news—and it is the gospel!

8

Christ's Redemption

Sandy Willson

When one of my sons graduated from college, it was the tradition at his alma mater to have a baccalaureate service on the night before commencement. Historically, of course, baccalaureate services were established for a minister of the gospel to deliver a sermon. Today, however, unless the institution hosting the baccalaureate service is evangelical, one does not expect a Christian sermon to be preached, and I certainly wasn't expecting such a sermon in this case. As a matter of fact, a Jewish rabbi had been invited to deliver the baccalaureate address, a rabbi I happened to know. He is bright, winsome, and interesting, so I was not surprised to find his address uplifting, practical, and thoughtful. In fact, it is the best I remember; I found that I agreed with everything he said with no exceptions.

As I walked away from that experience, I couldn't help but reflect on the state of much Christian preaching today. It is usually less interesting than the rabbi's preaching, and it often contains nothing with which the rabbi himself would disagree. Many of the sermons preached on TV and radio and in church pulpits are sadly devoid of anything distinctly Christian. They often consist of "common sense" things with which people of good will are generally in agreement. We often simply offer the same practical "how to" wisdom that others offer, except that we make reference to a Bible story or a Bible truth. My friend the rabbi also uses stories and principles from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and he does it exceedingly well. So what should be distinctive about Christian preaching?

Christian preaching is fundamentally about Jesus Christ and what

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he has done to redeem his people. The gospel proclaims him. The gospel glorifies God the Father by glorifying Christ. If we misunderstand or misinterpret who Christ is and what Christ did, we endanger our eternal salvation. At the heart of The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement, therefore, is our declaration concerning Jesus Christ and his great work of redemption. This is at the heart of what we teach, preach, and counsel.

Christ, the Eternal Son

*"We believe that, moved by love and in obedience to his Father . . ."*¹ From the beginning, our Confessional Statement addresses this question: "Why would Jesus Christ do what he did?" What we learn from the Bible is that there is only one explanation: Jesus Christ loves us, not because of who we are but because of who he is. There is no way to understand Jesus Christ apart from love. Love motivated everything he did. If we cannot receive love, we cannot receive Christ. If we cannot give love, we cannot serve Christ. The grand motive behind all of his words and deeds, behind his great sacrifice for us, is his undeserved, unmerited, unmitigated love for us.

What makes this love all the more amazing is that before Jesus Christ came to earth, he existed as the second person of the Godhead, the eternal Son of God. John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John also calls him the "one and only Son" (John 1:14).² He was "before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light" (Nicene Creed). From all eternity he was perfectly happy, coequal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He was not in need of friends, for he had intimate, infinitely satisfying communion with his Father and thus enjoyed all the pleasures of eternal bliss.

The love that moved him to leave his blessed environment and come to this earth is a love he shares with his Father from all eternity—for us! Jesus said that he came to do his Father's will, and his Father's will is that his people should be saved. The Son of God shares completely in that loving intention—a love so pure, so powerful, and so gracious that men and angels can never comprehend it.

Christ, Our Humble Savior

". . . The eternal Son became human . . ." One of the most remarkable characteristics of Jesus Christ is his humility. One cannot fathom the depth

of humility that is required to leave heaven's throne to be born on earth of a poor peasant woman. Thousands of hymns and poems have been written in an attempt to capture this amazing reality.

Thou Who wast rich beyond all splendor,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou Who wast rich beyond all spender,
All for love's sake becamest poor.³

Paul joins the chorus when he says: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6–8).

This humility was necessary for human beings to be saved from our plight. Our circumstances were such that we could not be saved by human effort. What Jesus Christ did for us, we could never do for ourselves. The only way we could ever be rescued was for God to condescend to our miserable condition in our broken world. He had to come and get us. And that's exactly what he did.

The life of Jesus Christ can be divided into two historical sequences: his humiliation and his exaltation. When we speak of his humiliation, we usually include his incarnation, his perfect submission to the law of God, and his suffering, death, and burial. One can see this sequence in our Confessional Statement. Each of these aspects of his humiliation is essential to the redemption of God's people, and, therefore, it is right and good for us to believe these things, to contemplate them, to celebrate them, and to live in light of them.

His Incarnation

"... the Word became flesh, fully God and fully human being, one Person in two natures. The man Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel, was conceived through the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary." The conception and birth of Jesus Christ is not just unusual or mi-

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raculous but rather *sui generis* (of its own kind; unique). To be sure, in the Old Testament there are some highly unusual conceptions and births, the chief of which would be Abraham (ninety-nine years of age) and Sarah (ninety years of age) giving birth to Isaac. There are also the peculiar births of Samuel (1 Samuel 1), Samson (Judges 13), and John the Baptist (Luke 1), but all these, as well as every other birth that has ever occurred, involved a human father and a human mother.

Only in the case of Jesus of Nazareth was a human being conceived and born of only one human parent and God. Through the years, and even today, some have said that the doctrine of the virgin birth is nice but not necessary, something we should not fight over or about which we should not get too exercised. On the contrary, the great theologian Athanasius (AD 296–373) taught that the full humanity of Christ was necessary because God could save only what Christ became, so if Christ were not fully human, humans could not be fully saved. Anselm (AD 1033–1109) taught that Christ must be fully God in order for his sacrifice to be sufficient for all God's people; otherwise one man could, at best, be substituted for only one other person.

We still believe this today, not primarily because Anselm and Athanasius taught it, but because Matthew's and Luke's God-breathed writings teach it (Matthew 1; Luke 1–2). How can we understand the depth of Christ's humility in the incarnation? If Bill and Melinda Gates left their palatial home on the West Coast and took up residence in the middle of the Kibera slums in Nairobi, Kenya, they still would not touch the level of self-denial that Jesus endured to take on our flesh. What a loving Savior, indeed!

His Perfect Submission to the Father

"He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father, lived a sinless life, performed miraculous signs . . ." Not too long ago, my church, Second Presbyterian in Memphis, Tennessee, gave my wife and me a sabbatical, and we spent four weeks traveling about. On each Sunday we visited a different church, and I was shocked to hear preachers on two consecutive Sundays, hundreds of miles apart, make apologies to their congregations for Christ's impatience, testiness, and insensitivity. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Who do these preachers think they are? Do they understand the

implications of their heresy? Do they realize that if Christ were a sinner of any type or degree that he would have been a “blemished” sacrifice, unworthy to atone for our sins?

But, praise God, the Bible declares that he is a worthy sacrifice for us because, although tempted in every way as we are, he never sinned—in thought, word, or deed. Not only is his life a worthy sacrifice for our sins, but also the Bible teaches that he willingly put himself under the law, in order that he might accomplish for all of us what our first human father, Adam, failed to do. Jesus was “born under the law” (Gal. 4:4–7), circumcised (Luke 2), parented (Luke 2), and baptized by John (John 1) in order to fulfill all righteousness on our behalf.

His Suffering, Death, and Burial

“. . . was crucified under Pontius Pilate . . .” Jesus suffered many things during his three years of public ministry: the demands of the poor and the lame and the bereaved, the contempt of the religious leaders, the unbelief of his own disciples, and the brutality of the Roman occupiers in Israel. But his greatest suffering came at the hands of his own Father. The night before his crucifixion in the garden of Gethsemane, under great stress and anguish, he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). And then, from the cross, in fulfillment of the messianic psalm (Psalm 22), Jesus cried out to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

Why would God allow, even foreordain, such a seeming travesty of justice? (Acts 2:22–23). The Qur’an proposes an answer to that question: Jesus did not actually die. It was someone else who died (Judas) who merely appeared to be Jesus. The Qur’an conceives that a righteous prophet like Jesus could never have been so humiliated; God would not allow it. But—amazing thing—God not only allowed it, but decreed it from all eternity (1 Pet. 1:19–20). Jesus, out of love for us, suffered the ultimate indignity of being whipped and crucified like a common criminal. *Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

Christ, Our Exalted Lord

One can only imagine the quiet desperation of the disciples on the Saturday following the crucifixion of Jesus. They had believed that he was the

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long-awaited Messiah. But everybody knows that messiahs reign; and to reign, they must be alive. Jesus was now dead. His death contradicted everything they heard and saw in him for the three years they traveled with him.

They served with him, ate with him, slept with him, and prayed with him, and they never heard a sinful word, saw a bad attitude, or witnessed lack of love toward the needy, and they never saw him stumped by clergy and scholars. They saw him calm the wind and the waves, cast out demons, heal the blind, and even raise the dead. They called him “the Christ,” and he assured them that the Holy Spirit had revealed that truth to them. Everything pointed to his messiahship. How could he be dead? A “dead messiah” is an oxymoron, like “fried ice.”

On the Sunday morning following his Friday crucifixion, some of the women made their way to Jesus’ tomb in order to care for and honor his remains with spices. They became the first known human witnesses to the greatest reversal of fortune ever experienced by any human being. Jesus had been dead. He was now alive! What theologians call the exaltation of Christ had been inaugurated. The exaltation of Christ consists of his resurrection, his ascension, his session (sitting) at God’s right hand, and his glorious return.

His Resurrection

“... *arose bodily from the dead on the third day . . .*” The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the crowning event of all God’s mighty works of redemption—more magnificent than the dividing of the Red Sea, more awesome than the quaking of Mount Sinai, more tremendous than the tumbling of Jericho’s walls, more impressive than David’s triumph over Goliath. The future of the created order rests upon this one great act of God. The hope of every true believer rests solidly on the historical reality of this event.

The resurrection of Christ was not, as some claim, just an idea, not a “spiritual resurrection” of sorts, but a bodily resurrection of the same body that had agonized and died on Calvary’s tree. This is what the early disciples powerfully, courageously, and relentlessly proclaimed: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). The disciples took great joy in the fact that their Lord Jesus had been completely vindicated and most highly exalted “and who through

the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4).

His Ascension

"... and ascended into heaven..." The disciples were joyful not only because they knew that Jesus is alive, but because they watched him ascend into heaven (Luke 24; Acts 1). By the cross and empty tomb, he had conquered all his and our enemies, and now, before their eyes, returns home as King. No longer could he be subject to the pride of the Pharisees, the plots of the Sadducees, or the cruelties of the Romans. No longer would he be manhandled by Caiaphas, Pilate, and their minions—or by the Devil himself. He ascended to the right hand of God, forever safe, forever secure, forever happy, forever King.

Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious:
See the Man of Sorrows now;
From the fight returned victorious,
Ev'ry knee to Him shall bow;
Crown Him, Crown Him,
Crown Him, Crown Him,
Crowns become the Victor's brow,
Crowns become the Victor's brow. . . .

Hark, those bursts of acclamation!
Hark, those loud triumphant chords!
Jesus takes the highest station;
O what joy the sight affords!
Crown Him! Crown Him,
Crown Him! Crown Him,
King of kings and Lord of lords!
King of kings and Lord of lords!⁴

His Session

"As the mediatorial King, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, exercising in heaven and on earth all of God's sovereignty, and is our High Priest and righteous Advocate." Some years ago I was leading a prayer group of pastors, missionaries, and their spouses. Before we prayed, I asked them to close their eyes and simply imagine Jesus Christ. After a few moments I asked them to share with the group what they "saw" in their imagina-

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tions. One person saw him loving and blessing the little children; one saw him teaching the multitudes; one saw him multiplying the loaves and fishes; one saw him praying in the garden of Gethsemane.

Upon reflection, we realized something significant (besides the fact that most of our images came from the simple pictures in an old King James family Bible): all our pictures of him were pre-ascension. We were not thinking of Jesus as he is, but as he once was. The exaltation of Jesus Christ is not only a historical event, but also a present reality. Jesus is no longer clothed in perishable flesh, but in imperishable glory. When the apostle John, in a vision, sees Jesus as he is, John falls down as though dead. Only God himself can revive him (Rev. 1:17).

This overwhelmingly radiant, exalted Christ is the Christ whom John came to know, love, worship, and serve. Christ now reigns as mediatorial king, interceding for us, ruling over us, and advocating for us. He has taken our flesh into the councils of the triune God where we are perfectly represented and continually protected. We, therefore, have nothing to fear but God himself (Matt. 10:28).

His Glorious Return

Christ will return in glory to consummate all things and to take his rightful place as king and exalted Lord, in whom and under whom the entire cosmos is unified in endless praise (Eph. 1:10).

Christ, Our Representative and Substitute

“We believe that by his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute. He did this so that in him we might become the righteousness of God . . .” We would have sufficient cause to praise and adore Jesus Christ if all we knew of him were the things already discussed in this chapter: his eternal deity, his loving obedience to his Father, his humility, and his unrivaled glory at the right hand of God. The Bible, however, gives us even more personal reasons to love and serve him. Everything he did, he did for us.

He was born into this world for us (Gal. 4:4–7); he was crucified for our sins (Gal. 3:13); he was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25); he ascended to heaven to prepare a place for us (John 14:12). We learn in the Scriptures that the way Christ did this was to become our substitute

so that he could do in our place what we could not do for ourselves. This concept is at the very heart of the Christian faith, and without it, the gospel loses its unique power.

Many religions teach us that we need to reform, and some of them give us the great prototypes we should emulate: Abraham and Moses (Judaism), Jesus (Christianity), Muhammad (Islam), Buddha and the Dalai Lama (Buddhism), Confucius (Confucianism), etc. But only one religion (evangelical Christianity) teaches us that someone else has already, in our place (1) lived that life; (2) taken the punishment we deserved for all our sins; and (3) attained resurrected life and exalted status, so that we are, spiritually speaking, already seated at the right hand of God. This is the deep mystery of the Christian faith (Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 3:16): through the substitutionary life and death of our Lord Jesus Christ we become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

A Sinless Life for Us

The Bible teaches that Adam, the first man, was actually our first representative (Rom. 5:12). As our representative, if he succeeded, we would succeed; but if he failed, we would fail. He failed. We failed. He sinned, so we sin. He became a sinner, so we are sinners. Sound unfair? Think you would have done better than he? There goes your pride, proving once again that you are a sinner.

The beauty of the story, however, is that after man's fall God immediately promised a new representative, a seed of Eve that would one day crush our enemy, Satan (Gen. 3:15). Jesus is that seed, the second Adam, and he lived perfectly for us so that when we put our trust in him, we receive all the benefits of his perfect performance, his perfect obedience to the Father. Everything he did goes on our record. When God looks at the "performance record" of Christians, he sees the record accomplished by his beloved Son Jesus. We are clothed in Christ, and God has imputed to us the merits of his Son's perfect life. It is blessedly true that Jesus lived a sinless life *for us*.

A Painful Death for Us

We often badly underestimate the extent of our moral and spiritual problems. As a result of the fall of Adam, we are guilty sinners who are objects

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of God's wrath; we are corrupt in all aspects of our human nature; we are alienated from God, having become his enemies; and we are morally and spiritually helpless to change or save ourselves. Only the substitutionary death of our Lord Jesus Christ can solve these profound problems.

Jesus died in our place. He did not deserve to die. We do. He died because God, for his own glory and out of his infinite grace toward us, imputed our sins to his own beloved Son. And Jesus Christ, by his sacrificial death (his own blood), bore our sins in his body, taking them away from us. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, 36 ESV). Jesus Christ expiated (removed) our sin by taking our sin to himself. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Paul explains why Jesus actually died on a wooden cross: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13). By becoming a curse for us, Jesus Christ satisfied the righteous wrath of God against all who sin; that is, Christ "propitiated" God. He turned God's wrath away from us. He satisfied the righteous demands of God's justice. This substitutionary sacrifice is necessary for our salvation because "whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36).

Paul described us in our natural, fallen condition as "dead in [our] transgressions and sins . . . by nature objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:1, 3). But while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). Ultimately, the blood of Christ, his sacrificial death for us, reconciles us to God so that we recover the intimacy with him that we lost in the garden of Eden by our sin. Paul puts it this way: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18–19). His painful death was *for us*.

A Triumphant Resurrection for Us

Because of our sins, we became subject to all the miseries of this life, death, and everlasting hell. By his substitutionary, redemptive work, Je-

sus vanquished sin, death, and all the principalities and powers that seek to destroy us. By his resurrection from the tomb, we are finally and forever justified before God and are resurrected to everlasting life. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are already spiritually raised with him, and one day we shall become like him in new, resurrected bodies. Our future is bound up in him: just as our humiliation became his humiliation, so his exaltation becomes our exaltation. We are resurrected; we ascend to God's presence; we reign with Christ; and we shall one day be like him in glorified bodies. His triumphant resurrection was *for us*.

A Glorious Ascension for Us

When Jesus was with his disciples in the upper room, he anticipated their anxiety about his future departure. He explained to them that his going away was actually a good thing, for two reasons. First, he would send them the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, who would guide, encourage, and teach them. Second, he would go to his Father's house in order to prepare a place there for them.

When I was a child, one of the highlights of my existence was to visit my maternal grandmother, usually once a year, and we would stay in her small house for several days. She was a simple woman who lived in a small, rustic village in the Smoky Mountains. One might wonder why an eight-year-old would be excited to visit a place with no TV, basketball court, or modern toys, and with only a small general store down the road. It was because Granny had been waiting for us for months. When we arrived, she was waiting on the little back stoop of her house. We ran to get our affectionate hug. She had a nickname for each one of us. We went upstairs to our bedroom just under the tin roof that made glorious sounds when it rained at night, and later we were treated to all the luscious dishes and desserts that Granny had prepared for us. We went on hikes and tours and did simple activities that Granny had planned. Most of all, we simply basked in the unmitigated, effervescent, unremitting love that our mother's mother had for us.

Now, if my seventy-five-year-old grandmother with her very limited resources and finite imagination was able to prepare an exciting place for me, can you envision what the Lord Jesus Christ, with his vast resources, his infinite power and imagination, and his boundless love will do for

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us? He eagerly awaits our arrival; he has a nickname prepared for every one of his people; he has prepared his estate to bring us constant joy. We will swim in the ocean of his affection for us. His glorious ascension was *for us*.

Christ, Our Only Hope

“We believe that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved.” There are several aspects of the Christian faith which nonbelievers through the centuries have found offensive. These include the natural depravity of the human heart, man’s helplessness in trying to rescue himself from his lost condition, and the reality of hell. In the time of the apostle Paul, there were other teachings that also provoked hostile responses: God’s judgment on Israel, the church’s inclusion of the Gentiles, and our freedom from the ritual laws of the Old Testament.

Perhaps one of the most offensive doctrines in our own day, one that the contemporary media is sure to address in religious interviews with evangelical Christians, is the Bible’s teaching on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the way to eternal life. The reason for the offense is obvious: Christians are claiming that they alone know and proclaim the one, true, and living God, that everyone else is substantively in the wrong, and that the consequences for such error are terrifyingly brutal.

Furthermore, some Christians take this stand with insufferable arrogance and with seeming insensitivity to the implied judgment upon every non-Christian and every other religious group. Why, then, would we in The Gospel Coalition make this doctrine one of our nonnegotiable doctrinal commitments? Here’s why:

- 1) Unless one embraces this truth wholeheartedly, he or she does not understand the gospel of Christ at all. If we believe what the Bible teaches about the plight of fallen humanity (our moral depravity, our spiritual death, our just judgment of eternal hell), only then will we fully understand and embrace the unique remedy God offers, the only remedy that could possibly redeem us from our condition. Because we have no righteousness of our own, we must trust in the righteousness of Christ alone. Because we by nature are dead in our trespasses and sins, we must receive the miracle of resurrected life from Christ. Because God’s justice against our sin must be completely

satisfied, we must receive the perfect, substitutionary atonement of Christ. Because we cannot come to God on our merits, we must rely on Christ's advocacy for us before the throne of God. These are the unique accomplishments of Christ's redeeming work that uniquely solve our sin problem. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," said Jesus, "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

- 2) If there were some other way to receive eternal life, God would be guilty of the most massive violation of justice in the history of the cosmos. The crucifixion of Christ, on a merely human level, was the greatest travesty of justice in all of human history. Jesus, as we have seen, is the only human being who never uttered an evil word, harbored a wicked thought, or committed a sinful deed. He lovingly served the poor, he had compassion upon the weak and lonely, and he healed the sick. He was the greatest human being who ever lived, and yet he suffered the most severe punishment of any criminal in history. More amazingly, God ordained this debacle; he handed his Son over to wicked men to face the excruciating agony of death on a wooden cross (Acts 2:23). If there were some other way for people to be saved from their sinful plight, if God had a Plan B that worked equally as well as "the Jesus way," then one would have to conclude that the death of Jesus Christ was not really necessary for the salvation of sinners. He would further have to conclude that God was the perpetrator of a senseless and grotesque violation of his justice. But Jesus is the only way, and therefore God's solemn decree to sacrifice his one and only Son is not the world's greatest act of injustice but rather the greatest act of love ever accomplished.
- 3) If there were some other way to be saved, it would have to be based on human moral performance, for the Christian gospel alone saves by grace; therefore, any other way of salvation directly contradicts salvation by grace alone, especially as Paul teaches in his letters. If there were any other way of salvation, the notion of grace would be futile and useless, and there would therefore be no Christian gospel at all.
- 4) If there were some alternate way of salvation, it would be impossible to reconcile that idea with the clear statements of Scripture (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:19–20; 1 Tim. 2:5–6). If Scripture can't be trusted to give an accurate account of this cardinal doctrine, how can we trust the Bible's accuracy in any other area?
- 5) If there were some alternate way of salvation, presumably it would be designed for those who have never heard the gospel but who want to go to heaven. But what makes folks think that the natural person wants to go to heaven? The Bible teaches us that the citizens of heaven are obsessed with the praise of Jesus Christ—the very thing the natural person eschews. Anyone not in love with Christ

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would naturally despise heaven. On the other hand, it can be truly said that no one who truly desires to go to heaven would ever be excluded. The hearts of sinful humans are given a longing for heaven only by hearing and believing the gospel, which, of course, means that the church's obedience to the Great Commission is of the utmost importance.

The one who has discovered the love of God in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ is actually not shocked that God has provided only one way to be saved; rather, he is increasingly confounded and befuddled that God provided any way at all. As the Christian disciple grows in his self-understanding, becoming aware of his intense selfishness, his enormous pride, his willful neglect of the needs of others, and his inexcusable rebellion against the holy commandments of Almighty God, he wonders in staggered amazement at the unspeakable kindness, patience, mercy, and faithfulness of God.

Why would God save anyone? For his glory. That is why he chose to demonstrate his grace toward unworthy sinners. Christians have never bothered to write hymns entitled, “Amazing Justice” or “Amazing Wrath”—his wrath and justice do not surprise us. We were duly warned of his wrath in the garden of Eden. No, Christians have written “Amazing Grace” (John Newton) and “And Can It Be” (Charles Wesley).

Among all those religious leaders who have made claims to helping, guiding, and saving people, only Jesus Christ has truly done it, and he did it at the cost of his own blood.

Christ, Our All in All

The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement says, “Because God chose the lowly things of this world, the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, no human being can ever boast before him—Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” (see 1 Cor. 1:28–30).

About twenty years ago immediately after Sunday morning worship, I thought I had delivered a particularly good sermon (theologically sound, exegetically insightful, helpfully illustrated) and had received several compliments from parishioners to confirm my sanguine assessment. Then one of our dear older ladies hung back after the service to speak with

me. Expecting her to fall in line with the other grateful worshipers, I was arrested and profoundly humbled when she said, "Pastor, thank you for your brilliant sermon; but next week would you just tell us about Jesus?" I realized in that moment that I had failed to make Jesus my all in all in my preaching and to some extent in my life.

In order to make Christ our all in all, we must do two things. First, we must empty ourselves. We proclaim him to others only when we know how desperately we need him. The apostle Paul says that certain people will not inherit the kingdom of God: the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, practicing homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. Then he says, "And such were some of you" (1 Cor. 6:9–11 ESV).

When describing the natural backgrounds of the Corinthian Christians, Paul writes, "Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26–27 ESV). God did not choose us because we had done something or would do something that merits his favor in the least. Rather, his choice of us is completely gratuitous. He chose us in spite of our unworthiness. Paul explains the effect of this reality on our self-assessment: "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded" (Rom. 3:27 ESV). If we are saved by the gospel, we acknowledge that "nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18 ESV).

Second, if we must cease boasting in ourselves when we come to Christ, we must also begin boasting in Christ. "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14 ESV). We now have one boast: God himself. King David exclaims, "My soul makes its boast in the LORD. . . . oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!" (Ps. 34:2–3 ESV). Why do we boast of him? Because he alone has accomplished for us everything of enduring value: our acceptance before God, our joy in life, our wisdom for living, and our hopes for the future. He is our all in all. Christ, because of his glorious redemption of sinners, has become the center of our lives.

We can survey the Gospel accounts to see what it means to have Christ as the center of one's life. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, we learn that if we have a Christ-centered life, we worship his majesty (Matthew 2); we

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believe his message (Matthew 4); we obey his teaching (Matthew 5–7); we call God “Father” (Matthew 6); we experience his healing (Matthew 8–9); we engage his mission (Matthew 10); we take up our cross (Matthew 16); we love his church (Matthew 18); we return his love (Matthew 26); we boast in his cross (Matthew 27); we celebrate his resurrection (Matthew 28). This is what real life is all about.

In light of our emptiness and his fullness, our sin and his righteousness, our foolishness and his wisdom, there are some obvious implications to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ:

- 1) We must find our contentment solely in him. Let us cease our complaining and our restless striving for this world's pleasures. Is he not enough for us? If you have him, can you possibly be any more content? Look at Paul's complete contentment, regardless of his trying circumstances, in Philippians 4:10–20.
- 2) We must suffuse our Christian ministries with the gospel of Christ. Our preaching and teaching must be focused on him; our counseling within the church must be focused on our relationship with him (the ultimate answer to every counseling problem); our worship services and prayer meetings must be centered on him; all our church programs and mission efforts must end in him. Here's why: when we glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and revel in his redeeming work, we glorify the triune God, who has made himself fully known in Christ.

Christ's redemption is at the heart of Christian theology. May it also be at the heart of every Christian.

9

Justification

Philip Graham Ryken



Picture the scene: An accused criminal stands before an impartial judge to receive his just sentence. The legal proceedings begin with a court official reciting the laws of the kingdom. As he listens, the criminal starts to realize that he is doomed to be condemned, for it turns out that he has violated every single law in the book. Whatever the charge, he is certain to be found guilty. When the judge finally turns to the defendant and asks how he pleads, the man is speechless. He stands before the judge in mute terror, unable to utter anything in his defense.

The Need for Justification: Universal and Desperate

This is the desperate legal predicament described in the opening chapters of Romans. Humanity stands in the dock. The religious and the irreligious, Jews and Gentiles, believers and atheists—everyone must appear before God’s throne for judgment. The standard for justice is God’s perfect law. By that standard, everyone deserves to be condemned, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23);¹ “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10; cf. Ps. 14:3).

When the law is read, therefore, every commandment is an accusation. There is nothing we can say in our defense: “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:19–20).

The problem of humanity is sin, plain and simple. We are guilty sinners who deserve nothing except God’s wrath. Nor is there anything

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we can do to save ourselves. God's righteous requirements cannot save us; they can only condemn us because we cannot keep them. Therefore, when we stand before God for judgment, there is not the slightest chance that we can be accepted on the basis of anything that we have done. This is not a trial in which we are innocent until proven guilty; instead, it is a trial in which we have already been proven guilty and must remain guilty until we are declared righteous.

It is only when we recognize how desperate our situation is from the legal standpoint that we can begin to understand the biblical doctrine of justification. A powerful example of a sinner's desperation comes from the life of Donald Smarto. While studying for the priesthood, Smarto performed the role of the cardinal in a religious play. To help him look the part, his monastery had arranged for him to borrow ornate robes from his diocese. "I was excited by this," Smarto writes in his autobiography, "and when they arrived, I went to my room, locked the door and carefully removed the scarlet cassock and sash and cape from the suit bag."²

As Smarto put on these clothes before each night's performance, they became a growing obsession:

Though the play began at eight o'clock, I found myself putting the robes on earlier and earlier. It took about half an hour to fasten all the buttons, but by the last days of the performance, I was dressing by two o'clock in the afternoon, five hours before the beginning of the play. I would strut back and forth in front of a full-length mirror, and as I did, a feeling would come over me. I stood for the longest time looking at my reflection, and I liked what I saw. . . . I had a sense that I was holy. I simply didn't think I was a sinner; I felt confident that my works pleased God.³

Smarto's false confidence was shattered when he saw what the person under the robes was really like. It happened at the movies:

A bishop came on the stage in the movie. Dressed in a beautiful vestment studded with sparkling gems, he walked out slowly from behind a curtain. As he walked, however, a large gust of wind ripped open his vestment, revealing a rotted skeleton underneath.

In an instant, my mind said, *That's me*. . . . I immediately blocked out the thought. . . . "That's not me!" I said. . . . I wanted to push the film images out of my mind, but it didn't work. . . . I kept trying to make myself feel better. "Make this feeling go away," I said to God. "I am *not*

a hypocrite. I am *not* an actor. I'm a *good person!*" I kept thinking of all the good things I did. . . . Yet, these thoughts didn't bring consolation.⁴

It is only when we see the stark and ugly reality of our sin that we are truly ready to turn to God for help—specifically, for the forgiveness and the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As James Buchanan wrote in his famous book on justification, "The best preparation for the study of this doctrine is neither great intellectual ability, nor much scholastic learning, but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God."⁵

The Centrality of Justification: "Hinge," "Foundation," "Chief Article"

Having described our predicament in all its miserable detail, the apostle Paul announces that a legal remedy has been made available: "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known" (Rom. 3:21). The words "but now" mark a major transition in Paul's argument. More than that, they introduce the great turning point in the history of salvation. Up to this point we stand condemned. God's perfect law tells us that we cannot be declared righteous at the bar of God's justice. But now a righteousness *from* God has been revealed. God has provided the way for us to be declared righteous. Or to put it in the biblical way, he has provided a way for us to be *justified*.

There is more to salvation than justification by faith. Yet without exaggerating its importance, it must be said that this doctrine holds a place near the center of the gospel. Justification is one of the central themes of Scripture, especially the New Testament, where various forms of the word "justify" (*dikaioō*) appear more than two hundred times.⁶ The prevalence of this vocabulary serves as an index to the importance of justification in biblical theology.

The centrality of justification has been recognized by many theologians in the history of the Christian church. John Calvin called it "the main hinge on which salvation turns."⁷ The English Reformer Thomas Cranmer described it as "the strong rock and foundation of Christian religion."⁸ Perhaps most famously of all, Martin Luther called justification "the chief article of Christian doctrine," so that "when justification

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has fallen, everything has fallen.”⁹ Whether we think of justification as the hinge, the foundation, or the standing-and-falling article of salvation, there is no hope of salvation without it. This is the doctrine, said Luther on another occasion, that “begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour.”¹⁰

The Meaning of Justification: To Declare Righteous

Justification is central to the Christian gospel because it answers the fundamental question, “How can a sinful human being be righteous before a holy God?” The answer lies in the biblical teaching about justification, which The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement defines as follows:

We believe that Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. By his sacrifice, he bore in our stead the punishment due us for our sins, making a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God’s justice on our behalf. By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God.

The vocabulary of justification comes from the law court, where “to justify” is a declarative verb. In its noun form “justification” is a legal word that refers to a person’s judicial standing. The biblical terms surrounding justification find their origin in legal relationships. The Greek verb *dikaioō*, which means “to justify,” is essentially a forensic term that “denotes basically a sentence of acquittal.”¹¹ To justify is to render a favorable verdict, to declare a person to be in the right, to announce forgiveness in legal terms. Justification is vindication. It is a decision of the court stating that someone has a right relationship to God and his law. It is the pronouncement that—as far as the law is concerned—the defendant is not guilty but innocent.

One good way to define justification is to contrast it with its opposite: condemnation. To condemn is to declare a person unrighteous. It is the judicial verdict that—as far as the law is concerned—he is guilty. This act of condemnation is not what makes a criminal guilty, of course. His own actions make him guilty, and he becomes guilty the very moment he vio-

lates the law. When he is finally condemned, therefore, the court simply pronounces him to be what he already is: a guilty sinner.

Justification is the opposite of condemnation. To justify is to pronounce a verdict of innocence. In justification a person is not *made* righteous, but *declared* righteous. Justification is not a process, therefore, but an act. It is not the impartation of righteousness through faith plus works and the sacraments, as some theologians have tried to claim, but the imputation of righteousness by faith alone.

The true meaning of justification—which is “legally to declare righteous,” not “actually to make righteous”—can be demonstrated from Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy 25:1 the Bible teaches that “when men have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty.” Obviously, a judge does not make a person guilty; he simply declares him to be guilty, thereby condemning him to his sentence. By analogy, the word “acquit” (which is really the Hebrew verb *hatsdiq*, “to justify”) means “to declare righteous.”

Or consider Proverbs 17:15: “Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent—the LORD detests them both.” Here again, the word “acquit,” or “justify” (*hatsdiq*), obviously refers to a legal declaration. By lamenting the justification of the guilty, God is not trying to stop anyone from transforming the guilty into fine, upstanding citizens. If justifying the guilty means to make them righteous, surely God would be in favor of it! His objection rather is to declaring the guilty to be innocent, which would be false and pernicious.

When we turn to the New Testament, we find justification used in much the same way. As in the Old Testament, to justify is the opposite of to condemn. This is clear, for example, from the contrast Paul draws between the sin of Adam and the gift of Christ: “The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification” (Rom. 5:16). To justify, then, means to declare that a defendant is innocent of a charge. In the context of salvation, it is God’s declaration that a person is acceptable in his sight and now stands rightly before him.

Note that justification means something more than acquittal. To acquit is to declare a person “not guilty.” But in justification God does not

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simply clear a sinner of all charges; he declares a sinner to be positively righteous. Justification is God's legal declaration that, on the basis of the perfect life and the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, received by faith, a sinner is as righteous as his own beloved Son.

Some theologians object that this places too much emphasis on judicial categories. They object to the idea that the cross was a legal transaction in which an innocent victim was made to pay the penalty for the crimes of others. Yet the Bible teaches forensic (i.e., judicial) justification—and with good reason. While there are many ways to describe God's saving grace, the legal category of justification is fundamental to the gospel. Since God is a judge as well as a father, our relationship to him must be a *right* relationship. To eliminate the legal basis for this rightness (i.e., justification) is to make it impossible for a sinner to know God in a saving way. Even worse, it is to believe in a God of unjust love who forgives people without having any right to do so.

The Source of Justification: God's Free Grace

If righteousness is necessary for justification, where does it come from? As we have seen, our problem is that we have no righteousness of our own. So what is the source of justifying righteousness?

The source of our justification is God's free grace. The apostle Paul says it very simply: we "are justified freely by his grace" (Rom. 3:24). The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement gives a more expansive answer:

Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own, freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners.

To say that we are justified by grace is to say that justification is far more than we deserve. It is an act of God's unmerited favor. As Thomas Cranmer wrote in his *Homily on Salvation*, "No man can, by his own deeds, be justified and made righteous before God: but every man, of necessity, is constrained to seek for another righteousness or justification, to be received at God's own hands."¹² The message of the gospel is that God

offers this righteousness to sinners as a gift: “It is God who justifies” (Rom. 8:33).

This brings us to a disputed point in New Testament interpretation. The gift of God’s justifying righteousness is mentioned twice in Romans 3, in both verse 21 (“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify”) and verse 22 (“This righteousness from God”). Technically speaking, however, these verses do not speak of a “righteousness *from* God,” as the New International Version has it, but of the “righteousness *of* God.”

There is more than one way to interpret this phrase. Perhaps the word “of” in the phrase “righteousness of God” is what grammarians call a “possessive genitive.” An example is the phrase “the people of God,” where the people in question belong to God, and God is the one to whom they belong. So perhaps the “righteousness of God” is simply the righteousness God possesses, which belongs to him and which he displays in salvation. We encounter this idea in Psalm 98:2, among other places: “The LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.”

There is another possibility, however. The words “of God” may explain where the righteousness comes from—what grammarians call a “genitive of origin.” An example is the phrase “music of Beethoven,” where the music in question finds its origin in Beethoven. If the “righteousness of God” is a genitive of origin, then God is the origin of the righteousness. Obviously, this is the interpretation that the New International Version favors when it speaks of “a righteousness *from* God.” On this reading, God is the source of the righteousness that he bestows to sinners.

Which interpretation is correct? Does the righteousness belong to God, or does it come from God as a gift? Certainly both statements are true. Righteousness belongs to God as one of his essential attributes. Indeed, the dramatic conclusion of Paul’s argument in Romans 3 is that even when he justifies sinners, of all people, God still preserves his righteousness! In justification, God “demonstrates his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Yet the righteousness of God is also “that righteousness which His righteousness requires Him to require,”¹³ and which he graciously offers

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as a gift to everyone who believes. There is righteousness for us *from* God, therefore—righteousness that God not only owns and demonstrates, but also bestows. The issue at stake in justification is not simply whether God is righteous, but whether we can be found righteous. Paul seems to cast doubt on this in verse 20, where he reaches the alarming conclusion that “no one will be declared righteous in his sight.”

Now in verse 21 he announces the good news that we can be declared righteous before God, not because of our own righteousness, but because of righteousness that comes from God. This interpretation is confirmed by verse 22, which makes it clear that the righteousness of God “comes to all who believe.” It is further confirmed by Romans 5:17, which speaks of those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace, and of the *gift* of righteousness.

Righteousness is not merely an attribute that God displays, therefore, but also a gift that he dispenses. To use a memorable phrase from John Stott, justification is God’s “righteous way of ‘righteousing’ the unrighteous.”¹⁴

If we are declared righteous on the basis of a gift, then the source of our justification must be the grace of God. For that is what grace is: God’s free gift for utterly undeserving sinners. This is the gift-righteousness Paul has in mind when he testifies to the Philippians that he wants to “be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Phil. 3:9; cf. Heb. 11:7).

It is also what Martin Luther meant when he spoke of an “alien righteousness.” Since there is no righteousness in us, we can be justified only by a righteousness that comes from somewhere outside of us. This righteousness is God’s own righteousness, which he grants to us through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Basis for Justification: Jesus’ Perfect Life and Sacrificial Death

On what legal basis does God grant the gift of his righteousness? The Bible teaches that God “justifies the wicked” (Rom. 4:5). But if we are in fact wicked, how can he declare us to be what we are not? And how can he justify the wicked without being considered wicked himself? It would

be an outrage for a righteous God simply to overlook or to excuse sin. If he intends to justify sinners, therefore, he must have some legitimate judicial basis for doing so. “Justification is not a synonym for amnesty,” writes John Stott,

which strictly is pardon without principle, a forgiveness which overlooks—even forgets—wrongdoing and declines to bring it to justice. No, justification is an act of justice, of gracious justice. . . . When God justifies sinners, he is not declaring bad people to be good, or saying that they are not sinners after all. He is pronouncing them legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because he himself in his Son has borne the penalty of their law-breaking.¹⁵

How then does God maintain his righteousness while at the same time justifying the ungodly? The answer to this theological problem is that God justifies sinners on the basis of the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. To say that Jesus lived a perfect life is to say that he kept the law of God in all its perfection, without ever committing even one little transgression. “He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father,” The Gospel Coalition writes in its doctrinal statement “The Redemption of Christ.” This is in keeping with Scripture, which says, “he committed no sin” (1 Pet. 2:22). Jesus lived the righteous life that God requires.

Furthermore, when we receive Jesus by faith, his righteousness counts for us, as if we ourselves had lived the righteous life that God requires. To quote again from The Gospel Coalition, in its Confessional Statement, “By his perfect obedience [Jesus] satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that perfect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God.”

By virtue of his perfect life, when Jesus died on the cross he offered a perfect sacrifice for our sins, and this too is part of the basis for our justification: we “are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Rom. 3:24–25). It is by his life-blood that Jesus secured our justification. As Paul goes on to say in Romans 5:9, “We have now been justified by his blood.” There is no justification without crucifixion. The gospel thus grounds the gift of saving righteousness in the suffering death of Jesus Christ. John Stott writes:

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God's saving work was achieved through the bloodshedding, that is, the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. . . . The death of Jesus was the atoning sacrifice because of which God averted his wrath from us, the ransom-price by which we have been redeemed, the condemnation of the innocent that the guilty might be justified, and the sinless One being made sin for us.¹⁶

Earlier we considered the shocking experience Don Smarto had when he discovered that underneath the proud robes of his outward righteousness there was a skeleton of sin. There is more to that story. When Smarto returned to his monastery that night, he struggled to justify himself before God. He kept trying to tell himself that he was good enough for God. He wandered out into the surrounding cornfields to walk in the moonlight. Yet soon the moon was covered with clouds; the night turned black. As Smarto stumbled around in the darkness, with his heart pounding, he cried out to God: "Tell me I am doing the right thing. Tell me that everything I do pleases you. Speak to me clearly!"

When he was almost in despair, Smarto heard a strange humming sound and walked toward it. He reached out in the darkness and touched a solid piece of wood. Of course! It was only a telephone pole. But as he looked up, the clouds began to part and he could see the crossbar that held up the phone lines. There, silhouetted against the moonlight, was the form of a cross. Don Smarto was standing at the foot of the cross, so to speak, looking to Jesus for his salvation. Here is what Smarto wrote about his encounter with Jesus and the cross:

Now I knew, I really knew, that Christ had died for me. It was coupled with the more important revelation that I was a sinner, that I was not the good person I had thought I was a moment before. All at once I embraced the telephone pole and began to cry. I must have hugged that piece of wood for nearly an hour. I could imagine Jesus nailed to this pole, blood dripping from his wounds. I felt as if the blood were dripping over me, cleansing me of my sin and unworthiness.¹⁷

What Don Smarto received in this dramatic encounter is really what every penitent person receives at the foot of the cross: the cleansing blood-sacrifice that atones for sin and justifies sinners before God.

The Righteousness of Justification: A Triple Imputation

When Jesus died on the cross he was treated like a condemned criminal. The Romans reserved crucifixion for the lowest of the low—for traitors, murderers, and other despicable malefactors. Jesus was neither a traitor nor a murderer; in fact, as we have seen, he never committed a single sin (see Heb. 4:15). Yet God permitted him to be crucified in order to take away our sin. To use the technical term for it, God *imputed* our sin to Christ. To impute is to credit something to someone’s account, which is precisely how we became sinners in the first place: Adam’s sin was charged to our account (see Rom. 5:12–19). By the imputation of Adam’s sin, we are reckoned to be sinners.

Happily, there is also a second imputation—the imputation of our sin to Jesus Christ. Jesus was perfectly righteous, yet he died a sinner’s death. How could God allow such a thing to occur? The answer has to do with imputation. God removed our sin and credited it to Christ’s account, just as he had promised through his servant Isaiah: “My righteous servant shall justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities” (Isa. 53:11 KJV). Once our sin was imputed to Christ in this way, he was condemned to die—not for his own sin, but for our sin. Jesus was reckoned to be unrighteous on the cross. Seeing that he was bearing the guilt of our sin, God condemned our sin in his flesh (see Rom. 8:3). As the Scripture says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). Or again, “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Pet. 3:18).

But Christ’s death is not the end of the story. The Scripture also mentions a third imputation: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). If we are to be justified, it is not enough for our sins to be imputed to Christ; his righteousness must also be imputed to us. Then, and only then, can we be declared righteous. This is exactly what God has done. Thus we have been given righteousness from God, imputed to us on the basis of Christ’s perfect life and sacrificial death.

Here it may be helpful to distinguish between active and passive righteousness. Jesus demonstrated his active righteousness by fulfilling the precepts of the law, and he demonstrated his passive righteousness by paying the penalty for sin. Christ obeyed God’s law on our behalf (active

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righteousness) and suffered the penalty for our disobedience (passive righteousness).

Active and passive righteousness are two different aspects of the one complete and total righteousness of Jesus Christ; both are required for full justification. For us to be declared “not guilty,” it is necessary for us to receive Christ’s passive righteousness through his atoning death. For us to be reckoned positively righteous, however, we also need Christ’s active righteousness credited to our account. It is not merely his atoning death that saves us, therefore, but also his obedient life.

The imputation of this righteousness is not merely a “legal fiction,” as some have alleged, but a legal reality that is based on our true spiritual connection to Jesus Christ. Like every other benefit of salvation, justification flows from our union with Christ. Jesus is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30), and thus it is by our participation in him that we are considered righteous. As Calvin explained it, “Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed. We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him. For this reason, we glory that we have fellowship of righteousness with him.”¹⁸

Salvation depends, therefore, on a triple imputation: first, by the fall of Adam, sin is imputed to the human race; second, in repentance, a believer’s sin is imputed to Christ; third, by faith, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believing sinner. Paul sums this all up in Romans 5, where he writes:

Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:18–19)

The imputation of justifying righteousness restores the righteousness that humanity lost through original sin. Marvelous to say, this righteousness is restored without doing any injustice to the righteousness of God’s own character. God has dealt justly with our sin by punishing it

in the person of the crucified Christ. He has also dealt justly with us by declaring us to be righteous in Christ. God accomplished this justifying work through the cross in order “to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

Thus the justification of sinners is also the justification or vindication of God. In justification, God proves his justice by dealing justly as well as mercifully with sinners through the cross. A transaction has taken place: our sin was imputed to Christ, and he was condemned; his righteousness is imputed to us, and we are justified.

The Means of Justification: Faith in Christ

Earlier we defined justification. Now we are in a position to enrich our understanding a little by further theological reflection:

Justification means a permanent change in our judicial relation to God whereby we are absolved from the charge of guilt, and whereby God forgives all our sins on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, our judicial relation to God is one of condemnation—we stand condemned on account of our sins, both original and actual. When we are justified, our judicial relation to God is changed from one of condemnation to one of acquittal.¹⁹

The Westminster Shorter Catechism offers a more concise definition: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ, imputed to us, and received by faith alone” (A. 33).

The last phrase in the definition from the catechism is essential because it identifies faith as the only instrument of justification. Faith is mentioned at least six times in Romans 3: “This righteousness from God comes through *faith* in Jesus Christ to all who *believe*” (Rom. 3:22). “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Rom. 3:25). In verse 26 God is described as “the one who justifies those who have *faith* in Jesus.” In verse 27 boasting is excluded on the principle of faith: “For we maintain that a man is justified by *faith* apart from observing the law” (Rom. 3:28; cf. 5:1). What this passage emphasizes over and over again is essential to the gospel: we are justified *by faith*.

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People sometimes wonder what they must do to justify themselves before God. The answer is that there is nothing we can do except believe. This is where Christianity differs from every other religion, from every merely human attempt to attain righteousness. As much as anything else, it is this difference which is so hard for unbelievers to understand: Isn't there something we can do to make ourselves good enough for God?

A striking example of humanity's misplaced confidence in works to justify comes from the epitaph on a first-century tomb:

Here lies Regina. . . . She will live again, return to the light again, for she can hope that she will rise to the life promised, as a real assurance, to the worthy and the pious in that she has deserved to possess an abode in the hallowed land. This your piety has assured you, this your chaste life, this your love for your people, this your observance of the Law, your devotion to your wedlock, the glory of which was dear to you. For all these deeds your hope for the future is assured.²⁰

Regina's epitaph is typical, especially for people who are religious. It assumes that righteous deeds are the best and only guarantee that someone will make it to heaven. Yet anyone who hopes to win acceptance from God by keeping the law has fallen into a soul-destroying legalism. Martin Luther made this point with his usual provocative flair when he said that thinking we can merit grace by our works is really a way of "trying to placate God with sins."²¹

When Jesus explained the true way of justification to his disciples, he was careful to distinguish between faith and obedience. The disciples asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28–29). The Philippian jailor put the same basic question to the apostle Paul: "What must I do to be saved?" Paul gave the same answer Jesus gave: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:30–31). In other words, there is nothing we can do to justify ourselves to God. The only righteousness he accepts comes "apart from law" (Rom. 3:21).

Thus the only thing we can do is put our faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. If we trust in him and his justifying work on the cross, then God will declare us righteous. We are acceptable to God, not by keeping his law but by trusting in the only man who ever did—Jesus Christ.

The difference between being justified by doing and being justified by believing is beautifully illustrated in the conversion of Martin Luther. In the days when he was still a monk, the famous theologian was deeply impressed by a verse from the prophet Habakkuk, as quoted by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians: “The righteous will live by faith” (Gal. 3:11; cf. Hab. 2:4).

Luther encountered this verse in the monastery at Erfurt, although at first he was uncertain what it meant. Later he went through a dark period of illness and depression during which he imagined that he was under the wrath of God. Lying on a bed in Italy, and fearing that he was soon to die, Luther found himself repeating the words over and over again: “The righteous will live by his faith. The righteous will live by his faith.”

Mercifully, Luther recovered, and not long afterward he proceeded to Rome, where he visited the church of St. John Lateran. The pope had promised an indulgence forgiving the sins of any pilgrim who mounted the church’s staircase, which was alleged to have come from the judgment hall of Pontius Pilate. Believing that the steps were stained with the very blood of Christ, pilgrims ascended the stairs on their knees, pausing frequently to pray and kiss the holy staircase.

Luther’s story continues in the words of his son (from a manuscript preserved in the library of Rudolstadt): “As he repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, the words of the prophet Habakkuk came suddenly to his mind: ‘The just shall live by faith.’ Thereupon he ceased his prayers, returned to Wittenberg, and took this as the chief foundation of all his doctrine.” Luther no longer believed that there was anything he could do to gain favor with God, and he began to live instead by faith in God’s Son. Later he said:

Before those words broke upon my mind I hated God and was angry with him. . . . But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood those words—“The just shall live by faith!” “The just shall live by faith!”—then I felt born again like a new man; I entered through the open doors into the very Paradise of God.²²

When the Bible says that we are justified “by faith” or “through faith,” it is asserting that faith is the instrument of our justification, the channel by which we receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ. In the

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words of J. I. Packer, faith is “the outstretched empty hand that receives righteousness by receiving Christ.”²³ Similarly, J. C. Ryle defined true faith as

laying hold of a Savior’s hand, leaning on a husband’s arm, and receiving a physician’s medicine. [Faith] brings with it nothing to Christ but a sinful man’s soul. It gives nothing, contributes nothing, pays nothing, performs nothing. It only receives, takes, accepts, grasps, and embraces the glorious gift of justification which Christ bestows.²⁴

This means that, properly speaking, it is not faith itself (or even the doctrine of justification by faith) that saves us. Rather, it is Christ who saves us, with faith simply operating as the means by which we appropriate Christ. In Calvin’s words, “Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.”²⁵

Although Romans 3 does not say that justification is “by faith alone” (at least in so many words), this is what the passage clearly implies, particularly at its close: “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Rom. 3:27–28; cf. Gal. 2:16).

If we were justified by works, or even by faith plus works, then salvation would be something to boast about (see Eph. 2:9). As it is, however, no one will ever be able to boast of making it to heaven on the strength of his or her own merits. We are justified on the basis of the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, and there is nothing more that needs to be done except to believe. To quote from The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement, “We believe that God justifies and sanctifies those who by grace have faith in Jesus.”

The Goal of Justification: Good Works for the Glory of God

Some people think that the apostle James contradicts the doctrine of justification by faith alone. After all, James contends that “a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). What James

is really saying, however, is something like this: “A person is proven to be justified by his works and not merely by his faith.” Unlike Paul, who needed to oppose the popular notion that sinners can be saved by good works, James was combating the misconception that believers can dispense with works altogether. To put the difference between them in theological terms, Paul was dealing with people who wanted to make sanctification part of the basis for their justification, whereas James was dealing with people who wanted to be justified without being sanctified!

For James, as well as for Paul, “to justify” means “to declare righteous.” The difference is that in Paul’s case it is God who declares the believer righteous, whereas in James’s case it is the believer’s works that declare him righteous by proving his faith to be genuine. Almost certainly both apostles would have agreed with Calvin that “it is faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone.”²⁶ Faith and works do not together produce justification (faith + works >> justification). Rather, faith justifies and produces good works (faith >> justification + works).

To express this in yet another way, the faith that alone justifies is a *faith that works*. This explains why The Gospel Coalition ends its statement on justification by saying, “We believe that a zeal for personal and public obedience flows from this free justification.” The true biblical doctrine of justification is not opposed to good works but in fact produces them. Our justification is vitally connected to our sanctification.

As far as justification itself is concerned, Christ’s work and our works are mutually exclusive. As Paul says in Galatians: “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16). Justification thus comes by trusting rather than by working: “To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). Where justification is concerned, the Bible sets faith and works in opposition to one another. If justification is by faith, then it is not by works. By ruling out works in this way, the Bible is really saying that justification is by faith alone. For if justification is not by works, then it must come only by faith.

There is an important reason for this distinction between faith and works—a reason that helps us to understand the purpose of our justification in the plan of God. If justification comes only by faith, then the biblical way of justification ensures that all of the glory goes to God alone. If we

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are justified by the saving work of Jesus rather than by our own work, then all the praise for our salvation goes to him and not to us. Thus the goal of justification—like every other aspect of the gospel—is the glory of God.

The Recipients of Justification: People Like Us

One of the most beautiful affirmations of the biblical doctrine of justification comes from the Heidelberg Catechism, which asks, “How are you righteous before God?” (Q. 60). The answer is this:

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have not kept any one of them, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

Notice that the catechism expresses justification in terms of the first person. This points us to an important truth: if justification comes through faith, then we ourselves must believe in Jesus Christ—personally and individually—to be justified. Justification is not simply a general principle about the way of salvation; it is a call to make a personal faith commitment to Christ, for without him we are doomed to be condemned. Indeed, the Bible warns that “whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:18). Yet the very same verse also promises that “whoever believes in him is not condemned.” If we would be justified and not condemned, therefore, we must put our faith in Jesus Christ.

For those who do believe, God’s final verdict—“righteous for all eternity”—has been brought forward into our present experience. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith,” the Scripture says, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). Our legal standing has already been decided. We can never be un-justified. We are acceptable to God right now and forever, to the glory of God. The day of judgment will confirm what God has already declared: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

One man who experienced the joy of justifying faith was the poet William Cowper. Cowper had long suffered from depression, and for a time he lived in an insane asylum where conditions were appalling. Despite all his physical and psychological torments, however, his most acute sufferings were spiritual, for he considered himself a condemned sinner. Yet the day came when Cowper found his legal remedy in the saving message of justification by faith alone. This is the story he told:

The happy period which was to shake off my fetters and afford me a clear opening of the free mercy of God in Christ Jesus was now arrived. I flung myself into a chair near the window, and, seeing a Bible there, ventured once more to apply to it for comfort and instruction. The first verses I saw were in the third chapter of Romans: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation, through faith in his blood, to manifest his righteousness." Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone on me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon in his blood, and the fullness and completeness of his justification. In a moment I believed and received the gospel.²⁷

This gift of righteousness is available to everyone who believes and receives the gospel. By his free grace, God offers full and complete justification on the basis of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ will be declared righteous forever at the bar of God's eternal justice.

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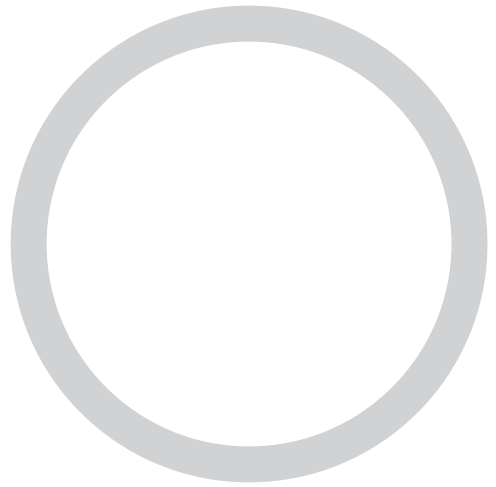
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The Holy Spirit

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Let's be honest: one of the fun things about Christmas is getting presents. Some people get very few, some get too many. But most people get something. This past year I got some books (yay), clothes (meh), a Nintendo Wii (it was, er, for the kids), and a John Calvin bobblehead doll (priceless). All in all, a decent haul.

Think about your favorite gift, not just from Christmas, but the best ever. It's hard to beat an engagement ring for long-term impact. But what if I told you of a gift that provided a surer, longer-lasting promise than marriage? Money might be your favorite. After all, you can wield a lot of influence and do a lot of fun things with money. But what if I told you of a gift that provided more life-changing power, more world-transforming influence, than wealth? Maybe you are the sentimental type and your most treasured gifts are old photographs given by friends and family. Well, what if I told you of a gift that provided more than a picture of your beloved; it gave you his very presence with you for all time?

This would be some gift—a gift of promise, of power, of presence. And millions all around the world have received it. Or received *him*, I should say. For the gift, as you may have guessed, is the Holy Spirit. No other possession is as precious, helpful, dynamic, strong, and loving as the Spirit who dwells in those who belong to God through Christ (1 Cor. 3:16).

The Holy Spirit in All the Bible

The word for “spirit” is *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. The former is used roughly ninety times for the Holy Spirit in the Old Testa-

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ment. The latter is employed more than 250 times as a reference to the Spirit in the New Testament. Both words can refer to wind or breath. The general idea is the same: *ruach* and *pneuma* express energy, motion, life, activity. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit set apart, belonging to God. He is God's power and presence among his people.¹

The Holy Spirit, though more "visible" in the New Testament, was also at work in the Old. He was present at creation, hovering over the face of the waters, poised to order and complete what the Father had purposed and planned (Gen. 1:2). The Holy Spirit was instrumental in the exodus (Isa. 64:7–14). He gifted God's people for service, equipping Bezalel and Oholiab not just with artistic excellence but with the Spirit's power to reshape a kind of heaven on earth (Ex. 35:30–35). We see frequently how the Spirit in the Old Testament rested on individuals like Balaam, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, and Azariah for special acts of speaking or acting (Num. 24:2; Judg. 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 2 Chron. 15:1). The Spirit could also come on people for a time and then depart, as Saul experienced (1 Sam. 16:14) and David feared (Ps. 51:11).

The Spirit's activity in the Old Testament is powerful but less than complete. It's no surprise, then, that the Old Testament looks forward to a coming age of the Spirit. Three prophecies in particular predict the glory of this new day. Joel 2:28–32 looks forward to the Spirit coming upon all God's people. Ezekiel 36:22–37:14 awaits the day when the Spirit will dwell within God's people personally and permanently. And Isaiah 11:1–5 promises a Spirit-anointed Branch from the root of Jesse who will usher in the day of salvation for Israel. A universal Spirit, an indwelling Spirit, and a Spirit-empowered Savior: this is the age of the Spirit the Old Testament anticipates. Under the new covenant, this outpouring is realized (2 Cor. 3:1–11). The Spirit is poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:14–21), indwells all believers (Rom. 8:9), and empowers and glorifies the Spirit-anointed Messiah in his earthly ministry and saving work.

The New Testament emphasizes that last point more than we often realize. The Spirit empowered the Son through every stage of his ministry. The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary in the virginal conception (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35). The Holy Spirit was upon Simeon when he spoke about Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:25). The Spirit rested on Jesus

at his baptism (Matt. 3:16). Then the Spirit led Jesus, who Luke says was full of the Holy Spirit, into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1). After the temptation, Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit (4:14) and announced in the synagogue that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to proclaim the good news to the poor (4:18).

It was by the Spirit of God that Jesus cast out demons (Matt. 12:28). Hebrews 9:14 says it was through the eternal Spirit that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice to God. According to Romans 1:4, Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead through the Spirit of holiness. From conception to birth through life, ministry, death, and resurrection, the Spirit was at work upon and through Christ.

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

A Person

The Holy Spirit is a person. He grieves (Eph. 4:30); intercedes (Rom. 8:26–27); testifies (John 16:12–15); speaks (Mark 13:11); creates (Gen. 1:2; Luke 1:35); has a mind (Rom. 8:27); and can be blasphemed (Mark 3:28–29).² (Of course, the Scriptures are also said to “testify” and “speak,” and no one thinks the Scriptures are human. Yet context shows in such cases that this is a personification of Scripture, signaling, in fact, that God speaks and testifies through the Scriptures.) In the Farewell Discourse (John 14–16), Jesus promises to send “another *parakletos* [variously rendered “helper,” “counselor,” “advocate],” namely, the Holy Spirit, who is Jesus’ successor in earthly ministry and in some respects Jesus’ replacement; and an impersonal force or the like simply will not fit the descriptions of what Jesus’ bequeathed Spirit will do.

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The Holy Spirit is not just a person; he is a divine person. Psalm 139:7 hints at his omnipresence. He is “the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14).³ Lying to the Holy Spirit is the same as lying to God (Acts 5:3–4). Paul uses the phrase “God’s temple” interchangeably with “temple of the Holy Spirit,” thus equating the two (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19).

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Distinct from the Father and Son

The Holy Spirit shares the same essence with the Father and the Son, and yet he is distinct from them (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; 2 Cor. 1:21–22; 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:2). Simply put, the Holy Spirit is God, but the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son. He is his own divine person.

Though he is distinct from the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). To say, “the Spirit of God lives in you,” or, “the Spirit of Christ is in you,” or, “Christ dwells in you,” are three ways of saying the same thing (Rom. 8:10).⁴ The Spirit is sent from the Father (John 14:26) *and* from the Son (16:7; 20:22).⁵ In fact, the identity of the Son and the Spirit so overlap that Paul can even say “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17–18).

This does not mean the Son and the Spirit are one in terms of their being, but rather that their mission is so united they are one in their shared redemptive activity. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6), and the Spirit will lead the disciples into all truth (John 16:13). Jesus came to bear witness to God the Father (John 1:14–18), and the Spirit comes to bear witness to Christ (John 15:26). The sinful world did not receive Christ (John 1:11; 5:43), and the sinful world will not receive the Spirit (John 14:17). The Holy Spirit is simply and gloriously *another* Helper (John 14:16), the very power and presence on earth of the resurrected and ascended Christ.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Having examined the “who” of the Holy Spirit, we now turn to examine the “what,” as in: “What does the Holy Spirit actually do?” Because the Spirit is not seen in the Bible, there is more to say about the work of the Holy Spirit than about the *person* of the Holy Spirit. The best way to know the Spirit is to understand and experience his effects. I have divided the work of the Spirit into seven categories: the Holy Spirit convicts, converts, applies, glorifies, sanctifies, equips, and promises.

The Holy Spirit Convicts

It is remarkable if you think about it. Jesus spends his last few hours before death teaching his disciples about the Trinity. Of all that he could have said, he felt it most necessary to speak of his oneness with the Father and his unity with the coming Holy Spirit. Five times in the Up-

per Room Discourse Jesus promises the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26–27; 16:4b–11, 12–15). In the fourth of these statements Jesus speaks of the Spirit’s convicting power:

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper [*parakletos*] will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. (John 16:7–11)

Understandably, the disciples are upset that Jesus is leaving (John 16:6). But Jesus assures them it is for their good, for if he doesn’t go away, the *paraclete* will not come. The “will not” is not because the Spirit and the Son cannot occupy the same space, but because the Spirit can come only after the Son’s death, resurrection, and ascension. The inauguration of God’s reign begun by Christ will be completed by the Spirit, but only after Christ’s work is accomplished.

The church, then, in a paradoxical way, is better because Jesus is no longer physically here. Back in the first century one had to go to Palestine in order to be with Jesus. But now, on the other side of Pentecost, Christ can be everywhere by his Spirit. We don’t have to travel to Israel to be with him or live in the mountains or light a candle to find him. We can do better than walking with him or seeing him. He can dwell in us anywhere at any time.

For the disciples, the presence of the Spirit was good news. He would be their Helper-Comforter-Advocate. But for the world, for those mired in sin, the Spirit would wield a convicting or exposing power (see John 3:20, where the same word, *elegcho*, is used). The Holy Spirit acts like a giant searchlight, exposing the world’s wickedness and calling people everywhere to repentance. It’s as if the world is having a nice romantic candlelight dinner, thinking everything is all sirloin and roses, and then *voila!* The Spirit flips on the lights to expose cockroaches scurrying up the walls and garbage strewn about the floor. We are not as good as we imagine, and the Spirit can prove it to us.

In particular, Jesus says the Spirit will convict the world of three things:⁶

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- 1) Of sin, because it does not believe in Jesus. At the heart of sin is unbelief. And there is no better (worse?) sign of unbelief than refusing to recognize Jesus for who he is.
- 2) Of righteousness, because Jesus went to the Father. The world is impressed with its own supposed goodness (Isa. 64:6) when it should be impressed with Jesus. We want to determine who Jesus is and decide what he really accomplished. But his ascension into heaven is enough to demonstrate his identity as the holy Son of God, one with the Father.
- 3) Of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. This is the most damning evidence the Spirit could bring against the Jews: they killed the wrong man and worship the wrong ruler. But the Spirit will come and bear witness to the resurrected Christ so they might see that the one they follow has been defeated and the one they murdered has proven victorious. The blow dealt to Satan on the cross was a precursor to the final defeat that awaits him and his spiritual children. Satan can still bark and bite, but he's on a short leash headed for the pound.

The primary fulfillment to this threefold promise came at Pentecost (Acts 2:22–24, 37), but the ongoing work of Spirit-prompted conviction continues wherever there is sin to be exposed and forgiven. The convicting work of the Spirit is the first element in regeneration. God the Holy Spirit must awaken us to our selfishness, our antipathy to godliness, and our indifference to Christ. Jonathan Edwards observed:

The Spirit that is at work takes off persons' minds from the vanities of the world, and engages them in a deep concern about eternal happiness, and puts them upon earnestly seeking their salvation, and convinces them of the dreadfulness of sin and of their own guilty and miserable state as they are by nature. It awakens men's consciences, and makes them sensible of the dreadfulness of God's anger, and causes in them a great desire and earnest care and endeavor to obtain his favour.⁷

When the Spirit is at work, we will not just be embarrassed by our failures or regret our mistakes; we see our sins in relationship to God and experience what David felt when he cried out, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). No sentient man or woman is a Christian who has not seen his or her sin in light of the Spirit's convicting work and seen it as an offense against Almighty God.

The Holy Spirit Converts

The classic passage on conversion is John 3, where Jesus talks with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews (v. 1). Unlike many of the other Pharisees in the Gospels, Nicodemus seems like an honest seeker, if a little cowardly. He doesn't appear hostile to Jesus. In fact, he strikes me as a sincere religious man genuinely interested to learn from Jesus. There's only one massive problem with Nicodemus: he's not born from above. He recognizes that Jesus is a teacher come from God. He affirms that Jesus has done miracles with God's power (v. 2). But this is not enough. Jesus says to him in effect, "I don't care that you see the miraculous with your eyes. I want you to *experience* the miraculous in your heart."⁸

Nicodemus, like the rest of us, must be born again (John 3:3). Or to put it another way, we must be born of water and the Spirit (v. 5). Nicodemus should have been familiar with this curious imagery, for it comes from the Old Testament (cf. 3:10). Jesus is no doubt thinking of Ezekiel 36, in particular the references to water and Spirit (Ezek. 36:25, 27). In Ezekiel's prophecy, water points to cleansing, and the indwelling of the Spirit suggests a new heart (36:25–26). Thus, in John 3, Jesus is not talking about the sacrament of baptism but about the supernatural work that removes the stain of sin and makes us new.⁹

This is what the Bible means by new birth, conversion, regeneration, or being born again. Conversion is wrought in us by the Holy Spirit. Titus 3:5 calls it the "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." Just like the wind (*pneuma*) blows where it wishes, so it is with everyone born of the Spirit (*pneuma*). God the Holy Spirit must invade our heart and awaken us to the vileness of sin, the truthfulness of God's Word, and the preciousness of Christ.

Jesus could not be any clearer: there is no Christian life without the converting work of the Spirit. He enables us to understand and spiritually discern the things of God (1 Cor. 2:12–14). He grants us repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18). He pours out God's love into our hearts (Rom. 5:5). He enables us to believe in the promises of God (John 1:12–13). "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father," Jesus says in John 6:65.

And how do the elect come to God? "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and

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life” (John 6:63). So we come to faith in the Son by the Father’s appointing and the Spirit’s imparting. Faith itself, then, is a gift, a gift that comes at conversion when we are born again by the Spirit working through the Word of God (1 Pet. 1:23–25).

The Holy Spirit Applies

Think of all Christ accomplished. He kept the prescriptive and penal requirements of the law. He took on human flesh and satisfied divine justice. He conquered death, sin, and the Devil. As the covenant-keeping Messiah, he won for his people every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). Jesus Christ is wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

UNION WITH CHRIST. But how does all that Christ accomplished become ours? That’s a question most of us have never considered. John Calvin asks:

How do we receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only-begotten Son—not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand, that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.¹⁰

So how do we share in Christ’s benefits? Calvin’s answer: “The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually unites us to himself.”¹¹

In Romans 8:9–11, Paul argues along similar lines. When the Spirit dwells in us, we have the Spirit of Christ (v. 10), and if the Spirit is in us, we will have life in Jesus Christ (v. 11). In short, when you have the Spirit, you have Christ; and when you have Christ, you have the Spirit. The Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, because the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. He is the Spirit of adoption, making us children of God the Father by joining us to Christ our brother (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; Heb. 2:17). God, by the Spirit, has torn the “first Adam” jersey from our backs and put us on the “second Adam” team.

We don’t often think about this aspect of redemption, but John Murray says that union with Christ is the “central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”¹² So crucial is our union with Christ that Paul uses this “in Christ” language about 160 times.¹³ Justification, reconciliation,

redemption, adoption, sanctification, glorification—all these belong to us because of our union with Christ. In a mysterious, supernatural way that transcends spatial categories, Christ is in us by the Spirit that we might have communion with Christ and share in all his benefits.

BAPTISM IN THE SPIRIT AS OUR UNION WITH CHRIST. One other passage bears special mention: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Christians continue to debate the meaning of this verse. Is this baptism something all Christians experience or a special blessing that only some Christians receive? The answer is fairly straightforward.

The phrase “baptism in/with/by the Spirit” (*en pneumatē*) occurs seven times in the New Testament. Four instances are in the Gospels, where John the Baptist prophesies that the Lord Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). The fifth occurrence is in Acts 1:5, where Jesus alludes to John’s prediction. The sixth instance is in Acts 11:16, when Peter recalls Jesus’ words from before his ascension in Acts 1:5. So all six of these references to baptism in/with/by the Spirit look forward or back to the same thing: the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

The seventh passage, 1 Corinthians 12:13, is unique because it does not refer directly to Pentecost (the Corinthians and Paul weren’t there to be baptized with the Spirit in Jerusalem). Some Christians, therefore, have taught that 1 Corinthians 12:13 speaks of a second-blessing experience, one that comes subsequent to conversion and that only some Christians enjoy. But the second-blessing explanation will not work. For starters, the verse emphasizes that *all* were baptized in the Spirit and *all* were made to drink of the Spirit.

Whatever Paul is talking about, it’s clear he assumes everyone at Corinth has experienced it. Furthermore, given the larger context, Paul could not possibly be talking about a unique second blessing experienced by only some Christians. After emphasizing the diversity of gifts in the body, Paul turns his focus on the unity the Corinthians share. They may all have different gifts, but they have all been baptized in one Spirit.

Baptism in the Spirit is something every Christian has experienced because every Christian has been born again and joined to Christ through

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the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Baptism with the Spirit is nothing less than our union with Christ. The same Spirit first poured out at Pentecost now dwells in every believer, joining us to Christ and immersing us in all his benefits.

If you'll permit a homely illustration, baptism in the Spirit is like that wonderful waterfall of glaze that pours over a Krispy Kreme doughnut moving down the conveyor belt. Every doughnut gets it, and every doughnut is much better for it. In a similar way, Jesus baptizes us in the Spirit that we might know his power and be awash in his blessings. Or as John Stott summarizes it: Spirit baptism is a distinctive blessing (realized only in the new covenant), an initial blessing (given at conversion), and a universal blessing (poured out on every genuine believer).¹⁴

The Holy Spirit Glorifies

With this subheading you may think I'm going to continue through the "order of salvation" and explain how the Spirit leads the Christian to final glorification. But that's not the point, because that's not what Jesus talks about in the upper room. In Jesus' fifth promise regarding the Holy Spirit, he speaks of a different kind of glorification:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

Here we have Jesus' final words about the Holy Spirit. And what does he emphasize as he comes to the cross but the central and often overlooked work of the Spirit to glorify Christ? Most immediately, Jesus is speaking to the Twelve about the work the Spirit will do in the days ahead to reveal Christ's full glory to them (John 7:39). But derivatively, Jesus' promise is also about the work of the Spirit to glorify Christ in our hearts through the truth the disciples would soon see. This is an important passage because it helps us avoid two common mistakes.

The first mistake is to pit the Spirit against the Scriptures. Jesus' promise has nothing to do with the Spirit's telling me whom I should marry or

what job I should take. That's not what he has in mind when he says the Spirit "will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). Jesus is talking to the apostles (v. 12). They are the ones who will be led into "all the truth."

The "all truth" they would receive was not the truth about every bit of knowledge in the universe, from supernovas to DNA. The "truth" refers to the whole truth about everything bound up in Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life. The Spirit will illuminate the things that are to come (John 16:13), not in a predictive sense, but insofar as he will unpack the significance of the events yet to come, namely Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation. The Spirit, speaking for the Father and the Son, will help the apostles remember what Jesus said and understand the true meaning of who Jesus is and what he accomplished (John 14:26).

This means that the Spirit is responsible for the truths the apostles preached and that in turn were written down in what we now call the New Testament. We trust the Bible because the apostles, and those under the umbrella of their authority, wrote it by means of the Spirit's revelation. The Bible is the Spirit's book. He inspired the Old Testament, as the apostles assume (Acts 4:25; 28:25; Heb. 3:7; 2 Pet. 1:21), and also the New Testament, as Jesus indirectly promised in John 16.

Therefore, we can yield no ground to those who, like Mormons, argue for ongoing revelation that adds to the doctrinal content of the New Testament. Nor can we tolerate the suggestion theological liberals often make that sticking meticulously to the Scriptures is somehow an insult to the Holy Spirit. Word and Spirit belong inseparably together. We hear from the Spirit when we search the Scriptures. And in searching the Scriptures, we must pray for the Spirit's illumination.

The second error this passage can help us avoid is the mistake of pitting the Spirit against Christ. The Holy Spirit is a serving Spirit. He speaks only what he hears (John 16:13). He declares what he is given; his mission is to glorify another (v. 14). All three persons of the Trinity are fully God, yet in the divine economy the Son makes known the Father and the Spirit glorifies the Son. Yes, it is grievous to ignore the Holy Spirit and overlook the indispensable role he plays in our lives. But we must not think we can focus on Christ too much. The Spirit is not hurt when we fix our attention on Christ.

Exulting in Christ is evidence of the Spirit's work! The focus of the

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church is not on the dove but on the cross, and that's the way the Spirit would have it. As J. I. Packer puts it, "The Spirit's message to us is never, 'Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me,' but always, 'Look at *him*, and see *his* glory; listen to *him*, and hear *his* word; go to *him*, and have life; get to know *him*, and taste his gift of joy and peace.'"¹⁵

All this business about the work of the Spirit to reveal and glorify the Son is why the notion of anonymous Christians is so horribly mistaken. I remember a professor in college who argued that because God is sovereign and the Spirit blows where he wishes, the Spirit could very well be savingly at work in all religions, causing people to be born again and joining people to Christ apart from their knowing it. He believed people could be saved in Christ without hearing of Christ or professing faith in him. This "inclusivist" way of thinking is popular. Even the beloved C. S. Lewis espoused it:

There are people who do not accept the full Christian doctrine about Christ but who are so strongly attracted by Him that they are His in a much deeper sense than they themselves understand. There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it. For example, a Buddhist of good will may be led to concentrate more and more on the Buddhist teaching about mercy and to leave in the background (though he might still say he believed) the Buddhist teaching on certain other points.¹⁶

I've benefited from Lewis often, but to think this way is to misunderstand the Spirit's mission at Pentecost and in the age of Pentecost. The work of the Holy Spirit is to bring glory to Christ by taking what is his—his teaching, the truth about his death and resurrection—and making it known. The Spirit does not work indiscriminately without the revelation of Christ in view. Arguably, the Holy Spirit's most important work is to glorify Christ, and he does not do this apart from shining the spotlight on Christ for the elect to see and savor.

The Holy Spirit Sanctifies

The opening greeting of Peter's first epistle gives a clear example of the Trinitarian nature of our salvation. The "elect exiles" are chosen accord-

ing to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, that they might be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled by his blood (1 Pet. 1:2). The Holy Spirit sanctifies in two ways. First, he sets us apart *in Christ* that we might be cleansed by his blood. Second, he works *in us* so we can be obedient to Jesus Christ. Through the sanctification of the Spirit we are given a new position and infused with a new power.

It's the second element, the new power, that we usually think of when discussing sanctification. Though sanctification is positional too, as a theological term it usually refers to our progressive sanctification, the way in which God works in us for his good pleasure as we work out the life of salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12–13). Or, as Romans 8:9–13 puts it, we are no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit (position); therefore, by the Spirit we ought to put to death the deed of the flesh (power).

Though we must make effort in our growth in godliness (2 Pet. 1:5), the Spirit empowers through and through. The Bible is not a cheap infomercial telling us to change and then serving as an enthusiastic cheerleader: “You can do it!” We have already been changed. We are already new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and have a new strength at work in our inner being (Eph. 3:16), producing gospel fruit in us by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23). The Bible expects that because God dwells in us by the Spirit, we can, by that same Spirit, begin to share in the qualities that are characteristic of God himself (2 Pet. 1:4). Of course there is still a fight within us. But with the Spirit there can be genuine progress and victory. The New Testament simply asks us to be who we are.

How exactly, then, does the Spirit empower us for growth in godliness? Think again of the metaphor of light. The Holy Spirit, as we've seen, is like a light shining into our dark places, exposing our sin and leading us to repentance. The Spirit is also a lamp to illumine God's Word, teaching what is true and revealing it as precious (1 Cor. 2:6–16). And, as we see in John 16, the Spirit throws a spotlight on Christ so we can see his glory and beauty and be changed accordingly.

This is the stunning argument Paul makes in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” Just as Moses had his face transformed when he saw the Lord's glory on Mount Sinai, so will we be

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transformed when we behold God's glory in the face of Christ. Except we won't get just a shiny, tan face; we will grow more and more into the image of the one we see. We become what we behold.

My wife loves to watch figure skating. She loves the artistry and beauty of it. She also enjoys the puff pieces on the young women. I find them nauseating, but I have to admit that it is pretty remarkable what they can do. I imagine most of them grew up watching figure skating. They probably marveled at all the lay-back spins and double-axes and triple salchows (uh?). I'm sure many of them were mesmerized as little girls by Kristi Yamaguchi or Michelle Kwan. They probably thought, "I want to do that. That's amazing! That's incredible! How can I be like her?" Of course, it takes practice to be a world-class figure skater, just like sanctification takes effort on our part. But the effort in both cases is inspired and motivated and modeled after glory. The sight of brilliance and majesty is transformative in and of itself.

That's why when the Spirit is at work to sanctify us—by revealing sin, revealing truth, and revealing the glory of Christ—and we look the other way, it is a profound offense. The Bible refers to this as resisting (Acts 7:51), quenching (1 Thess. 5:19), or grieving the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). There may be slight nuances among the three terms, but they all speak of situations where we do not accept the Spirit's work in our lives. When we reject what the Word of God has to say to us, when we turn our eyes from the Spirit's exposure to sin, when we say one thing as Christians and do another, we sin against the Spirit.¹⁷

The Holy Spirit Equips

The Holy Spirit not only empowers us for Christlike living; he equips us for Christlike service. "Fullness" is one way to describe this equipping. The Spirit fills with boldness, courage, wisdom, faith, and joy (Acts 6:3; 11:24; 13:52). Even though the Spirit dwells within us, he can still fill us to a greater or lesser degree, just like a balloon can be full of air—if you blow into it, it expands and has a fuller fullness. Being filled by the Spirit may or may not make you an emotional person. It may or may not make you a spontaneous person. But whenever you engage in worship, thankfulness, and proper submission, you can be assured it is the Spirit who is filling you (Eph. 5:18–21).

SPIRITUAL GIFTS. “Gift” is another way to talk about the Spirit’s equipping work. The word “gift” (*charisma*) is a flexible term.¹⁸ Most broadly, a gift is simply the manifestation of God’s grace in and through his people.¹⁹ In 1 Corinthians 12:4–6, a gift is equivalent to service or activity. The major gift lists in the New Testament are not meant to be exhaustive descriptions of the Spirit’s equipping (see Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:8–10, 28; Eph. 4:11). The lists are overlapping, imprecise, and occasional in nature. Paul is simply saying, “The church is made up of all sorts of people doing all kinds of things by the hand of God. For example . . .” In other words, wherever God’s grace is evident in his people for the common good, there we see spiritual gifts at work.

The purpose of spiritual gifts is not to impress or even to provide a powerful personal experience. The manifestation of the Spirit is for the common good and the edification of the church (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:12, 26). The gifts are for service and ministry for the benefit of the body of Christ.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit apportions gifts to individual Christians as he wills (12:11). It’s not as if the Holy Spirit backed up a big dump truck of gifts and unloaded them indiscriminately on God’s people. He didn’t distribute the gifts by putting us in a money booth with spiritual gifts flying around (and some poor chap gets stuck with administration). No, the Holy Spirit has apportioned the gifts carefully and personally. Everyone is gifted by the Spirit for service. This means we *can* serve. It also means we *must* serve. Whether it’s within or without the walls of the church building, each of us must be working for the common good. Church is not like going to the movies. It’s more like being a soldier in an army. Every soldier needs to do his part, and munching popcorn while his fellow soldiers do battle in the foxhole doesn’t count.

THOSE CONTROVERSIAL GIFTS. I would be remiss in talking about spiritual gifts if I didn’t say something about the debate over the “miraculous gifts.” On the one side are cessationists, who claim that some of the gifts, such as tongues and prophecy, ceased after the apostolic age. They contend:

- 1) The miraculous gifts were needed only as authenticating signs for the initial establishing of the gospel and the church.
- 2) First Corinthians 13:8–10 says that prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will cease “when the perfect comes.” A minority of cessation-

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ists contends that the “perfect” came with the completion of the Bible.

- 3) Revelatory gifts such as tongues and prophecy undermine the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.
- 4) The miraculous gifts we see today are not analogous to the gifts exercised in the New Testament.

On the other side are continuationists, who claim that all the gifts are available today. They argue:

- 1) Without a clear word to the contrary, we should assume all the gifts are still in effect and earnestly desire them (1 Cor. 14:1).
- 2) The “perfect” in 1 Corinthians 13 refers to the return of Christ, not to the close of the canon (and, it must be pointed out, many cessationists accept this exegesis, too, but draw different conclusions).
- 3) Revelatory gifts do not have the same authority as Scripture. They must always be tested.
- 4) Whether or not the gifts are identical with the first century, we should welcome the Spirit’s work in our midst.

I believe both sides have come to see that they agree on more than they once thought. They agree:

- 1) Every proclamation must be tested against Scripture.
- 2) Nothing can be added to Scripture.
- 3) It is unwise to claim personal words from the Lord for someone else.
- 4) We should be open to the Spirit working in nondiscursive ways, whether that’s called “prophecy,” “illumination,” or something else.

One of the encouraging signs in the evangelical world is how cessationists and continuationists have been able to partner and worship together in recent years, realizing that their commonalities in the gospel are far greater than the issues that separate them with regard to spiritual gifts.

The Holy Spirit Promises

In Ephesians 1:3, Paul begins his glorious explosion of praise, extolling the blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus. The concert of blessings comes to a final crescendo with the sealing of the Spirit: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee

of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:13–14).

SEALING. What does it mean to be sealed with the promised Holy Spirit? The language may sound obscure to us, but it probably didn’t to the Ephesians. A seal in the ancient world did three things. (1) A seal authenticated—think of a letter with the king’s official stamp pressed in wax. (2) A seal secured—think of a branding iron marking the cattle to keep them safe from thieves. (3) A seal marked ownership—think of that overpriced embosser that makes a literal impression on the opening page of your books. Paul uses the imagery of a seal to capture these same thoughts.

The seal of the Spirit authenticates us as true believers, secures our eternal safety, and marks us out as God’s possession. It’s as if God took his spiritual embosser and stamped us as his very own.

Although some Christians would disagree, I believe the sealing of the Spirit takes places at conversion. As Peter O’Brien says, “The sealing is a reference to the actual reception of the Spirit by the readers. The Pauline connection between hearing the gospel, believing, and receiving the Spirit is made, and these are important elements of conversion-initiation.”²⁰

Along these lines, the ESV translates the ambiguous participle with the word “when.” When we heard the word and believed, we were sealed. These things—belief and sealing—happened at the same time, which is why Paul can write the Ephesians from a distance and be assured that they all have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. The sealing is an objective work done in us concurrently with regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

But just because the work is objective doesn’t mean we can’t have a subjective experience of it. We *ought* to pray for an experience of God’s love poured in our hearts (Rom. 5:5). We should hope not just to know that the Spirit is our guarantee, but to feel deeply the good news that he is the down payment of our inheritance (2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 4:30). The seal of the Spirit is there even when full assurance is not, just like two feet of ice holds us up even if we are afraid it is only two inches. But how much better to skate freely on the pond, resting assured that we are free from danger.

The seal of the promised Holy Spirit, securing us for the final day of redemption, is a gift possessed by every Christian, and every Christian

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is meant to enjoy it (Eph. 1:18). The Spirit is like God's engagement ring saying to us, "This promise is only the beginning. You have no idea how much I will bless you. There is a wedding feast coming to you that you wouldn't believe. But I've given you my Spirit so that you will believe that it is coming."

GO AHEAD AND KNOCK. What should we do with all this truth about the person and work of the Holy Spirit? Jesus has some good advice for us. But first, a story.

It's early Saturday morning, barely 7:00 AM, which means, if it's winter and you live where I do, the sun is still sleeping. Undeterred by the darkness and motivated by your stomach, you set out to make pancakes. You grab some flour and a little oil. Then you head to the refrigerator for an egg. Just one egg is all you need to feed your hunger and your family. But alas, no eggs.

You bounce over to your neighbor's house and cautiously tap on the door. After a minute of silence the door opens a crack.

"What do you want? It's Saturday morning. The kids are all in bed. I should be in bed too."

"I'm sorry to be a bother," you reply; "I just need one egg."

"Come back at 9:30."

But sticking your foot in the closing door, you make one more appeal. "Please, I can see your refrigerator from here. It won't take you more than ten seconds. Just one egg. Then you can go back to bed." And sure enough, with a little persistence, you get your egg, and your family gets your pancakes.

Jesus told a story like this one time. Here's what he said at the end:

And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:9-13)

Your heavenly Father loves you more than you love your own family. None of our little ones opened up a box of vipers on Christmas morning,

because, though we are evil, we love to give nice presents to our kids and grandkids. How much more, then, does God delight in giving us good gifts?

So, go ahead and knock. Ask him for the best gift of all. Ask him for more of the Holy Spirit's presence in your life. Ask God to fill your church with the Spirit's power. Wouldn't you like more of Christ, more repentance, more godliness in your life? Wouldn't you like your church to be more loving, more faithful, more courageous, more honoring to God? Wouldn't you like a fuller fullness?

All we have to do is ask. Jesus himself promises a favorable response. Ask for the Holy Spirit and he will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened.

11

The Kingdom of God

Stephen Um

Contemporary people have difficulty with authority. The self-proclaimed libertine denies any ruling structure—except for his own intrinsic self-authority—since he believes that no authoritative power has the ability to emancipate. External authority is seen as intrinsically oppressive. Grant that conclusion, and it is easy to nurture the illusion that we humans do not need any external authority. A scene in Monty Python’s *The Holy Grail* illustrates well this anti-authority sentiment while satirically suggesting that certain forms of lordship can be suppressive and coercive.

King Arthur: Old woman.

Dennis: Man.

King Arthur: Man, sorry. What knight lives in that castle over there?

Dennis: I’m 37.

King Arthur: What?

Dennis: I’m 37. I’m not old.

King Arthur: Well I can’t just call you “man.”

Dennis: Well, you could say “Dennis.”

King Arthur: I didn’t know you were called Dennis.

Dennis: Well, you didn’t bother to find out, did you?

King Arthur: I did say sorry about the “old woman,” but from behind you looked . . .

Dennis: What I object to is you automatically treat me like an inferior.

King Arthur: Well, I am king.

Dennis: Oh, king, eh? Very nice. And how’d you get that, eh? By exploiting the workers. By hanging on to outdated imperialist dogma which perpetuates the economic and social differences in our society . . .

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King Arthur: I am your king.

Woman: I didn't know we had a king. I thought we were an autonomous collective . . .

King: I am your king.

Woman: Well, I didn't vote for you.

King Arthur: You don't vote for kings.

Woman: Well, how'd you become king then?

[Angelic music plays]

King Arthur: The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. THAT is why I am your king.

Dennis: [interrupting] Listen, strange women lyin' in ponds distributin' swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.

This culturally dominant interpretation of self-determination is supported by postmodernist thinkers like Don Cupitt, who declares, "The age of authority of grand institutions, of legitimating myths, and capital-Truth, is over."¹ Cupitt makes his declaration with bold authority—and that of course makes his declaration ironic, even self-negating. This is the irony and the paradox of choice. Modern individuals believe that the multiplicity of options is liberating, but it is actually debilitating and ultimately demotivating and tyrannizing.² According to Richard Bauckham:

God therefore is undoubtedly implicated in the contemporary crisis of freedom. . . . Belief in God . . . seems to many incompatible with human autonomy. . . . All too often in church history God has been misrepresented as suppressing rather than promoting freedom. He has been the heavenly despot who is the model and sanction for oppressive regimes on earth. It is clear that this is not the biblical God. His lordship liberates from all human lordship. This is because the divine Master himself fulfills his lordship not in domination but in the service of a slave (Phil. 2:6–11).³

What then of authority and kingship in the Christian faith? Postmodernism empowers the individual's intrinsic authority and casts it over against the extrinsic authoritarian claims of Enlightenment rationality or premodern religious authority. By contrast, the Bible's message promotes not self-mastery but the authority of grace. Authority belongs

in the first place to God and his gracious self-donation to us.⁴ In other words, the increase of intimacy enjoyed by individuals in a relationship will inevitably, naturally, and simultaneously decrease their level of independence.

The Bible introduces the undisputed reality of the authority of God, of his Word, and of truth revealed by him. Therefore, the theme of the kingship of God is one of the central and key motifs in all of Scripture. This chapter examines a theology, an identity, and a community shaped by this kingdom.

A Theology Shaped by the Kingdom

The concept of the kingdom of God is an important teaching found in all of Scripture. The Bible also calls it the “kingdom of heaven,” the “kingdom of Christ,” the “kingdom of the Lord,” and the “kingdom.” Since the Bible is one book, many commentators have attempted to find one unifying biblical theme that holds the two Testaments together. There are obviously many complementary biblical themes of great importance, but a good case can be made for the view that “the bond that binds [the Testaments] together is the dynamic concept of the rule of God.”⁵

It is curious to notice in the landscape of biblical interpretation that there have been numerous explanations for the biblical term *kingdom*. Some have reduced the kingdom of God to the present subjective realm and inward power of the Spirit at work in the human heart, while others have either defined the idea to a new, future, heavenly, spiritual order or equated the kingdom with the visible church.

Still others have taken a reductionistic approach in understanding the kingdom as an ideal social program for human civilization without referring to individual redemption. Therefore, according to this approach, “building” the kingdom means eradicating all social problems such as poverty, social injustice, and various forms of inequalities.

There has been a diversity of interpretations throughout history because the biblical teaching embraces disparate emphases: the kingdom as both a present reality (Matt. 12:28; 21:31; Mark 10:15) and a future blessing (1 Cor. 15:50; Matt. 8:11; Luke 12:32), both a spiritual and saving blessing of new life (Rom. 14:17; John 3:3) and an expanded future rule of society (Rev. 11:15).

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The key to resolving the different emphases is figuring out what the Bible means by the word *kingdom*. What is the kingdom of God? Most modern dictionaries will define the word as a “sphere,” “realm,” or “place.” This explanation has misguided interpreters away from the biblical understanding that emphasizes the rank, rule, reign, dominion, and royal authority of God.⁶

Jesus’ parable in Luke 19 makes clear the fundamental meaning of the kingdom of God. The story describes a nobleman who “went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then to return” (Luke 19:12 ESV).⁷ This man did not visit another country in order to secure for himself a realm over which to exercise his rule; rather, he left his own place and went elsewhere to obtain the authority, the kingship, the right to rule the territory to which he returns (Luke 19:15; indeed, the RSV has “kingly power”). (It is possible Jesus is thinking of Herod, who went away to Rome to secure Caesar’s blessing so that he might return to Judea and reign as King Herod.)

The kingdom of God is fundamentally God’s sovereign rule expressed and realized through the different stages of redemptive history. This biblical doctrine derives from the truth that God, as the one true, living, and eternal Ruler, always existed and therefore reigns over his creation. “The kingdom of God, already present but not fully realized, is the exercise of God’s sovereignty in the world toward the eventual redemption of all creation.”⁸

God’s Rule in Creation

When discussing the theology of kingship, many have inadequately emphasized God’s cosmic rule as the creator of the world (Pss. 24:1; 47:1–9; 83:18; 93:1; 95:3–7; 103:19; 113:5; Dan. 4:25–26; 5:21; Matt. 5:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 1:16; Heb. 12:2; Rev. 7:15). There is a clear connection between Yahweh’s kingly reign and the history of the Israelite monarchy (1 Samuel 8), but God’s royal rule began with his sovereign administration and preservation of the cosmic order he had created. Goldsworthy states:

God’s own sovereign rule was epitomized in the probationary world which set the bounds of human freedom within the kingdom (Gen. 2:15–17). The blessedness of kingdom existence consisted in both the

relationship of man to God and the relationship of man to creation. Nature was submissive to man's dominion and fruitful in providing his needs.⁹

The royal administration of God the Maker-Lord was mediated through the "assignment of dominion to man over the world under conditions of Edenic beatitude (Gen. 1:28) [which] can be seen as signaling a covenantal relationship between God and man."¹⁰

The theme of the kingdom of God is well attested throughout the changing historical periods that Scripture portrays. The concept of God as king was basic to a nomadic people who viewed their God as the sovereign ruling king. He accompanied their travels and provided protection and shelter while developing a line of descendants who would be chosen to be his special people.

The focus of this description of God's reign is primarily on the children of Abraham and the land of Israel.¹¹ Genesis 4–11 describes the line of Abraham to whom the significant covenantal promises were given concerning a great nation, a great land, and a covenantal rule and relationship (Gen. 12:1–3). Some have interpreted the threefold promise as highlighting the biblical description of the kingdom of God, namely, God's people, God's realm, and God's rule.¹²

God's Rule in the Exodus

At the time of the exodus from Egypt, God established his reign over Israel's history through a series of divine interventions and mighty acts of salvation (e.g., see Exodus 15; Deut. 6:20–24; 26:5–10; Josh. 24:5–13; Psalm 78; 105; 106; 114; 135; 136; Neh. 9:9–15), the deliverance of the people who were in bondage, the distribution of the miracles of the plagues and the parting of the sea, the preservation of the Israelites in the wilderness, along with theophanic experiences. The people recognized that Yahweh's sovereignty was constituted by his successive acts of salvation, "forming a God-controlled continuity, a history, and that this history was moving forward to a future according to God's will."¹³ God asserted his ruling activity when he delivered his people from the hands of Pharaoh and brought them into the Promised Land (Exodus 15; 19:5–6).

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God's Rule in the Period of the Monarchy and the Prophets

The history of salvation during the period of the monarchy is full of tragedies. Israel was called and set apart to be a blessing to the world and to be God's vice-regents to oversee the land (1 Chron. 29:23; 2 Chronicles 6), but sadly its history was marked more by infidelity than faithfulness, idolatry than worship, and rebellion than obedience. The heavenly host has always worshiped and continues to praise God's holiness with "unqualified voluntary service,"¹⁴ but humans have refused to honor God as king, which explains the rising of earthly kingdoms filled with evil opposition to God. Therefore, the prophetic books introduce a message of hope that will be ushered in by the Messiah, who "will judge the wicked and bring redeemed humanity into a new creation (Ezekiel 36; 47; Isaiah 35; 55; 65; Zechariah 14)."¹⁵

This will be the stage in redemptive history, a great and glorious day in the future when all things will be restored, when God's universal rule will break in (Isa. 26:1–15; 28:5–6; 33:5–24, 17–22; 44:5; Ezek. 11:17–21; 20:33–38; Hos. 2:16–17; Zech. 8:1–8), along with the righteousness of the kingdom (Isa. 11:3–5; Jer. 23:5–6), and everlasting peace and harmony (Isa. 2:2–3; 9:5–6; 11:6–7; 35:9; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 9:9–10).¹⁶

God's Messianic Rule in the New Testament

In the New Testament, both Jesus and John the Baptist announce that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15), the final stage of the kingdom on earth being realized by the incarnation and ongoing ministry of Christ (Matt. 2:2; 4:23; 9:35; 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 16:16; 23:3; John 18:37). Although this earthly ministry is already present, the consummate and complete fulfillment will not yet be realized until the return of Christ in glory (1 Cor. 15:50–58; Rev. 11:5).

This central mission of ushering in the final stage of the kingdom is presented to allow a broken and fallen humanity to enter into the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:20; 7:21; John 3:3). The realized kingdom, God's powerful rule, was entering "historical life in a new way, for here was the King himself coming 'to announce the decisive redeeming act of God, and to perform it.'"¹⁷ Even his parables are used as a teaching vehicle to illustrate to his followers the truths of his kingdom (Matt. 13:11). Although the benefits and privileges of the gospel are already present in part (Eph.

1:3), the future blessedness of glory is promised to those for whom it was prepared (Matt. 25:31, 34).¹⁸

Throughout the Old Testament there are numerous inter-canonical themes where the plots of stories thicken with dramatic tension and seemingly irreconcilable resolutions.¹⁹ Only in the person of Christ can the tensions be resolved and the expectations of a perfectly righteous, peaceful, salvation-supplying rule be completely fulfilled. Ever since the garden, humanity through its fall lost the freedom to enjoy the glories of God's rule; therefore, the drama of human history would be forever engaged in an insatiable pursuit of finding the perfect true king.

The tragedy of biblical history, especially during the period of the monarchy, is a picture of the people's failed attempt to learn how to submit to the rule of God. Instead of surrendering their self-creation, self-promotion, and self-salvation to monarchy, Israelite history shows the enslavement of the human heart to idolatry. All of the corporate representatives of God's people—from Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David to all of the other great redemptive figures—failed to resolve the tension in the salvation storyline in providing healing and liberation from slavery and bondage. The resolution provided by God was unexpected: God himself through the incarnation visited a fallen humanity, and the renewal of all things broken took place through the work of a suffering Messiah. With magnificent irony, God identified himself with the godforsaken.

This paradoxical picture of God's willingness to identify in his death with godforsaken people is linked to the suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12, this servant who bore the sins of many and suffered in a substitutionary way.

It was in this context of the necessary link between the uniqueness of God and his [final] acts for the salvation of Israel and the world that the early Christians read of the enigmatic figure of the Servant of the Lord, who witnesses to God's unique deity and who, in chapters 52–53, both suffers humiliation and death and also is exalted and lifted up.²⁰

The unfolding hope of redemption for human rebellion and renewal for a broken creation finds its expression and fulfillment in Jesus Christ come in the flesh. The kingdom now has its objective reality realized in

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the historical arrival and activity of the messianic king. The biblical description of the kingdom highlighting God's people, his place, and his power has its complete final resolution in Jesus, who is God's true people, presence, and authority.

FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PEOPLE. Luke describes Adam as the son of God (Luke 3:38) while Exodus 4:22 refers to Israel, the people of God, as God's firstborn son. The sonship motif was fulfilled in Jesus, who as the perfect second-Adam, the "beloved Son" (Luke 3:22 *ESV*), and true Israel accomplished what both the first Adam and Israel failed to do, namely, submit to the cosmic King. "Thus the temptation narratives show the reversal of Satan's conquest of Adam in the garden and of Israel in the wilderness," and therefore, "all the prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel [as] the people of God must [find] their fulfillment in Him."²¹

FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PRESENCE. The "tabernacle imagery is able to . . . portray the person of Jesus as the locus of God's Word and glory among humankind."²² What was impossible for Moses, seeing the radiant glory of God (Ex. 33:20), has become possible for those who believe (John 1:14) since the Word incarnate has seen God (John 1:18; 3:11).

Therefore, the description of Jesus' symbolizing the ultimate manifestation of the dwelling place of God appropriately introduces the temple motif in the Gospel of John. He is the "eternal cosmic-human Temple of God"²³ who tabernacled among his people "by its totally different form of proximity,"²⁴ which symbolizes the ushering in of the final presence of God's temple in the messianic age. In this "temple," the body of Christ (John 2:19–22), the ultimate sacrifice would be made; yet Jesus says that after three days the true, spiritual temple will be raised from the dead to replace the Jerusalem temple.²⁵

The kingdom of God cannot be separated from the presence of Jesus (Heb. 12:22–23).²⁶ God's self-disclosure is accomplished by the manifestation of his living presence in the true temple. True worship has a new temple; Jesus replaces the temporal location. The people of God are now able to experience the fullness of eternal life and the abundant blessings of the new creation not available through land rights and a temporary inheritance.

Finally, the church is able to be utterly known by a holy God but not rejected. The tabernacle was where heaven and earth met with the glory

of God sitting on the invisible throne on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant behind “the shielding curtain” in the Most Holy Place. Greater access was provided when the true temple “tabernacled” among us (Col. 2:17). When the God-man, the true temple, was crucified, his body was torn and blood was shed to pay for our sin, and it was “at that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt. 27:51).

The ultimate insider who had enjoyed fellowship within the Godhead came into a distant country in order to seek lost, marginalized outsiders by becoming an outsider himself who was rejected, abandoned, consumed, crushed, and despised for the iniquities of the church (cf. Heb. 13:11–12). The shielding curtain was torn, the flaming sword of the angel consumed the perfect sacrifice so that we, the church, might have unending access to the presence of our holy God. Exodus 40:33 states, “And so Moses finished the work” (cf. Gen 2:2: “God finished his work that he had done” [ESV]), which foreshadows the final words of Jesus and of his perfect fulfillment of redemption: “It is finished” (John 19:30). The church has been emancipated from bondage freely to enjoy our God, who is Spirit, in order to worship him in Spirit and in the reality of the true temple.

FULFILLMENT OF GOD’S RULE. Jesus is not only the true people and final presence of God but also the final authority of God’s kingly power. For example, the act of granting life-giving water (or life itself), identified as a divine activity performed by a sovereign creator who has the authority to dispense life (see Isa. 44:3), is attributed to Jesus (John 4:13–14; see also 4:10). The Old Testament’s accounts of both creation and salvation unambiguously describe God as the sole, authoritative giver of life (Gen. 1:11–12, 20–31; 2:7; Job 33:4; Isa. 42:5; Ezek. 36:26). The divine activity of granting life flows from God’s own identity and distinguishes his uniqueness.

These divine functions are exercised by Jesus. In other words, Jesus participates in God’s unique activity of creation and the new creation.²⁷ Jesus answers the woman in John 4 by saying, “Whoever drinks the water *I give* him will never thirst” and “the water *I give* him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (4:14). Jesus dispenses life; he dispenses the right to become the children of God (see John 1:12, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, *he gave* the right

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to become children of God”; and 5:21, “For just as the *Father* raises the dead and *gives them life*, even so the *Son gives life* to whom he is pleased to give it”).

The Christian’s Identity Shaped by the Kingdom

Our confessional documents state that “those who have been saved by the grace of God through union with Christ by faith and through regeneration by the Holy Spirit *enter the kingdom of God* and delight in the blessings of a new covenant” (emphasis added). The Christian’s place in the kingdom of God necessarily shapes his or her identity. The saving plan of God’s sovereign rule is manifested in the life of a Christian in three different ways: works of grace, benefits of grace, and the effects of grace.

Works of Grace

First, God’s kingly rule in redemption mediated and accomplished by Jesus Christ is a saving work established by his grace whereby an estranged sinner is regenerated, reconciled, and allowed to enter the kingdom of God. Humans who embrace a determined self-focus resist grace because they are not comfortable with any authority in their lives other than their own. It is a power struggle of gargantuan proportions. The Bible portrays the human plight as living under the power of sin and the passions of the flesh (Eph. 2:1–3). That is why we are in need of redemption from sin by the saving work of a merciful God. Bauckham states:

We should think of the compulsions of sin, from whose grip we cannot get free by ourselves, as not just the inner compulsions to sin in fallen human nature, but also the forces outside individual persons, such as consumerism, which appeal to the base desires of human nature and exploit people by latching onto the human tendencies to greed, lust, envy and excess. The grip in which many contemporary people are held is an alliance between the worst of the forces that control our society and the worst aspects of their own inner selves.²⁸

Paul states that the human heart is fallen, but he does not say that we harden our hearts because our understanding is darkened but rather that our understanding is darkened because of the hardness and the corruption of our hearts (Eph. 4:18). God manifested his kingly reign on earth

to redeem fallen humans. Sin is placing any center or ultimate value in our hearts that displaces God so as to fundamentally govern our pursuit of happiness, significance, and identity (see Ex. 20:1–2; Rom. 1:25). Sin is our desire to substitute ourselves in the place of God, whereas God discloses his grace in Jesus by substituting himself in our place.²⁹ He redeemed us by making full atonement and absorbing the punishment our sins deserved and securing justification and acceptance freely by his grace.

Because of the inner compulsions of sin, the Bible emphasizes the radical priority of the inner life rather than the outer life. The cycle of idolatry (Gal. 4:8) expands its influential work through the stages of adultery and autonomy (James 4:13–16). Whether the personal center is one's career, relationships, money, academic achievement, or sex, if an individual lives for anything besides Jesus, then that functional god will abuse, crush, and tyrannize one's heart.

Those who live for Jesus will receive the loving approval of this king and will be set free (Gal. 5:1). Living for one's selfish pride will cause a person to live under the weight of a curse, since people can never live up to their expectations or measure up to their high standards, never mind the perfect holy law of God. My identity is not a matter of who I am but whose I am. So both religious and irreligious people are avoiding God as Savior and Lord—but in different ways. Both are seeking to keep control of their lives by looking to something besides God as their salvation.³⁰

The Bible provides us with a beautiful picture of a gospel that is multifaceted. Some have tried to pit the “eternal life gospel” that is dominant in John's Gospel with the “kingdom gospel” of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but each Gospel writer is expressing a form that is helpful not only for his own theological focus but also for his particular audience.

Moreover both John and the Synoptics can link “life” and the “kingdom of God.” In responding to Nicodemus in John's Gospel, Jesus combines the idea of regeneration and new life with the kingdom of God in order to introduce to a Pharisee the truths about this new life (John 3:3, 5).

Similarly, Mark records Jesus as saying, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you *to enter life* maimed than with two hands

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to go into hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:43). On the other hand, in verse 47 Jesus asserts, “And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you *to enter the kingdom of God* with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.” Mark thus refers to the kingdom of God as “life.”

John uses “life” and “eternal life” to refer to the kingdom of God. To John, eternal life is the same reality as the kingdom of God. They are used interchangeably to refer not only to the authoritative power of a Savior who grants eternal life but also to the sovereign reign of a king who rules people’s hearts.

Benefits of Grace

One of the benefits of being united with Christ and receiving eternal life and the forgiveness of sins is becoming a new citizen of God’s kingdom (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20). This Pauline image touches the Christian in both private experience and public interaction. Paul describes the various rights and duties of a citizen who is a stranger and alien in a foreign land. Christians conduct themselves in relationship to others in ways that adorn the gospel, seek the other’s good, and bring glory to Christ. They do this because they are members of a radically different community, God’s kingdom, and are in union with the person in charge of history.

Even when a Roman citizen would go outside of his home city, his rights and responsibilities as a citizen were still intact wherever he might travel within the Empire. In the same way, the Christian’s rights and responsibilities within the kingdom of King Jesus extend to the farthest reaches of his reign. Again, just as Paul had the right to appeal to the Roman emperor, a citizen of God’s kingdom can appeal to the final authority of King Jesus.

The Christian should be encouraged to know, however, that Jesus is a different kind of emperor; he always responds with interest to any case or concern of one of his citizens. Since the gospel confirms the Christian of his legal standing and permanent status, he can gain confidence in knowing the truth that no degrees exist in citizenship.

In other words, either you are a citizen or you are not; either you are a child or you are not. This truth will repudiate any false notions and

insecurities about one's performance determining his status as a citizen. In other words, one does not become a second-class citizen when one is less obedient and a first-class citizen when one is more obedient.

And what is the fundamental criterion that makes an individual a citizen of a country? It is not his race, ethnicity, language, fashion, or cultural or socioeconomic background. It's whether the individual has been naturalized into the country as a citizen. What is the criterion for someone's being a Christian? It is the fact that he or she has received citizenship not because of social, cultural, racial, or moral location but because of the grace of the King. Once an alien (Eph. 2:19), he or she is now a citizen with full rights and privileges in a new community.

Effects of Grace

Along with these rights and privileges, a citizen has a responsibility to represent well the king of this kingdom. As "fellow [super-naturalized] citizens with the saints" (Eph. 2:19 ESV), God's people are a radically different, countercultural, cosmopolitan community. They share a common spiritual language and an allegiance that supersedes all other loyalties. They share not only a common duty and responsibility but more importantly a common goal and delight in glorifying, honoring, and obeying the one true king.

Rather than adoring our God, however, we often engage in self-congratulatory praise. But the effect of saving grace has awakened us to see Jesus as utterly majestic. The picture of his kingliness in his triumphal entry (John 12:12–19) is an ironic combination of majesty and meekness, holiness and humility. This is the paradox of Jesus's kingliness. It's an upside-down, subversive picture of how the servant-king came in humility. What we all really long for is a perfect king who will come to give us a kingliness we desperately want. We want an ideal king who is bold and sweet, brave and meek, all at the same time.

In the Gospel of John, when John uses the verb "to be glorified" or "lifted up," he is frequently referring to the cross. So what John is trying to say is that if you want to know the fullness of God's glory, then it can be found not in the triumphs of the miracles but in the cross. Jesus Christ came into the world in a paradoxical way and was glorified. He said, in effect, "The way that I am going to show you how great a king I am is that

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I left the riches of my heavenly place, came to this world, became nothing, and made you, who are impoverished, rich.”

People had false expectations of their messianic king, and they did not anticipate the coronation of their king coming through a cross. Whenever we think about this upside-down, paradoxical kingliness of Jesus, who is majestic and meek, holy and humble, we desire the same royalty that creates our hearts to be both lamb-like and lionhearted, and courageous and compassionate at the same time. Keller summarizes this divine excellency well:

It's only paradoxical to the world. But it's real royalty to us. In Jesus Christ we see the combination of infinite power and complete vulnerability, unbounded justice yet unending mercy, transcendent highness and exquisite accessibility and nearness. We feel in the present something completely wild and unpredictable. It's mighty, it's powerful, and yet perfectly under control. The attraction is deep. It is really, really deep. It's a lordliness, it is a royalty, it's a kingliness that we all long to have. The majesty is more majestic for the tenderness, the tenderness more tender for the majesty. If you come face to face with this gentle king who comes riding on a colt, you will become a gentle king. You will become more bold and yet more humble at the same time. But only if you understand how it is to be saved, that it will happen not through strength but it will happen through weakness. That it is not through your moral exertion but it is going to be submitting to the grace of God.³¹

Community Shaped by the Kingdom

All peoples, institutions, and groups are interested in changing, renewing, or transforming society by impressing their core values on the culture. For that matter, we cannot help but make an impact on our culture. The minute anyone opens his mouth, he is speaking in a particular language, from a particular cultural context, with a particular worldview of morality and various definitions of what he believes to be the “true,” the “good,” and the “beautiful.” No one should be led to think that he is not “getting into the public square.”

In addressing the question, “Is it the church’s responsibility to embrace the civic responsibility of the state (e.g., education, the poor, social injustice, the arts, etc.)?” we need to consider the following. The church does not have any juridical authority in the city/state public

square, but that does not mean that the church ought to stay on the periphery. The church does have the responsibility to act in mercy and to engage our community with deeds of social justice (see James 1:27).³²

Paul states in Galatians 6:10, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”³³ James says that true religion is this: “To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (1:27). In other words, it is the church’s responsibility to pursue both public compassion and personal piety. For example, although a failing school system is not the civic responsibility of the church, the church may well get involved in “doing good” by coming alongside the local school in providing after-school tutoring.

Christians ought to cultivate friendships with people in their neighborhoods. This may well mean joining clubs and associations, and partnering with organizations that are also involved in acts of mercy and benevolent involvement. None of this means that the primacy of heralding the gospel is undermined. Rather, the effect of the gospel, the entailment of the gospel, is the inevitable transformation of men and women such that we begin to love our neighbors where once we loved only ourselves.

This pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world, that it creates an “alternate kingdom,” an “alternate city” (Matt. 5:14–16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, wealth. The gospel reverses the place of the weak and the strong, the “outsider” and the “insider.” It is an advantage, spiritually speaking, to see one’s weakness; it is a severe danger, spiritually speaking, to be successful and accomplished. And when we finally understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation (either that of psychological fulfillment, or of social transformation, or of spiritual blessing, or of all three) in power, status and accomplishment. That destroys their power in our lives. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to other power of material things and worldly status in our lives. We begin to live a new life without much regard to them.³⁴

Some people live in the city and find their needs met there: they obtain credentials, status, education, training, and influence. Others are almost consumed by the city. But Christians desire to live counter-

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culturally to create the new alternative community of God's kingdom. They participate in the in-breaking of God's presence and rule among a people he has claimed as his own, as he forms them into a radically distinct, set-apart community that looks forward to the total in-breaking of his authority expressed throughout the world.³⁵

Christians refuse to believe that there are only two options in engaging our culture: either to assimilate or to separate, to capitulate or to evade, to over-contextualize or to under-adapt. Jeremiah 29 encourages God's people not to accommodate the foreign culture but to move in and get involved in the life of the city economically and culturally. The prophet is asking the people to be spiritually bicultural. They are being called neither to worship the city nor to hate the culture, but to love the city.

Barry Schwartz says that people are engaged in a psychology of personal autonomy.³⁶ We have all sorts of goals, expectations, and desires to reach the heights because we are maximizers engaged in social comparison, mixed opportunities, regret, adaptation, and trying to meet high expectations. He says that there is a psychology of personal autonomy, but there is also another perspective that he calls the "ecology of personal autonomy." That is, if we pursue our own psychology for our own ends, sooner or later this will come in conflict with the ecology of personal autonomy (i.e., the ecological structure, in which everyone is pursuing their own ends, such that the structure that maintains personal autonomy is undermined), and then something has to give. You cannot pursue your own goals and also support someone else's when they're in conflict. It is difficult to pursue the common good when the common good is in tension with self-interest. However:

The gospel thereby creates a "kingdom community"—a counter-culture, the church—in which we are "royal priests" showing the world what the future kingdom will look like (1 Peter 2:9–10.) We "model" how all of life—business practices, race relations, family life, art and culture—are healed and re-woven by the King.³⁷

Kingdom-driven alternative communities will have a healthy balance between "theologically substantial preaching, dynamic evangelism and apologetics, and church growth" and planting of churches that will "emphasize repentance, personal renewal, and holiness of life" and win-

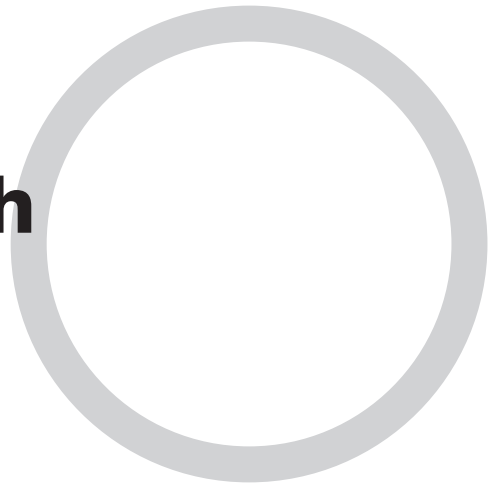
some “engagement with the social structures of ordinary people, and cultural engagement with art, business, scholarship, and government.”³⁸ The fabric of our communities and the interiority of hearts will continue to be restored and reshaped under the kingly reign of Christ, the head over all his creation.

12

The Church

God's New People

Tim Savage



It is the most strategic body of people on the face of the planet. Through its ministries, vast tracts of humanity are rescued from evil and lifted from despair. And by its voice, new life is proclaimed to entire civilizations. It is an association of people that pulsates with the glory of God. What human gathering could possibly warrant such accolades? Only one qualifies: the church of Jesus Christ.¹

Few Christians are aware of the explosive nature of the church to which they belong. Several years ago when transporting the English churchman John Stott to the place where he was preaching, I asked him what he thought was the most neglected doctrine among contemporary Christians. Supposing he would say, “theology” (our view of God is too small), or possibly, “soteriology” (our methods of salvation are too self-reliant), I was surprised to hear him reply without hesitation, “ecclesiology.” To me, the doctrine of the church seemed peripheral to other more weighty doctrines and certainly not worthy of the stature my interlocutor ascribed to it. But in the years since, after reflection on the biblical teaching of the church, I have come to see otherwise. The church of Jesus Christ is the locus of God’s plan for creation.

The Church and God's Agenda

According to the Bible, God is executing a plan of cosmic dimensions. He is in the process of reclaiming all things for his glory. Writing to

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believers in Ephesus, the apostle Paul makes a stunning observation: God is “summing up all things—things in the heavens and things on earth—under one head, namely, Christ” (Eph. 1:10).² Precisely where this comprehensive “summation” is taking place Paul makes clear a few verses later: “God has given Christ as head over all things *to the church*” (Eph. 1:22).

Remarkably, the church is ground zero in God’s ambitious reclamation project. It is home base for the execution of God’s work in the world, the place where “all things” are being drawn together under Christ. If we want to see what God is doing on this planet—and who would want to miss something so spectacular?—we must look to the church. Here, and only here, we find a people drawn together and filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 1:23; 3:19).

The link between Christ and the church is nearly seamless. The church is the body of Christ, and Christ is its head (Col. 1:18). The church reverberates with the resurrection power of Christ himself (Eph. 1:19–20). It personifies his love (Eph. 5:2). It manifests his fullness (Col. 2:9–10). It is a “new man” measuring up to the full stature of Christ himself (Eph. 4:13). And yet the church is also distinguished from Christ. It is his bride (Eph. 5:25–27). It is the one he nurtures and cherishes as his own flesh (Eph. 5:29). It is the repository of the Father’s wisdom (Eph. 3:10). It is where God receives all glory (Eph. 3:21). It is a beacon of divine light, a foretaste of heavenly glory (Eph. 1:18).

God’s People as a Family

Perhaps the best way to envisage the church—accounting for both its organic link to Christ and its distinctiveness from Christ—is as a family related by blood. Members of the church are “blood relatives.” They share the same Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its name (Eph. 3:14). They share the same elder brother, Christ (Heb. 2:17), whose blood shed on the cross has reconciled them to the heavenly Father (Col. 1:20). And they share a fraternity with their spiritual siblings, brothers and sisters in Christ (Col. 1:2), who are reconciled to each other by the same blood of the cross (Eph. 2:13).

It is especially as a family that the church forms the centerpiece of God’s work in creation. This should not be surprising, because God has always

worked through families. Right from the beginning he formulated his agenda in terms of a family. It will be enormously helpful as we seek to understand the unique and powerful role of the church to venture back into primordial history and look at the very first family, the family of Adam and Eve, and to notice how their union serves as a picture of what would later become the church of Jesus Christ.

The Inaugural Family

The drama of the sixth day of creation never ceases to amaze us. It was then that God fashioned his *magnum opus*, a human being, and bequeathed to him a magnificent garden paradise. The new creature apparently lacked for nothing. He was the beneficiary of a priceless bounty from the hand of a loving Creator. Yet, surprisingly, there was a deficiency. Something was “not good.” The solitary man lacked a “helper,” someone who corresponded to him (Gen. 2:18). By himself he was but one piece of a two-piece puzzle, and the adjoining piece was nowhere in sight. Not only was he bereft of the comforts of companionship, but far more importantly he was unable to fulfill his purpose in creation.

Man was created to bear the image of God, to manifest the likeness of his Maker (Gen. 1:26). Such a tall order could not be accomplished in isolation. So when God fashioned man, he created him “male and female” (Gen. 1:27). In other words, he constructed man as a family, subject to the interpersonal relations inherent within every family. The relational component of the divine likeness is hardly surprising given the fact that God himself is a family of triune relations—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To manifest the divine image thus requires at least a duality of persons. Man needs help for his lofty calling. He needs a family.

The first family was given an exalted mandate. No sooner had God invested Adam and Eve with his image than he issued the following injunction: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). What sounds like a recipe for overpopulation is actually a prescription for ecological blessing. By calling for the multiplication of families, God intends to saturate the planet with relational units manifesting his image, so that every nook and cranny of creation will be subdued by the presence of his likeness. Under the sovereign decree of an

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all-wise God, the family is the vehicle by which his triune likeness will be disseminated to the four corners of the earth.

God's People, God's Image, and Christ

But this begs the question, What aspect of the divine likeness are families meant to disseminate? Or more to the point, What is the actual nature of God's image? Down through the ages questions like these have prompted much speculation, because in the near context of Genesis (as well as in the more distant context of the entire Old Testament) little light is shed on the nature of God's image. For this reason, the rabbis who labored between the Testaments came up with their own ideas and proceeded to link the divine image to the glory of God. To manifest God's image is to reflect his glory. Since the interpretation was not divinely inspired, it may seem irrelevant to us today, except for the fact that one of those rabbis, a Pharisee who converted to Christianity, authored epistles in which he reiterated the link between God's image and God's glory. And those epistles, the letters of the apostle Paul, were inspired! In them Paul breaks new ground and identifies an even more strategic link: a connection between God's image and the glory of Jesus Christ.

According to Paul, we see perfectly in Christ the image and the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). The nature of the divine image is thus no longer a matter of speculation: we need only look at the divine glory in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). The paragraph in Paul's writings where the image probably receives its sharpest definition is found in the famous hymn of Philippians 2. Here, in an expanded translation, we read:

Because Christ existed in the form of God [a term nearly synonymous with the image of God], he did not regard his lofty status as an opportunity for self-aggrandizement but rather as a calling to do just the opposite: to empty himself, to humble himself, to take on the form of a slave, and to submit to a slave's death, even the unthinkable repellent death of a cross! (Phil. 2:6–8)

From the unspeakable riches of equality with God to the most impoverished death in antiquity, from heights unsearchable to depths unimaginable, from one polar extreme to another, this is the measure of the self-emptying death of Christ. It is history's most perfect expression of

sacrificial love. And, according to Paul, it is also the clearest revelation of what it means to manifest the image of God. In Jesus we see the likeness of the heavenly Father. On the cross we behold a picture of what God is like, and hence of what families created in his image are meant to be like. It is a picture of infinite love.

God's People, God's Image, and Love

The portrait is consonant with what we know of God elsewhere in Scripture. "God is love," says the apostle John (1 John 4:8, 16). And his love is unlike anything on earth, far above the superficial, conditional, sentimental love that reigns among postmodern devotees of the term. Divine love is supernatural love, the kind of love of which only the Lord and those who bear his image are capable. It is a "greater" love (John 15:13), a love that is prepared to lay down its life (1 John 3:16), to absorb into its very constitution the life of another (Luke 10:25–37), and to give up everything to redeem the existence of others (Mark 10:45). Moreover, it is precisely the love passed back and forth among members of the Godhead. The Father loves the Son (John 17:26), the Son loves the Father (John 15:9), and the Holy Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son (John 14:26).

Many writers have identified this other-directed love as the distinguishing feature of the Godhead. "God's very being is love, which subsists eternally and necessarily between the several persons in the Godhead."³ The "tri-personal" God manifests "infinite love in relationship."⁴ "Self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God."⁵ The "picture of God" is of one "whose love, even before creation of anything, is other-oriented."⁶

What is perhaps most striking about God's love, and what is certainly most pertinent to our understanding of the church, is that the Lord wants to share his love with us, not only by making us the objects of that love but also by equipping us to share that love with others. By creating us in his image, he has fitted us to reproduce the inter-relational love of the Trinitarian family, passing back and forth among members of our families the love that reverberates within the holy Godhead.

When we fulfill our vocation, when love-dispensing families fan out across the globe, we subdue the planet by a kind of husbandry that

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prosper the world and all it contains. By the far-flung migrations of families reflecting the self-giving image of God, creation erupts in a song of impassioned thanksgiving to its Maker.

God's People, God's Image, and Sin

But there is a problem. The people of God have not been faithful to the mandate they have been given. Rather than manifest self-giving love, they are self-grasping. “The woman saw . . . the tree . . . and *took* of its fruit . . . and she also gave some to her husband” (Gen. 3:6). And tragically the first family’s sin has become every family’s downfall. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Far from spreading the glory of his image throughout the entire earth, families have pursued their own glory and inflicted a terrible darkness upon the planet. Indeed, every earthly ill can be traced to this single Adamic defect. All relational division—whether interpersonal abuse, racial strife, or international discord—stems from the failure to embody the glory of God’s love.

Our examination of the people of God would grind to an abrupt halt were it not for the fact that God’s love for sinners is stronger than his condemnation of sin. To be sure, the heavenly Father abominates sin. It represents a personal affront. It diminishes his glory in the world and effaces the radiance of men and women created in his image. What good father would not be enraged by the degradation of his children? And who could blame such a father if, in his wrath, he simply abandoned his offspring to the consequences of their rebellion—indeed, relinquished families to the cancer of their self-centeredness?

Rescue of God’s People

Yet, astonishingly, our heavenly Father conceives a rescue plan for humanity. He elects one family out of a multitude of families and enjoins this chosen people to shine once again the glory of his image into the world. First, it is the family of Noah that, preserved from the flood, is called to multiply and to fill the whole earth (Gen. 9:1). Sadly, Noah and his progeny fall into the very sin that ruined Adam and Eve.

So God chooses another family, this time headed by the patriarch Abraham, and commissions his offspring to be the ones through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). But this fam-

ily, too, falls into sin, reducing the glory and the image of God to a mere flicker of their original intent. Time and again God graciously rejuvenates his people, raising up new versions of the nation of Israel and calling them to fidelity to his covenant and the manifestation of his character throughout the world. But repeatedly—albeit with rare instances of success—Israel fails to live up to its calling.

Clearly, the family of God is incapable of fulfilling the divine mandate. It is defective at the core of its being. At root, it is not God-glorifying. At heart, it is self-promoting. Because of its internal hardness, Israel is the opposite of what God intended his people to be.

The failure of his chosen people did not take God by surprise, nor did it undermine his plan for creation. By far the biggest part of the plan was still to come, and the Old Testament provides tantalizing clues of its ultimate unveiling. God will make “a new covenant with the family of Israel” in which the defect of sin is eradicated. “I will put my law with them, writing it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:31–33). “I will give you a new heart . . . my Spirit I will put within you” (Ezek. 36:26–27).

By his Spirit, God will perform cardio surgery, implanting a new impulse within human hearts, an internal law that the apostle Paul identifies as the law of love: “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14). It is an astonishing promise. From time immemorial it was God’s intention to carve out a new family whose hearts would be purged of the defect of sin and filled with the law of love, an impulse empowered by the indwelling Spirit of God himself. Creation eagerly awaits the emergence of this family!

A New People Foretold

The prophet Isaiah anticipates this re-created family. He identifies the new “Israel” as the servant of the Lord, who (in words reminiscent of Genesis) will be “a light to the nations so that my salvation reaches to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6). Exactly when this family will arrive Isaiah never fully reveals, but he does offer important clues. A child will be born (Isa. 9:6–7), and this child will become a servant who will endure unspeakable suffering (Isa. 52:13–53:12).

At this point, the clues become more difficult to decipher. Sometimes the servant is identified with the family of God (Isa. 41:8) and sometimes

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with an individual (Isa. 49:6–7). How the servant (out of whose suffering a new humanity presumably will arrive) can be both a collection of people and an individual is left to the reader to ponder. But with the passing of centuries all becomes clear: in a tiny town in a backwater province at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean, a child is born. “In the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son” (Gal. 4:4).

Christ and the People of God

This son—whose name is Jesus, whose calling is messiah, whose title is Lord—would fulfill the eternal plan prophesied by Isaiah. The apostle Paul exults to give definition to the plan: “The mystery hidden for ages has now been revealed—namely, Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:26–27). Here at last is the arrival of the indwelling presence of God signaled by the prophets, the glory of God’s image inscribed on human hearts, the displacement of sin by the internal law of love. Christ, whose own self-emptying death on the cross represented the quintessential expression of divine love, now comes to reside in us. The supernatural love of God can, because of the indwelling presence of Christ, be perfected in our hearts (1 John 4:12).

The Body of Christ: Personal and Corporate

Because of our focus on the nature and role of the church, it is absolutely essential to acknowledge that the indwelling love of Christ is bestowed within a plurality of human hearts. When the apostle Paul etches the definitive words on parchment—“Christ in you, the hope of glory”—he signals (using the plural pronoun “you”) that it is a blessing conferred on a collection of people.

This is not to suggest that Christ does not indwell hearts individually. He most certainly does, but not hearts isolated from other hearts. Ultimately, it is a family of hearts that Christ comes to indwell (2 Cor. 4:6). Where on earth do we find such a love-filled family? The Scriptures make it clear: it is within the body whose head is Jesus Christ; it is within the church that bears his name.

We are at last in a position to comprehend the full wonder of this holy community. But before we draw out several implications, it is important to reckon with a vital point: while membership in the church is freely

granted, it is not an automatic accomplishment. It is something won only at great cost. In our natural state, we are shot through by sin and entirely unfit for the indwelling presence of the Lord. On the cross, in an act of self-sacrifice that was quantum leaps beyond anything ever seen in human history, Christ cancelled the debt of our sin and credited his righteousness to our account (Col. 2:13–14; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Not only that, but he also broke the bonds of sin by being the first human ever to pass his entire life without grasping for his own glory, even to the point of submitting willingly to the ignominies of death on a cross (1 John 3:5). By vanquishing our sin in these two respects—paying sin’s penalty and purging sin’s power—Christ fits us for membership in his holy community. Costly to him and priceless to us is our induction into the body of Christ.

Too often we think of the cross only in terms of its application to individuals. Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, single human beings can be saved from the wrath of God and assured seats in a heavenly eternity. While these realities are not to be diminished in any way but rather prized with full-throated praise, to limit the fruit of Christ’s work to the salvation of single hearts is to read the Bible through the individualistic lens of our day. Everyone who is reconciled personally by the fleshly body of Christ is installed within the corporate body of Christ. “In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). And it is, above all, within this corporate body, within the people of God newly reconstituted in and by Christ, that the larger dimensions of God’s plans for creation receive breathtaking definition.

The Body of Christ: Local and Universal

The church of Jesus Christ is a very big body, nothing short of the worldwide community of believers in Christ. In other words, it’s a universal church. But—and here is a critical distinction—the universal church is only as strong as its local manifestations are viable. It is especially at the level of the local assembly that the drama of God’s plan for creation is being fleshed out. That is why the apostle Paul prays specifically for the local churches in Galatia and Ephesus, visits the local churches in Corinth and Philippi, and writes to the local churches in Rome and Thessalonica—epistles we often interpret personally in the privacy of

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our personal Bible readings but the content of which was directed in the first instance to edify entire communities of people, called local churches.

There is genius in the corporate dimension of God's plan. The world itself is nothing more or less than an assortment of human relationships, most of which are broken, rent apart by discord and strife, ruined ultimately by the self-grasping of sin. Disunity reigns on every level, from small-scale relational units such as marriages (where nearly half of all unions in North America end in divorce) to large-scale units such as nations (where presently almost forty wars are being waged internationally) to everything in between (where lines of conflict cut deeply between genders, races, political parties, generations, sexual preferences, and a list of other relationships that could be multiplied almost indefinitely). The fracture and division within relational units is our world's most besetting darkness.

Unity in the Church

But it is a darkness that the local church is peculiarly equipped to dispel. A striking unity pervades the family of God. Relationships that were once fractured have been supernaturally mended. Even Jews and Gentiles, ethnicities renowned for mutual animosity, have come together in one body. How? They "have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). They have been "reconciled to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility" (Eph. 2:16). Christ has dealt a mortal blow to the divisiveness of sin, to the social plagues of egotism and pride, and thus broken down walls of separation and brought together in one humanity a new household in which "the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple of the Lord . . . a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:15, 19–22).

God, through Christ, is actually making his abode in this freshly minted family. This is a good thing because, with his self-emptying love indwelling the collective hearts of this holy humanity, binding its members more and more firmly together, the newly united family serves as a beacon of hope to the fractured families of the world. Through local churches, as they multiply and fill the earth, the unifying glory of Christ becomes visible to the ruptured relationships of the planet.

Spiritual Gifts

It is important to appreciate exactly how the love of God works out in practice. Remarkably, every person reborn in Christ arrives in the local church with a supernatural bequest from a gracious God, a gift of the Holy Spirit, a special and unique talent. It could be the gift of service or teaching or faith or administration or any number of other gifts (for lists see Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:7–10).

No gift should ever be played down; each represents a mammoth benefaction, allocated “according to the measure of Christ’s own gift” (Eph. 4:7), and each is dynamically effective, “empowered by one and the same Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:11). God strategically distributes the gifts among his people, insuring that local churches are vested with the resources necessary to thrive for his glory; he arranges “the members of the body, each one of them, just as he desires” (1 Cor. 12:18).

Here is the most important thing to understand about spiritual gifts: they are given by the Holy Spirit in order to be given away, to be lavished on other members of the body for the growth of the body, “for the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). When every member of the local church gives away his or her gift, when each person is investing spiritually in others, the result is absolutely stunning: members of the church are bound together in a glorious union. “The whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph. 4:16). Indeed!

When people lavish their gifts on other members of the body, they draw others into a nearly seamless constitution with themselves. Pouring themselves out, they draw others in. The laws of physics would appear to be violated (who ever heard of an outward thrust creating a seamless union?) and yet it makes perfect sense. When each member of the body engages in an outpouring of service, all members become increasingly united, so much so that they actually begin to resemble Christ himself.

Indeed, what is being passed back and forth among them is precisely the love of Christ that indwells them. Characterized by multiple expressions of his cruciform love, the local church attains “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13) and “[grows] up

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in every way into him who is the head, even into Christ” (Eph. 4:15). To look at this body of people is to behold—in a very real sense—the Lord Jesus himself.

The Power of the Church

The power of this spectacle can scarcely be overstated. It is like nuclear fusion. Atoms are among the tiniest and most unnoticed wonders of nature, but when two of these diminutive structures fuse together, an enormously powerful reaction is created. When several of these fused atoms are in turn fused with other atoms, something even greater is engendered: an explosion of thermonuclear energy capable of turning on the lights of entire cities.

How can such a tiny and seemingly insignificant atom produce such arresting displays of power? In my younger days, I would ponder this very question while surfing offshore from the nuclear power station at San Onofre, California. While waiting for a good wave, I would gaze at its immense dome and marvel at the thousands of utility pylons arranged like a well-ordered army prepared to convey massive quantities of energy from particles so small they were invisible to the naked eye. It was a mind-boggling spectacle.

Yet the energy of nuclear fusion is insignificant compared to the power welling up within a local church. When members of the local church pour out the love of Christ into each other, a dramatic series of “explosions” takes place, reaction upon reaction, enough energy not just to electrify cities of neon lights and microwave ovens, but, more importantly, to bring spiritual light to a world dying in darkness. To the eyes of the bedraggled citizens of the world, mired in discord and division, the love of the local church could scarcely be a more revitalizing image. It will cause many to raise a voice of praise in honor of the Source of this love (Matt. 5:16).

Love and the Church

For this reason, the exhortation of the apostle Paul to local churches never varies: “Put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14); “Owe nothing to one another except to love each other, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8); “So now faith, hope and love remain, these three, but the greatest of these is love”

(1 Cor. 13:13); “Through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:13–14); “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another” (1 Thess. 3:12).

A similar call is issued by the apostle John: “This is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another” (1 John 3:11); “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God” (1 John 4:7). So also the apostle Peter: “Above all, keep on loving one another” (1 Pet. 4:8). These exhortations doubtless find a source in the words of Jesus himself: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Love is the *sine qua non* of the family of God.

Examples of how this love works out in practice are ubiquitous in the apostolic canon: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2); “Look out for the interests of others, having in you the mind that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:4–5); “Always seek to do good to one another” (1 Thess. 5:15); “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another” (Eph. 4:32); “Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, living in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:15–16). Additional examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely since there is no limit to the ways in which a local church manifests something as boundless as Christ’s love. It’s a love that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:19).

There are no human words to capture the strategic importance of this love. The local church and its love represent the only sure antidote to a postmodern world mired in sin and despair. People today are trying to put one foot in front of the other and sustain a meaningful existence but are consistently sinking into the quicksand of uncertainty and confusion. Looking for friendships, they absorb wounds of the soul. Craving companionship, they become mired in loneliness. Seeking assurance, they are riddled by self-doubt. Yearning for security, they are wracked by anxiety.

People are weary, marooned in darkness with little real contentment, and yet they trudge onward seeking solace in anything that might distract them from their empty lives—a screen, a beer, a dalliance. When these, too, fail, desperation sets in and they begin to wish—begin to pray—that a cry might be raised by someone farther up the trail who can draw their

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attention to something beautiful, something substantial, something transcendent—anything that might banish despair and ignite hope.

There is something that proclaims just such deliverance. It is something so radiant that it actually transforms its surroundings. It is the body of Christ. To catch a glimpse of the local church, the local church in action, whose members interact lovingly with each other, pouring out their God-given gifts into each other's lives, showcasing in their relentless self-sacrifice the cruciform love of Jesus Christ himself, is to witness more light by exponents than secular minds can begin to absorb. It is to see what society lacks, a love without which souls wither and die, a love that all people (whether they know it or not) passionately crave. It is the love found exclusively in the local church.

The Uncompromising Church

This brings us to an absolutely vital question. Will the local church fulfill its purpose and shine like a radiant light against the darkness? Also, will it take pains to guard its position as a repository of triune love? It is hardly surprising that Paul pleads with brothers and sisters in Christ to nurture their love and maintain unity at all costs:

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 2:1–5)

So much is riding on the unity of the local church. It must be preserved with utmost vigilance.

We can be grateful that the local church is not left to itself in this endeavor. The Lord himself is a reliable guide in the matter of ecclesiastical sanctification. In his sovereignty, he ushers his people into the unexpected experiences of suffering, because through suffering he can purge the pride that so readily foments disunity. In other words, he engenders humility (without which there can be no true love) by introducing afflictions in many ways like those experienced by Christ himself.

He asks his people to “carry about in their bodies the dying of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10) and to “fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Col. 1:24). By becoming increasingly “like [Christ] in his death” (Phil. 3:10), by persevering through the same sort of ostracism and rejection that the Lord himself endured (2 Cor. 13:4)—a not unexpected consequence of manifesting a love so antithetical to the egotism of the world that it poses a mortal threat to the world and its ways—members are prepared to “manifest in their bodies the life of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:10). They are prepared to become conduits of resurrection life to more and more people, causing the “thanksgiving of many to increase to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). Suffering, when authored by the hand of a sovereign God, works paradoxically to engender love and to encourage a radiant witness in the world (1 Pet. 1:6–7).

The Church and Outreach

While the local church must guard the unity within, it must also showcase the unity without. In other words, the new people of God must avoid insularity. It is part and parcel of God’s cosmic plan to use this family to placard his glory before secular eyes. “Through you I will vindicate my holiness before the nations . . . declares the Lord GOD” (Ezek. 36:23). But even churches endorsing the call to radiate the light outwardly can stumble in their witness. They can seek to impress and draw in outsiders on worldly terms, adjusting styles of worship, manners of dress, and even content of sermons to cater to worldly tastes.

The approach is fundamentally flawed. When local churches attempt to give people what they want, they are at cross-purposes with the gospel of Christ. At some point they will have to come clean, reverse course, and jolt their auditors by the revelation that true followers of Christ actually die to their wants—they deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34–35). It is doubtful whether many churches can bring themselves to unsay the things they have used to lure people in the first place.

The Gospel of Christ as a Foil to the World

The local church must remember that it is most useful to the world when it is most different from the world. Nor must it try to be different. It just needs to be itself—a radiant beacon of the selfless love of Christ. And by

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being itself, it actually loves the world. What could be more loving in an age lost in the mists of subjectivity than to preach the truth of God's Word and the unvarnished gospel of Jesus Christ? What could be more loving in a world mired in despair and saddled with sad songs than to erupt in the unbridled joy of genuine Christian worship and Christ-exalting songs? What could be more loving in a day when people grope in vain for a love that will nurture their souls than to inundate newcomers with a compassion resembling that found in the cross of Christ? The local church loves the world best when it most clearly embodies what the world does not have.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a great preacher of the last century, issued a strong challenge to the church of his day:

We seem to have a real horror of being different. Hence all our attempts and endeavours to popularise the church and make it appeal to people. . . . [But] the world expects the Christian to be different and looks to him for something different, and therein it shows an insight into life that regular church-goers often lack. . . . If [a person] feels at home in any church without believing in Christ as personal Saviour, then that church is no church at all, but a place of entertainment or a social club.⁷

The local church must rise up and be the local church, a body of people committed to preaching the undiluted gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the gospel must form the center of all a church is and does. For Paul that means two things: preaching Christ Jesus as Lord and ourselves as servants because of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:5). Neither emphasis would have appealed to the self-seeking world of Greco-Roman antiquity, nor would either emphasis have won much support as a strategy for drawing in the lost. Yet Paul does not flinch. His preaching is unswerving.

Interestingly, only here does Paul use the verb for preaching with more than one object, one denoting verbal content (Christ Jesus as Lord) and the other denoting behavior (ourselves as your servants). Central to Paul's *kerygma* is the proclamation both that Jesus is Lord and that he, Paul, is a servant. When we follow Paul's lead and preach in this way, and when (as a result) local churches become servants in their world as Paul was in his—or better yet as Christ was in his (Mark 10:35–45)—then our preaching will be not only more fully orbled but also more gratefully received.

Bringing the World to Christ

Any local church that serves in its world as Christ served in his exhibits a twofold thrust: it seeks to bring the world to Christ, and it seeks to bring Christ to the world. One of the best ways of bringing the world to Christ is to invite the world into the gatherings of the local church. “I have been delighted,” commented the preacher Charles Spurgeon, “as I have noticed the earnest efforts of many of my church-members in seeking to bring sinners to the Tabernacle to hear the gospel.”⁸ Admittedly, this is not a fashionable idea among contemporary church strategists who argue that we must in contrast meet the world on its own turf—over coffee during work breaks, after hours in the sports bar, in the neighborhood walking the dogs.

While few would deny that penetrating the world’s domicile is vital to the witness of the local church, we miss a strategic opportunity when we fail to invite the world into our home, where the family of God assembles to worship Christ, where members listen to the gospel of Christ faithfully preached and carefully applied, where people minister to each other through radical expressions of Christ-shaped love, where in a corner of this troubled world a family is actually functioning in accordance with the image of the triune family of God. Amid the ubiquity of broken relationships and dysfunctional families, where else will people see a better way to be human than among the family of God? We must invite the world into our churches.

Underscoring this point, Paul draws our attention to the fact that the organism called the local church is at root a kaleidoscope of relational units. He groups the members of the ecclesiastical body into pairs: husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees (Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1). It is immediately noticeable that each pair represents one of the three fundamental building blocks of society. But the significance of these pairs derives not from their presence in every society but from their presence in God’s society.

For Paul, the local church is the world’s fundamental social gathering and as such is meant to serve as a model to the pairs of the world. In its interpersonal relations, and especially in the ecclesial relations of couples in marriage, in family, and in business, the local church provides paradigms for similar relationships in the world outside (see again Eph.

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5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–4:1). By mirroring the glory of Christ’s love, each pair reveals to the world a better way to live in relation. How will the world see the better way (and then hopefully respond to what it sees by trusting for its own salvation in the finished work of Christ) unless it is invited into the assemblies of the local church?

Bringing Christ to the World

There is a second thrust in the strategy of the local church: bringing Christ to the world. Every local church ought passionately to pursue corporate ministries (i.e., ministries representing not just the isolated forays of individual members but the collaborative efforts of the entire body) within its city, ministering to both neighbors and even enemies, seeking to improve the living conditions of those who need it most and to create conditions in which human lives can thrive in the ways God intended at creation. In other words, the local church should embrace the mission of bringing God’s love to the city. It is a mission spelled out not only in the Old Testament (Isa. 58:6–10) but also in the New Testament (Matt. 25:34–40) and embodied preeminently in the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

The parable of the good Samaritan is a case in point. We reproduce the love of Christ when we pick up the broken lives of people right in front of us, bearing them on our own backs as though their brokenness were our own. And we will continue to bear up such lives until they are no longer broken—“binding up wounds, pouring on oil and wine, carrying to an inn, paying out whatever is required, showing mercy, proving to be a true neighbor” (Luke 10:34–37). To love your neighbor as yourself is not merely to love another as much as you love yourself, but to take up the life of another and make it your own. In every city, local churches ought to be the best neighbors. “We must love men and women to Jesus.”⁹

In the early days of the Christian era, two devastating epidemics swept the Roman Empire. Even the wisest physicians were at a loss to prescribe antidotes for these plagues, and many of them, including the famous, classical doctor Galen, fled the cities for the relative safety of the countryside. There was one notable exception—members of local churches:

Most of the Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves but thinking only of others. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life, drawing onto themselves the very sickness of their neighbors, cheerfully accepting their pains.¹⁰

Unbelievers noted the vicarious sacrifice of Christians: “Look how they love one another!”¹¹ As members of modern churches, it is our privilege to dignify this sacred legacy, thinking strategically and praying earnestly about how we might collectively bring the love of Christ to the needy of our cities, how we might become countercultural by living out within our culture the glory of the image of Christ.

A Bit of Heaven on Earth

As we learn from Genesis, the image of God was meant to permeate the earth. As we learn from Christ, it is an image revealed preeminently in the self-giving love of the cross. When that love penetrates the hearts of a body of people—a possibility only for those who have, through the work of the cross, been cleansed of sin and declared in the right—when that love takes up an abode in the family of God, in the church of Jesus Christ, and when expressions of that love mark out the interpersonal relations of local churches in the same manner as they epitomize relations within the triune family of God, the glory of heaven begins to break out on earth.

The new-covenant people of God will, while still walking on earth, obtain a foothold in the heavenly Jerusalem. Their eyes will be alive to the riches of their glorious inheritance (Eph. 1:18). And the nations will come to the celestial light of this holy family, famished as they are for the unity of relationships not fractured by egocentrism, for a body summed up under one head, for a people radiating the image of divine love, for a church manifesting the cruciform love of the triune God (Isa. 60:1–11).

The Imperfect Church

How can a local church be sustained in such a glorious vocation? First, it will be sustained only imperfectly. Although the love of this body shines like a radiant beacon against the darkest night, it will never emit more than the initial rays of heaven’s glory. The body of Christ is not yet per-

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fectly aligned under its head. Rancor and division, indeed sin, still invade its relationships. But when the body of Christ falls short of the glory of God (sometimes falling so low it can only look up), it will, secondly, lift its eyes to Jesus Christ and, beholding the glory of the Lord, be transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to the next, from a dimmer manifestation of self-giving love to a brighter one (2 Cor. 3:18).

Fixed on Christ

The local church must never take its eyes off Christ. It must set its mind on the things of heaven where Christ is seated (Col. 3:1–2). It must eagerly await a Savior who, when he comes again, will transform its lowly body into perfect conformity with his body of glory (Phil. 3:20–21). When at last we shall see him—no longer through a glass darkly but in the clarity of undiluted light—we shall know fully the love that for so long surpassed our comprehension. Then, and only then, shall we perfectly reflect the image of Christ (1 John 3:2–3).

Until that time, the local church fixates on Jesus Christ. In its preaching, Christ is upheld. In its worship, Christ is extolled. In its ordinances—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—Christ is celebrated. Indeed, whoever is baptized is baptized into Christ, and specifically into his death (Rom. 6:3), and whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). In the discipline of its members, the humility of the Passover Lamb serves as the guiding impulse (1 Cor. 5:7).

Everything comes back to Christ; every member is riveted to its head. Christ binds everyone and everything (Col. 1:17–18). No wonder a great champion of the local church, Charles Spurgeon, resolutely affirmed his dependence on Christ: “I would have no wish to be here without my Lord; and if the gospel be not true, I should bless God to annihilate me this instant, for I would not care to live if you could destroy the name of Jesus Christ.”¹²

Conclusion

The vocation of the local church could scarcely be more exalted. Called out of the world to be a light in the world, to be a united family among the disunited families of earth, to be indwelt by Christ himself, to be the apple of God’s eye, to be graven on Christ’s hands, to be the glory of

the image of the Holy Trinity, to be an embodiment of the infinite love of the cross, to be a collective portrait more beautiful than any other in the world—that is the church, the local church, the new people of God.

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13

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

*Thabiti Anyabwile and
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I [Anyabwile] sat across the table from Matthew, a creative, inquisitive, free-spirited twenty-five-year-old. He'd come into the restaurant as breezy and bright as the warm Caribbean day outside. Just a few minutes late, he smiled and casually apologized for any inconvenience he'd caused.

Taking up our menus, I wondered to myself what lay ahead in our conversation. Though he'd been attending church for nearly a year, I wasn't sure exactly where Matthew was spiritually or what his questions for me would be. No sooner had we ordered our meals and returned the menus to our waitress than Matthew turned to me and said, "So, I have a lot of questions."

"Wonderful," I replied, relieved that I wouldn't have to drag any conversation out of my young friend. "What's on your mind?"

That day Matthew asked me lots of things. Many of his questions dealt with themes such as God's glory and anger with sinners, the reliability of the Bible, the resurrection, the exclusivity of Jesus, and the future. For nearly two hours we enjoyed a really wonderful exploration of the Bible's teachings on these topics.

But near the end of our conversation, I grew concerned that Matthew, while asking great theological questions, was failing to deal with the more personal heart of the matter. So I asked, "Matthew, what will you do about your sin?"

He gulped, slightly taken aback, and replied, "I hope Jesus has taken care of them." Then he proceeded to tell me how six months earlier he had

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come to accept Christ as his Savior and Lord. At the end of his story, he said, “I want to join the church, but I’m not ready to be baptized.”

Matthew had come to a point many Christians sometimes reach. He had come to understand the gospel and to rely upon Jesus for his salvation, but he had not yet come to understand just what that had to do with the local church. In other words, he had not come to see that the Lord gave two ordinances or sacraments for marking both his initiation into the Christian life and his ongoing fellowship with Christ. In giving these ordinances to the church, the Lord provided “visible words” that communicate the believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (baptism) and the outworking of that union, namely, continuing fellowship with the Lord (the Lord’s Supper). Both, then, become not just ordinances to be obeyed but also means of grace for our strengthening and enjoyment until Christ returns.

Baptism

I live in a country where many people have come to believe that only the “near perfect Christian” may be baptized. Some have come to attach so much importance to baptism that the ordinance no longer applies to the “regular Christian” who experiences imperfection and struggles with sin. They assume that delaying baptism is the appropriate path for most Christians. During our lunch, Matthew expressed these beliefs.

I realize that Christians in many other places in the world make precisely the opposite error. They assign very little importance to baptism. Baptism may be a rite you undertake “when you’re old enough” or an unimportant exercise left optional to each believer. It’s a box checked off the spiritual to-do list and basically forgotten.

Christians may fall into either error: assigning either too little or too much importance to baptism. In doing so, we risk losing the beauty and richness of a command that Jesus himself instituted and that Christian churches have celebrated for nearly two thousand years. The solution is to embrace a biblical understanding of baptism that immerses us deeply in the gracious and efficacious work of our Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners.

What Is Baptism?

In the most basic terms, baptism is a sign and a seal. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, baptism “is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of [the believer’s] ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life” (28.1).

A sign is a symbol pointing to a greater reality or idea. Baptism is “a neon light flashing ‘Gospel, Gospel, Gospel.’”¹ When the church practices baptism, she testifies to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and signifies the sinner’s union with Christ in all he did and accomplished on our behalf.

But baptism (and the Lord’ Supper too, for that matter) is also a seal:

The sacraments are not only signs that point our attention back to Jesus Christ as presented in the gospel and thus remind us of his grace offered to the whole world. They are also seals, which assure us that God’s grace and promise are given to us in particular. This word “seal,” when used in the context of the Reformation, referred to the wax imprint that marked a document as official and legally binding. In this context, Baptism is the seal whereby God takes the general promise of the gospel and applies it to us in particular. In the ancient world, the same word also referred to marks on the body—brands or tattoos which functioned as a mark of ownership. We are “marked” by Christ’s death and resurrection, as witnessed both by baptism and the Lord’s Supper.²

A ruler or king might affix his seal to an official edict or law. Correspondence received from a magistrate or influential person would bear the imprint or seal belonging to his office or family. Or a slave might bear the markings of his owner. Recipients and the public would thereby recognize the bearer of such a seal or marking as belonging to its owner.

In baptism, God places his mark upon the one baptized. The repentant and professing Christian receives the seal of heaven’s ownership. God speaks to us in baptism: “This one so marked or sealed belongs to me.”

In modern evangelicalism, people often speak of making a “public profession of faith.” That phrase has come to be associated with things such as responding to altar calls, praying certain prayers, or signing response cards. In general, these actions focus on what we say to God. Unfortunately, many of these practices leave us thinking solely about

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what we say, not realizing that God wishes to speak of his love to his people. And they make what we say the decisive action or speech. But the Bible strongly supports none of those practices. The apostles and the early church, however, did have a way for repentant sinners to make a public profession, to signify their faith in Christ while receiving the seal of God's salvation—baptism.

The Beauty of Baptism

The beauty of baptism may be observed by considering what baptism signifies, for baptism wonderfully associates the believer with the many riches found in Christ.

THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST. First, baptism visibly portrays the atonement that Jesus accomplished. Redemption and the remission of sins are central to Christ's work and therefore central to the meaning of baptism:

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col. 2:13–15)³

In baptism, we are reminded of our Lord's own baptism on our behalf. The Savior taught, "I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished" (Luke 12:50 ESV). When overly ambitious disciples requested to sit at his side in his kingdom, Jesus humbled them by replying, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:38 ESV). The cup the Master drank was the cup of the Father's wrath against sin. The distressing baptism he endured was the baptism of the cross where he made propitiation for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2).

Baptism reminds the church and the individual Christian of Jesus' cross, where Jesus took away and nailed our sins and where Jesus' triumph becomes our triumph. Baptism reminds us that Christ has suffered our judgment and made peace with God for us.

UNION WITH CHRIST. Second, baptism represents the sinner's spiritual union with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. (Rom. 6:1–5)

When Jesus died, we died with him. When he was buried, we were buried. When he rose, we rose, too! Because we are united to Christ by faith, we receive the benefits of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Through faith we vicariously participate in all that Jesus did. Baptism pictures that spiritual reality.

Our union with Christ is so strong that some have compared baptism to marriage. For example, Marion Clark writes, "God is our bridegroom, who has chosen us, paid the dowry, and given us his ring so that all may know that we belong to him. Even more, he has done so to make clear to us that we are his. The ceremony of baptism asserts that his love for us is not a dream but a reality."⁴ In baptism we exchange vows uniting Christ, the bridegroom, to his bride, the church.

UNION WITH THE CHURCH. Baptism not only pictures our union with Christ but also our union with his body, the church. Having been joined to Christ through faith and the operation of the Holy Spirit, by the same Spirit "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). Or as the apostle Paul writes elsewhere, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6).

Baptized individuals profess that they are joined to Christ's body through faith. That union with Christ manifests itself in union with his people, most concretely demonstrated by commitment and membership in a local church.

Whenever a couple gives birth to a child, family and friends visit the hospital, deliver well wishes, and rejoice at the addition of this new life.

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In a similar way, when people receive the sign and seal of baptism, they become a part of God's family, the church. They enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of family membership. Don Whitney explains this well: "When God brings a person into spiritual life, that person enters into the spiritual and invisible body of Christ—the universal church. When that spiritual experience is pictured in water baptism, that is the individual's symbolic entry into the tangible and visible body of Christ—the local church."⁵

CONSECRATION TO GOD. Finally, we should understand that baptism signifies our consecration to God. In baptism we are set apart for worship and service to the God of our salvation. We are marked out from the world and sealed as belonging to God. This is why the apostle Paul often writes of New Testament ethical requirements when discussing baptism. For example:

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Col. 2:11–12)

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Rom. 6:11–14)

Because our lives are united with Christ by faith and the Spirit's engrafting, we are obligated to live "circumcised" lives, to "put off the sinful nature." We "count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" and we "offer ourselves to God." Because we died with Christ, sin no longer reigns over us. We are freed from the tyranny of unrighteousness. "Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (Rom. 6:6). We belong to a new Master. Credobaptists would add that we go down to the "watery grave" to be raised in newness of life.⁶

Our baptism obligates us to live in righteousness so that we honor, not shame, our Lord with whom we have been buried and raised to life in baptism. We cannot go back. We have entered into the new covenant; we have sworn allegiance to our king. Now we must live as citizens and servants of his kingdom.⁷

My friend Matthew did not see the beauty of baptism. He thought of baptism primarily as something he said to the world: “Hey, I’m living for Jesus and plan not to mess up.” He failed to recognize that God says in baptism, “Hey, you belong to me. I’ve made you new. You will live for me because I will live in you.”

When viewed from that perspective, baptism gains the beauty and importance it deserves. It becomes a means of grace for the believer, a reminder of the gospel and Savior that rescue us.

Moreover, baptism opens the doors of continuing fellowship with our Lord. That continuing fellowship with the Lord finds expression in another sign and seal, the Lord’s Supper or Communion Meal.

Paedobaptists and Credobaptists

I [Duncan] love the way Thabiti lays out the doctrine of baptism here and the pastoral view he gives us of its importance in the lives of Christians. He, as a Baptist, and I, as a Presbyterian, thus far agree. But we also want to acknowledge that there are some areas of significant disagreement among otherwise united members of The Gospel Coalition on the subject of baptism. In general, we agree on the meaning, importance, and function of baptism, but we have some disagreements on the mode and subjects (or proper recipients of baptism). These differences are not inconsequential, and so we want to honor one another’s consciences under the Word of God, and we want the members of our respective churches to understand and take these issues seriously.⁸

Some of us in The Gospel Coalition are credobaptists (that is, Christians like Thabiti who believe that only believers should be baptized) and others of us are paedobaptists (that is, Christians like me who believe that both believers and their children should be baptized). Both groups seek to ground their baptismal practice in the teaching of Scripture, but both come to different conclusions as to what the Bible teaches about the proper recipients of baptism.

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Evangelical paedobaptists believe that the Bible teaches that the church should baptize the children of believers as well as adult professing believers who have not been previously baptized. We believe that baptism is a new-covenant sign that points to and confirms the gracious saving promise of God to his people and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We base the administration of baptism to believers and their children on our understanding of passages such as Genesis 17, Matthew 28, Colossians 2, 1 Corinthians 7, and Acts 2 and 16.

We agree with our credobaptist friends that (1) Christ commands Christian baptism in Matthew 28:19–20 (“Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing . . . and . . . teaching them”) and that (2) believers should be baptized as in Acts 8:

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” *And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”* And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. (vv. 35–38 NASB)

But we disagree on a third point, because paedobaptists also believe that Christian believers *and their children* should be baptized. If we had to reduce our biblical argument for paedobaptism to one (albeit complex!) sentence, it would be something like this:

God made promises to believers and their children in both the Old and New Testaments, attached signs to those promises in both the Old and New Testaments, explicitly required the sign of initiation into his family (circumcision) to be applied to believers and their children in the Old Testament, and implicitly appointed the new-covenant sign of initiation (baptism) to be given to believers and their children in the New Testament.

Credobaptists disagree and argue not only that paedobaptists misunderstand the passages that we appeal to, but also that the New Testament references to baptism entail a command to baptize only those who profess personal faith in Jesus Christ (e.g., Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:44–48; Rom. 6:3–4; Gal. 3:27). They hold that passages such as Jeremiah 31 teach that

the church, under the terms of the new covenant, is the gathered assembly of *believing* disciples, and that in this respect they differ from believers under the old covenant, which clearly included children.

Paedobaptists, on the other hand, believe that the membership of the local church is made up of believers and their children, and that in this respect the new covenant does not differ from the old covenant. Hence, a difference in ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is one of the main factors in the credobaptist and paedobaptist disagreement over the proper recipients of baptism.

A slightly less significant disagreement concerns the mode of baptism. Credobaptists generally argue that baptism is to be performed only by immersion or dipping a person into water. They also typically hold that the mode is so bound up with Jesus' command that those who are not immersed are not baptized. Meanwhile, most paedobaptists believe that baptism is best done by affusion (pouring or sprinkling water upon the recipient) but that mode is not of the essence of the rite; thus, immersion is a valid, but not a required, mode of baptism.

Those who argue for immersion do so on a number of grounds. They assert that the Greek word for baptism means "immersion," that the examples of baptism in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:5, 10, John 3:23; Acts 8:36–38) indicate that immersion was the mode, that Paul teaches immersion in his explanation of baptism in Romans 6:1–11 (cf. Col. 2:11–12), and that passages adduced by paedobaptists as examples of nonimmersion are unconvincing.

Those who argue for affusion argue that there are places in the biblical usage of baptism where it cannot mean "to immerse" (e.g., Lev. 14:6, 51; Acts 1:5; 1 Cor. 10:2; Heb. 9:10–23); that only one passage in the New Testament actually describes the mode of baptism (Acts 1–2) and that all the rest describe merely the location of baptism (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Acts 8), not its mode of administration; that there are places in the New Testament where immersion is unlikely or impossible (Acts 9:17–18; 10:47; 16:32–33); and above all that water baptism signifies the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is depicted only by pouring out, not immersion (see Acts 1:4–5; 2:2–3; cf. Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; Acts 11:15–16).

Despite these important and ongoing differences, both sides are able to affirm Article 12 of The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.

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Furthermore, we also stand with one another in rejecting baptismal regeneration. This view, held by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, High Anglicans or Anglo-Catholics, Lutherans, and groups such as the Church of Christ, is that water baptism is “the instrumental cause of regeneration, and that the grace of regeneration is effectually conveyed through the administration of that rite wherever duly performed.”⁹

Without in any way diminishing the importance of baptism or its necessity for Christian obedience, we deny that water baptism regenerates or that it causes the new birth. In the Bible, uniformly, covenant signs, sacraments, or ordinances (as many of our Baptist friends prefer) signify and confirm the spiritual realities that they represent; they do not produce those realities.

This is precisely Paul’s point in Romans 4:1–12 about Abraham’s circumcision. Abraham was not justified by his circumcision but *before* his circumcision, and God gave the covenant sign of circumcision to confirm, not to confer, Abraham’s justification (Genesis 15) before he was ever circumcised (Genesis 17). So we agree with the Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock, who says that regeneration

is not external baptism. Many men take their baptism for regeneration. The ancients usually give it this term. One calls our Saviour’s baptism his regeneration. This confers not grace, but engageth to it: outward water cannot convey inward life. How can water, a material thing, work upon the soul in a spiritual manner? Neither can it be proved, that ever the Spirit of God is tied to any promise, to apply himself to the soul in a gracious operation, when water is applied to the body. If it were so, that all that were baptized, were regenerate; then all that were baptized would be saved; or else the doctrine of perseverance falls to the ground. Baptism is a mean of conveying this grace, when the Spirit is pleased to operate with it. But it doth not work as a physical cause upon the soul, as a purge doth upon the humours of the body: for it is the sacrament of regeneration, as the Lord’s Supper is of nourishment. As a man cannot be said to be nourished without faith, so he cannot be said to be a new creature without faith. Put the most delicious meat into the mouth of a dead man, you do not nourish him, because he wants a principle of life to concoct and digest it. Faith alone is the principle of spiritual life, and the principle draws nourishment from the means of God’s appointment. Some indeed say, that regeneration is conferred in baptism upon the elect, and exerts itself afterwards in conversion. But how so active a principle as spiritual

life should lie dead, and asleep so long, even many years which intervene between baptism and conversion is not easily conceivable.¹⁰

Very often Christians who deny the doctrine of baptismal regeneration are accused of reducing baptism to a “bare sign,” that is, making it an empty symbol that “does nothing.” But this is not the case. Baptism is God’s means not to regenerate or justify us but to confirm his promise to us, put his mark on us, and assure us of his love, all of which serve to increase and strengthen the faith of the believer and thus promote our growth in grace.

This is why the Westminster Larger Catechism urges believers to “improve their baptism” every time they see baptism administered to another. What did those theologians mean by exhorting us to improve our baptism? To improve our baptism means to meditate on its blessings, to make use of it, to take full advantage of it, and to gain the maximum benefit from it as a means of growing in grace, especially when we are present at its administration in public worship. The Larger Catechism says:

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.¹¹

On this paedobaptists and credobaptists heartily agree.

The Lord's Supper

I [Anyabwile] remember my wedding day as though it were yesterday. It was a very humid August day (the 31st, in case my wife reads this).

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We were married in my mother-in-law's front yard wearing traditional African clothing, and a small group of family and close friends attended. Our wedding marked the beginning of a joyful married life full of grace and love.

If baptism is akin to the believer's wedding-day union with Christ, then the Lord's Supper represents the ongoing renewal of love and vows sometimes celebrated at wedding anniversaries. I like the analogy. It reminds us that the Lord's Supper is far more than mere necessity, though it is necessary; far more than a mere memorial, though it reminds of precious things from redemptive history; and far more than mere ritual, though practiced by Christian churches of nearly every variety since the days of Jesus himself. The Lord's Supper, like a nightly dinner I share with my wife, or the occasional special days we observe together, provides an ongoing means of grace and fellowship between the Lord Jesus and his bride, the church.

When Did the Lord's Supper Get Its Start?

The Lord Jesus Christ himself instituted what many commonly call the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper, a name taken from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:20, is also known as the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:24) and Holy Communion (1 Cor. 10:16). While the name varies, each of the Synoptic Gospels records for us that amazing night when Jesus recast a centuries-old Jewish religious meal, the Passover, in terms of a new-covenant relationship with him accomplished by his death, burial, and resurrection (Matt. 26:26–30; Mark 14:22–26; Luke 22:19–20).

In the final plague on Egypt, God sent the angel of death to pass over the entire land, killing the firstborn male of every household and all livestock. To escape this judgment, Israelites were commanded to sacrifice an unblemished lamb for each household and to smear blood from the sacrifice on the doorposts of their homes. When the angel of death saw a home with sacrificial blood over its doorposts, he "passed over" that home. The blood turned away the judgment of God from that home. During the exodus, God commanded Israel to commemorate their flight and deliverance from Egypt with a special meal (Exodus 12).

For centuries after that fearful night, faithful Jewish families ate the Passover meal and explained the extraordinary deliverance of God to the

next generation of Jewish children. No doubt Jesus' disciples had these things in mind when Jesus instructed them to prepare for the Passover (Matt. 26:17–19). But during that Passover meal, Jesus spoke remarkable and surprising words about the true meaning of the meal itself:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matt. 26:26–29 ESV)

What Does the Lord's Supper Signify?

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper is a sign and a seal of God's grace. It, too, points to the gospel of our Lord, his sacrifice on our behalf, and redemption through faith in his name.

THE ELEMENTS: BODY AND BLOOD. The night that Jesus instituted Holy Communion, he redefined the elements of the meal. For centuries the bread and wine stood as reminders of the lambs slaughtered on that first Passover. But Jesus revealed what even that first Passover signified: his body broken and his blood shed for sin. In the simple act of eating and drinking, the disciples were to remember that Christ our Passover Lamb was sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7). He sacrificed himself "for many for the forgiveness of sins."

These signs, then, picture the gospel for the believing and the witnessing communities. When my young friend Matthew is baptized into the covenant community, he will gain the privilege of joining those who "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). The Lord's Supper sensorially proclaims, enacts, and celebrates what is "of first importance . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3 ESV).

Believers should never move far from appropriating the gospel benefits of Christ. So Christ grants the church signs or visible words that continually refresh our memories of his sacrifice. We eat and drink in faith, and our forgiveness through Christ is presented to us again as a reminder of the efficacy of his atonement.

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THE MEAL: NOURISHMENT. Perhaps the most obvious thing that the Lord's Supper signifies is the spiritual nourishment that believers receive at the meal. Just as actual food and wine nourish and please the body, the Communion meal nourishes and pleases the believer's soul. At the Communion Table we "take and eat," and "we drink the cup." We feed upon Christ by faith. The London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) describes this view:

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death; the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally, but spiritually present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses. (30.7)

In this way, Jesus continues to be the food that nourishes Christians. He presents himself to our senses as "the bread of life." In feeding upon Christ by faith, we take into ourselves the benefits and grace that sustain us through the Christian life. "Jesus Christ is there offered to us in order that we may possess him, and in him all the fullness of grace which we can desire, and that herein we have a good aid to confirm our consciences in the faith which we ought to have in him."¹²

This means, in part, that the Lord's Supper belongs to the weak Christian. No one comes to the Table in unblemished worthiness or undiminished strength. We come to the Table in need. We come to the Table fresh from battles with sin, discouragement, unbelief, and the world. We need to be fed again. We need to receive the sustenance that Christ affords. By faith we receive the nourishment we need as we imbibe the benefits of Jesus' atoning work for sinners and weaklings.

THE ADMINISTRATION: PARTICIPATION WITH CHRIST. Not only are the elements of the Eucharist symbolic, but also the very administration or partaking of the Supper signifies important realities. Richard Phillips summarizes what the act of eating and drinking the Supper denotes:

The eating of the elements by believers signifies their participation in the crucified Christ. Additionally, the partaking of the sacrament signifies the effect of Christ's death in giving life and strength to the soul, as food and drink sustain the body. Furthermore, just as the sacrament

symbolizes the believers' union with Christ, it also places a visible difference between members of Christ's church and the world, while signifying believers' communion one to another in him.¹³

Phillips paraphrases well what the apostle Paul wrote centuries ago about the Eucharist:

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 10:14–16).

Eating and drinking this meal indicates the believer's union or participation with Christ. Believers thus appropriate the benefits of Jesus' atoning work and rely upon the continuing sustenance of Christ, the bread of life.

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.¹⁴

THE LOAF: THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH. Finally, the Lord's Supper also represents the unity of his people. "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor. 10:17). When the church gathers at the Lord's Table, believers must recognize this profound spiritual unity. Paul chided the Corinthians for failing to reflect their unity in Christ. He had no praise for them, saying that their "meetings do more harm than good" (1 Cor. 11:17). The troubled divisions in the Corinthian church were manifested in divisions at the Lord's Table of all places (1 Cor. 1:10–13; 11:18–19). Selfishness and gluttony so prevailed at the Table that Paul concluded that it was "not the Lord's Supper you eat" (1 Cor. 11:20).

For the meal to truly be the Lord's Supper, members of the church

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needed to eat and drink “in a worthy manner,” in part by “recognizing the body of the Lord” at the Supper (1 Cor. 11:27, 29). That is, they were to recognize the unity of the church as one loaf, one people, joined together with Christ through his sacrifice on our behalf. Failure to do so constituted “sinning against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). In such cases, the Table also became a place of judgment and self-examination (1 Cor. 11:28–34).

The Lord's Supper Is a Seal

But the Lord's Supper is not just a sign. Holy Communion is also a seal. By participating regularly in the Lord's Supper, Christians receive by faith the seal or “tattoo” that identifies them as belonging to Jesus and the covenant people of God. This is what is meant, in part, when The Gospel Coalition's Confessional Statement describes the Lord's Supper as “ongoing covenant renewal.” In the Lord's Supper, the Lord speaks to his people of his ongoing love and mercy toward them.

The Lord's Supper seals God's people by giving them a reliable attestation of their participation in Christ. It is Christ who thus identifies his own, stretching forth his hand to give them the bread and the cup of his covenant meal. John Murray says: “When we partake of the cup in faith, it is the Lord's own certification to us that all that the new covenant in his blood involves is ours. It is the seal of his grace and faithfulness.”¹⁵

While baptism represents a kind of “I do” between Christ and his bride, the Supper repeats an “I continue” statement of love from Jesus to the church. Communion reminds us that his love endures forever.

The Lord's Supper and the Presence of Christ

If the Lord's Supper is an ongoing covenant renewal, then this suggests a genuine participation or communion with Christ. Jesus must be present at the Supper in a meaningful way. In the history of the church, there have been three major views on Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

REAL PHYSICAL PRESENCE. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that during the celebration of the Eucharist a miracle happens wherein the bread and wine continue to look like bread and wine but are really turned into the physical body and blood of Christ. This view, known as transub-

stantiation, also claims that in the Eucharist there is a re-presentation of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, not just a sign remembering the Lord's death.

In arguing for transubstantiation, the Roman Catholic Church presses the metaphor of Jesus' words, "This is my body . . . this cup is my blood," into a woodenly literal straitjacket. Furthermore, their insistence that the Mass re-presents Jesus' sacrifice plainly contradicts the Bible (Rom. 6:10; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10). Christ Jesus died once-for-all-time and now lives forever to intercede for his people.

The Lutheran view of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper also takes the words of Christ's institution literally. But Luther maintained that the elements were not transformed; they remained bread and wine, but Jesus' body and blood are present in, under, and along with the elements of the sacrament. This view is called "consubstantiation."

MEMORIAL VIEW. On the other end of the spectrum there have been Christian bodies that deny that Christ is present in any way in the Lord's Supper. The memorial view emphasizes "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24–25). So the Supper becomes a remembrance or memorial. Many commonly associate this view with the Swiss Reformer Huldrych Zwingli, who opposed the Roman Catholic and Lutheran views of Christ's presence in the Supper.

SPIRITUAL PRESENCE. A third option holds that Christ—while not physically present—is present spiritually in Communion. The elements remain bread and wine, but by faith Christ meets with and communes with his people at the Supper.

The statements "This is my body" and "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" are figurative statements, according to the spiritual-presence view. The bread and wine do not change in any real way. Yet the Supper represents more than mere commemoration. In calling the statements figurative or symbolic, this view does not downplay the reality and importance of the thing signified. The Lord's Supper combines tremendous mystery and genuine spiritual blessing.

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ's flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not

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comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.

Now, that sacred partaking of his flesh and blood, by which Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow, he also testifies and seals in the Supper—not by presenting a vain and empty sign, but by manifesting there the effectiveness of his Spirit to fulfill what he promises. And truly he offers and shows the reality there signified to all who sit at that spiritual banquet, although it is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept such great generosity with true faith and gratefulness of heart.¹⁶

When we behold and partake of the elements in Communion, we receive by faith all that they signify regarding the broken body and shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. By faith, Christ joins us at the Supper, and we anticipate the day when faith gives way to sight and we eat with the Savior in the Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29).

A Pastoral Hope

I look forward to the day when Matthew celebrates baptism with the church. I look forward to seeing Matthew rejoice to receive the sign and seal of his union with Christ through faith. And Lord willing, Matthew and the church will regularly come to the Lord's Supper to see and receive afresh the work of Christ and the benefits of his sacrifice. Together we will hear the Lord express his ownership of and love for us in the visible signs he gives to his church. We remember and proclaim together our Savior's sacrificial death for us even as we anticipate eating with him in the Father's kingdom. By these sacraments we receive fresh supplies of grace. By them we receive Christ our Lord and the joy of communing with him. What a wonderful joy to participate in these rich privileges given by Christ Jesus to his people!

Some Theological-Pastoral Reflections

[Duncan] Thabiti has beautifully, clearly, biblically, and pastorally outlined our understanding of the Lord's Supper, as well as outlined for us three of the main positions on how Christ is "present" (or not!) in the elements and/or the administration of them, but perhaps it would be helpful to summarize the emphases of the key scriptural passages on the sacraments or ordinances in general (e.g., Genesis 9; 12; 15; 17; Exo-

dus 12; 24; Isaiah 7; Acts 2; Romans 4; 1 Cor. 1:17; 1 Pet. 3:18–22) and the Lord's Supper in particular (Matt. 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–23; 1 Cor. 11:17–32).¹⁷

This is important because the clearer that Christians are on what the Lord's Supper is and isn't, and what it does and doesn't do, and what it is and isn't for, the more helpful it will be to them as a means of growth.

- 1) Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as sacraments, or ordinances, or covenant signs/seals, do not inaugurate or effect a covenant relationship; rather, they represent and confirm a previously existing, election-originated, promise-commenced, grace-established, Father-initiated, Spirit-bestowed, Christ-grounded, faith-received, covenant relationship.
- 2) Baptism and the Lord's Supper, as sacraments/ordinances, are part of the divine program of assurance. They are given to buttress and grow faith in the covenantal promises of God. It is this area that relates to the idea of sacraments as seals.
- 3) God is not present "in" any sacrament, but the sacramental analogy in every sacrament points to the glorious, gracious, covenantal, communal, promise of the presence of God, and by the Spirit we know something of this presence. That is, through the sacrament, and especially through the ongoing and repeated Lord's Supper, we are pointed to and experience a foretaste of the glorious communion of the ultimate covenant promise, "I will be your God and you will be my people," and the ultimate covenant hope, "God with us," and the ultimate covenant fellowship, "to recline at his table."
- 4) There are objective and subjective aspects to the sacraments/ordinances, as well as inward and outward aspects. Any refusal to come to grips with the distinction between the sign (outward) and the thing signified (inward) overthrows the sacrament, as Calvin noted. Furthermore, the objective (the sign) exists for the subjective (the reality that is *signified*). So to talk about sacramental efficacy in the absence of the key subjective instrument (faith) and effects (strengthened faith, growth in grace, assurance) is to miss the whole point of the Spirit's use of and goal for the Lord's Supper.
- 5) Following on this, sacramental signs do not bestow the sacramental reality. The sacraments are efficacious in the sense that they accomplish God's purpose, but they are not invariably efficacious. There are always Ishmaels and Simons. Those who want an invariable objective efficacy, that is, those who want the sacraments and ordinances to automatically bestow grace just by their being administered, will have to go to Rome or Constantinople, and without the slightest support from biblical covenant thought.

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- 6) Not one of the Lord's Supper narratives focuses our attention on the bodily presence of Christ in the Supper. The language of body and blood clearly points us to contemplation of the covenantal sacrifice of Christ.¹⁸
- 7) Positively, the New Testament's Lord's Supper narratives press us (a) to give thanks to God for the salvation we have by Christ; (b) to commemorate Christ's death as the new-covenant exodus in a covenant meal; (c) to proclaim or set forth the incalculable significance and glorious meaning of his saving death; and (d) to commune with him and with his people, which is his body.

Paedo-Communion and a Parting Word

Though the practice of paedo-communion (communing infants and young children, apart from a credible profession of faith), long confined to Eastern Orthodoxy, has gained some currency in liberal and high-church Protestant circles (with a few minor exceptions in some conservative Reformed quadrants), most evangelical Protestant paedobaptists and credobaptists agree that the Lord's Table is only for those who are trusting in Jesus Christ. So the proper participants in the Lord's Supper are *those who trust in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation as he is offered in the gospel and who have received the sign of membership (baptism) in the body of Christ, his church*. The Lord's Supper is for professing believers in the Lord Jesus Christ who have discerned the body of the Lord, that is, the church (1 Cor. 11:29).

In conclusion to our exposition of Article 12 of The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement, it may be helpful to summarize some high points of the biblical teaching on the nature of the sacraments or ordinances. God's sacraments or covenant signs and seals are "visible words" (Augustine). In them, we see with our eyes the promise of God. Indeed, in the sacraments we see, smell, touch, and taste the word. In the public reading and preaching of Scripture, God addresses our mind and conscience through the hearing. In the sacraments, he uniquely addresses our mind and conscience through the other senses. God's promise is made tangible in, through, and to the senses. A sacrament is a covenant sign and seal, which means it reminds us and assures us of a promise. That is, it points to and confirms a gracious promise of God to his people.

Another way of saying it is that a sacrament is an action that God designed to sign (symbolize) and seal (ratify) a covenantal reality that

the power and grace of God accomplished; the Word of God has communicated its significance, and people received or entered into its reality only by faith. Hence, the weakness and frailty of human faith welcomes this gracious act of reassurance. The sacraments by nature supplement and confirm God's promises in his Word, and the grace they convey is the same grace conveyed by preaching. The sacraments are efficacious for only the elect since their benefits sanctify them and are received by faith.

14

The Restoration of All Things

Sam Storms

“Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again!” This simple liturgical refrain reminds us of the profoundly important truth that eschatology is deeply and inextricably grounded in the gospel. The twofold past tense “*has died*” and “*has risen*” is the basis on which the Christian perseveres in hope that “Christ *will* come again.” Simply put, what God has already achieved in the past through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son is the foundation for what Scripture says he *will* do in the future, at the consummation.

Christian hope is not a wishful grasping at an uncertain tomorrow but a confident expectation rooted in the reality of what transpired 2,000 years ago. The efficacy and finality of Christ’s redemptive work, together with his resurrection and exaltation as Lord to the right hand of the Father, account for the anticipation all Christians have of the return of Christ and the consummate fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose in the new heavens and new earth.

The eschatological hope of the Christian is summarized well in the thirteenth and final article of The Gospel Coalition’s Confessional Statement. This statement does not address the variety of end-time scenarios present in the evangelical world but is designed to identify those *essential* elements of our eschatological hope that are embraced by all who affirm the authority of the inspired text. It is, therefore, a broadly evangelical statement that avoids the denominational and sectarian distinctives that have so often marred the discussion of God’s end-time purposes. It reads as follows:

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We believe in the personal, glorious, and bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ with his holy angels, when he will exercise his role as final Judge, and his kingdom will be consummated. We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the just and the unjust—the unjust to judgment and eternal conscious punishment in hell, as our Lord himself taught, and the just to eternal blessedness in the presence of him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb, in the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. On that day the church will be presented faultless before God by the obedience, suffering and triumph of Christ, all sin purged and its wretched effects forever banished. God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.

The Inaugural Coming and Ultimate Consummation of the Kingdom of God

The “blessed hope” of the Christian, and thus the controlling theme of biblical eschatology, is “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13),¹ at which time he will consummate the kingdom of God. To understand what this consummation entails we must first explore the inauguration of God’s sovereign rule in the first coming of Christ. As noted above, we see here again that the key to the future lies in the past.

Christ’s first-century proclamation of the kingdom of God must be seen in relation to, indeed, in contrast with, the aspirations of the Jewish people of his day. The expectant attitude and hope of the first-century Israelite was for dominion in the land that God had promised to Abraham and his seed, together with an everlasting throne, international supremacy, and above all else the presence of the King himself in power and glory to rule over God’s people. The questions reverberating in the heart of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus were: “When will Yahweh send the Messiah to deliver us from our oppressors and fulfill the covenant promises given to our fathers? Where is God’s promised fulfillment of the kingdom?”

No one disputes the fact that the focus of Christ’s ministry was the announcement of *the coming of the kingdom of God*: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15; see also Matt. 3:2; 4:17, 23; 10:7; Luke 4:43; 10:9). The concept of the kingdom most prevalent in the mind of the Old Testament

Jew was that of God's visible conquest of his enemies, the vindication and restoration of his people, Israel, to supremacy in the land, and the fulfillment of the promises of a Davidic throne and rule upon the earth in power and glory.

"God's kingdom, to the Jew-in-the-village in the first half of the first century," notes N. T. Wright, "meant the coming vindication of Israel, victory over the pagans, the eventual gift of peace, justice and prosperity. It is scarcely surprising that, when a prophet appeared announcing that this kingdom was dawning, and that Israel's God was at last becoming king, he found an eager audience."² The crucial issue was: when will Yahweh return to Zion to dwell with his people, to forgive and restore them? Jewish hope, notes Wright,

was concrete, specific, focused on the people as a whole. If Pilate was still governing Judaea, then the kingdom had not come. If the Temple was not rebuilt, then the kingdom had not come. If the Messiah had not arrived, then the kingdom had not come. If Israel was not observing the Torah properly (however one might define that), then the kingdom had not come. If the pagans were not defeated and/or flocking to Zion for instruction, then the kingdom had not come. These tangible, this-worldly points of reference are all-important.³

For the religious leaders of Jesus' day as well as for the common man, the coming kingdom of God would be a matter of national liberation and the military defeat of the pagan oppressors. This mind-set may well have contributed to John the Baptist's bewilderment concerning Jesus:

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." (Matt. 11:2-6)

In his response to John's disciples, Jesus was claiming that the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope with its attendant blessings was in fact *present* in his person and ministry. The fulfillment, however, was not taking place along anticipated lines; hence John's perplexity.

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The unexpected element was that fulfillment was occurring in Jesus, *but without the eschatological consummation*. The Old Testament prophetic hope of the coming messianic kingdom of God as promised to Israel is being fulfilled in the person and ministry of Jesus, but not consummated. The Jews of our Lord's day, in keeping with what they read in their inspired writings, expected the consummation of the kingdom, the complete and final overthrow of Israel's political enemies and the ushering in of the age of blessed peace and prosperity in the land.

Our Lord, however, came with the message that before the kingdom will come in its eschatological consummation, it has come in his own person and work in spirit and power. The kingdom, therefore, is both the present spiritual reign of God and the future realm over which he will rule in power and glory. Thus, George Ladd rightly concludes:

*Before the eschatological appearing of God's Kingdom at the end of the age, God's Kingdom has become dynamically active among men in Jesus' person and mission. The Kingdom in this age is not merely the abstract concept of God's universal rule to which men must submit; it is rather a dynamic power at work among men. . . . Before the apocalyptic coming of God's Kingdom and the final manifestation of his rule to bring in the new age, God has manifested his rule, his Kingdom, to bring men in advance of the eschatological era the blessings of his redemptive reign.*⁴

In his response to John's query, Jesus pointed to the binding of Satan as one example of the manifestation of his kingdom reign. "The meaning of Jesus' exorcism of demons in its relationship to the Kingdom of God is precisely this: that before the eschatological conquest of God's Kingdom over evil and the destruction of Satan, the Kingdom of God has invaded the realm of Satan to deal him a preliminary but decisive defeat."⁵ Likewise, the very words of Jesus embodied and gave expression to the presence of the kingdom: "The word which Jesus proclaimed itself brought to pass that which it proclaimed: release for captives, recovery for the blind, freeing of the oppressed. . . . The message creates the new era. . . , it makes possible the signs of the messianic fulfillment. The word brings about the Kingdom of God. The gospel is itself the greatest of the messianic signs."⁶

Thus the kingdom of God is the redemptive reign of God, or his sovereign lordship, dynamically active to establish his rule among men.

There are two decisive and dramatic moments in the manifestation of this kingdom: first, as it is fulfilled within history in the first advent of the Son, whereby Satan was defeated and men and women came into the experience of the blessings of God's reign; and second, as it will be consummated at the close of history in the second advent of the Son, when he will finally and forever destroy his enemies, deliver his people and all of creation from evil, and establish his eternal rule in the new heavens and new earth.

This unexpected expression of the kingdom in its present form as God's redemptive reign is precisely the *mystery* form of the kingdom as illustrated in the parables of Matthew 13. That God proposed to bring in his kingdom is, of course, no secret or mystery. That the kingdom was to come in power and glory was no secret. The mystery is a new disclosure concerning God's purpose for the establishment of that kingdom; to be more specific, that the kingdom which is to come in the future in power and glory has, in point of fact, *already entered into the world in advance, in a hidden form*, to work secretly within and among men (see Mark 4:26–32). Again, here is Ladd's explanation:

We may conclude that the 'mystery of the kingdom' is the key to the understanding of the unique element in Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom. He announced that the Kingdom of God had come near; in fact, he affirmed that it had actually come upon men (Mt. 12:28). It was present in his word and in his messianic works. It was present in his person; it was present as the messianic salvation. It constituted a fulfillment of the OT expectation. Yet the coming and presence of the Kingdom was not self-explanatory and altogether self-evident. There was something about it which could be understood only by revelation. This meant that while the presence of the Kingdom was a fulfillment of the OT expectation, it was a fulfillment in different terms from those which one might expect from the prophets. Before the end of the age and the coming of the Kingdom in glorious power, it was God's purpose that the powers of that eschatological Kingdom should enter into human history to accomplish a defeat of Satan's kingdom, and to set at work the dynamic power of God's redemptive reign among men. This new manifestation of God's Kingdom was taking place on the level of human history and centered in one man—Jesus Christ.⁷

There is, therefore, a dual manifestation of the kingdom of God corresponding in kind to the two comings of Christ himself. He first appeared

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in obscurity and humility, to suffer and die for the vindication of God's righteousness and the salvation of his people (Rom. 3:23–26). By this means, said Paul, God “has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14). He will yet appear a second time in visible power and greatness to deliver the earth from the curse of sin, to glorify his people, and to establish his sovereign rule forever in the consummated splendor of the new heavens and new earth.

Thus, we must think in terms of *both* “the present realm of righteousness or salvation when men may accept or reject the kingdom, *and* the future realm when the powers of the kingdom shall be manifested in visible glory. The former was inaugurated in insignificant beginnings without outward display, and those who accept it are to live intermingled with those who reject it until the consummation. Then the kingdom will be disclosed in a mighty manifestation of power and glory. God's kingdom will come; and the ultimate state will witness the perfect realization of the will of God everywhere and forever.”⁸

Resurrection

An oft neglected element in the eschatological hope of the believer is the resurrection of the body. The popular image of a shapeless Christian floating in some ethereal spiritual fog, moving from one cloud in the heavens to another, is due more to Greek dualist philosophy than to the biblical text. The people of God will spend eternity in a body; albeit a glorified and resurrected body, but not for that reason any less physical or material in nature. The reality of this resurrection is explicitly affirmed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:50–57. He writes:

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The

sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The key phrase is Paul's declaration that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 50). Simply put, a corruptible and perishable nature can neither possess nor participate in an incorruptible and imperishable kingdom. Neither the living ("flesh and blood") nor the dead ("the perishable") can inherit the kingdom in their present state.

Paul, then, is insisting not merely on the necessity of regeneration but of resurrection, which is to say the ultimate glorification of the believer that will occur at the second coming of Christ (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–18). In a word, only those who have been consummately transformed in body and spirit by that resurrection/glorification brought to pass at the return of Christ shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Second Corinthians 5:1–5 is a crucial text in this regard. There, Paul likens physical death, the dissolution of the body, to the dismantling of a tent. But death should not lead to despair, for "we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (v. 1). Amid the many interpretations, the best option is to see here a reference to the *glorified, resurrection body*, that final and consummate embodiment in which we will live for eternity.⁹

The major objection to this view is Paul's use of the present tense, "we *have* a building from God" (not "we *shall* have"). This seems to imply that immediately upon death the believer receives his or her glorified body. But this would conflict with 1 Corinthians 15:22–28, 51–56; 1 Thessalonians 4–5, and perhaps 1 John 3:1–3, all of which indicate that glorification occurs at the second advent of Christ.

Furthermore, frequently in Scripture a future reality or possession is so certain and assured in the perspective of the author that it is appropriately spoken of in the present tense, as if it were already ours in experience. Thus, Paul's present tense "we have" most likely points to the *fact* of having as well as the *permanency* of having, but not the *immediacy* of having. It is the language of hope.

It has been argued that perhaps Paul uses the present tense because the passing of time between physical death and the final resurrection is not sensed or consciously experienced by the saints in heaven, and thus the reception of one's resurrection body *appears* to follow immediately

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upon death. But against this is the clear teaching of Scripture that the intermediate state is consciously experienced by those who have died (see 2 Cor. 5:6–8; Phil. 1:21–24; Rev. 6:9–11). If the deceased believer has “departed” to be “with Christ” (Phil. 1:23) and is therefore “with” Christ when he comes (1 Thess. 4:17), it would seem that some kind of conscious existence obtains between a person’s death and the general resurrection, which is why we refer to this time as the *intermediate* state.

Even though Paul appears to envision the possibility (probability?) of his own physical death, he still has hope that he will remain alive until Christ returns. Thus he writes:

For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. (2 Cor. 5:2–5).

Paul speaks here of his desire to be alive when Christ returns, for then he would not have to die physically and experience the separation of body and spirit, a condition he refers to as being “naked” (v. 3) or “unclothed” (v. 4). He much prefers, understandably, to be immediately joined with the Lord in his resurrected and glorified body.

In 2 Corinthians 5:2, which is repeated and expanded somewhat in verse 4, Paul mixes his metaphors by speaking of putting on or being clothed with a building. But it is more than simply putting on a garment: it is putting on one garment over another. The heavenly body, like an outer vesture or overcoat, is being put on over the earthly body with which the apostle is, as it were, presently clad. In this way the heavenly, glorified body not only covers but also absorbs and transforms the earthly one (see Phil. 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 15:53).

If he (or we) remains alive until Christ returns, he will be found by the Lord clothed with a body (the present, earthly one), and not in a disembodied state. To be without a body is to be “naked” (2 Cor. 5:3). Clearly, Paul envisaged a state of disembodiment between physical death and the general resurrection (cf. “unclothed” in v. 4).

But what assurances do we have from God that he will in fact supply us with a glorified and eternal body that is no longer subject to the

deterioration and disease we now experience? The simple answer is: the Holy Spirit! Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5:5 is a reminder "that 'the earnest of the Spirit' is not a mere static deposit, but the active vivifying operation of the Holy Spirit within the believer, assuring him that the same principle of power which effected the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead is also present and at work within him, preparing his mortal body for the consummation of his redemption in the glorification of his body."¹⁰

For the Christian, then, death is not to be feared. We know that whatever illness or debilitation we experience now, whatever degree of suffering or hardship we must face, there is promised to us by the Spirit a glorified, Christlike, transformed, and utterly eternal abode, a body in which there is no disease, no pain, no deprivation, and no decay. The best case scenario, Paul seems to say, is to be alive when Christ returns. That way, the believer would transition instantaneously from this "garment" (our current physical body) into that glorified "vesture" (that is and will forever be our resurrected body). Paul prefers not to get "undressed" but to put the garment of eternity over the garment of time in such a way that the former redeems and transforms the latter.

The apostle is also careful to link the resurrection and final glorification of believers to the reversal of the curse imposed on the natural creation:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Rom. 8:18–23)

The deliverance or redemption of the natural creation is thus inseparably connected with that of the children of God. It is when the sons of God are revealed (Rom. 8:19) that the creation itself will experience its

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redemption. That is why the creation is personified as waiting “with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”

The creation anxiously awaits the return of Christ and our glorification, for it is then that it too shall be set free from “its bondage to corruption” into that very “freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21). The creation waits for the revealing of the sons of God (v. 19) because it is *into* that very freedom that the creation too will be delivered (v. 21). In other words, the creation and the children of God are intimately intertwined both in present suffering and in future glory. As there was a solidarity in the fall, so also there will be a solidarity in the restoration.

The redemption we will experience at Christ’s return is the complete and final eradication of all sin, of every trace of the corruption in spirit and flesh that was ours prior to that moment. Paul’s point is that the natural creation awaits that day because, then, it will in like fashion be fully redeemed and delivered. If the creation should somehow fall short of complete deliverance from its present corruption, the finality and fullness of our redemption is seriously undermined.

Inasmuch as the natural realm will enter into “the freedom of the glory of the children of God,” any deficiency that it might experience must obtain in the case of Christians as well. To the extent that the created order is not wholly and perfectly redeemed, we are not wholly and perfectly redeemed. *Thus the redemption and glory of creation are coextensive and contemporaneous with ours.*

Judgment

The certainty of final judgment is also affirmed by the apostle in 2 Corinthians 5. Paul insists that “whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. 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 Cor. 5:9–10).

The broader context of 2 Corinthians 4–5 suggests that believers only are in view in this passage. Murray Harris has pointed out that wherever Paul speaks of the recompense, according to works, of all mankind (such as in Rom. 2:6), “there is found a description of two mutually exclusive categories of people (Rom. 2:7–10), not a delineation of two types of

action [such as ‘whether good or evil’ in 2 Cor. 5:10] which may be predicated of all people.”¹¹

Eternal destiny is not at issue in this judgment; eternal reward is (John 3:18; 5:24; Rom. 5:8–9; 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:10). This judgment is not designed to determine entrance into the kingdom of God but to determine blessing, status, and authority within it. Paul is unclear concerning when this judgment occurs. Is it at the moment of physical death, or perhaps during the intermediate state, or possibly not until the second coming of Christ? The most we can be sure of is that it happens after death (see Heb. 9:27).

Having said that, the evidence suggests that it happens at the second coming of Christ (see Matt. 16:27; Rev. 22:12), at the close of human history, most likely in conjunction with that larger assize that will include all unbelievers, known to students of the Bible as the great, white throne of judgment (see Rev. 20:11 ff.).

Paul clearly emphasizes the *individuality* (“each one”) of the final judgment. As important as it is to stress the corporate and communal nature of our life as the body of Christ, each person will be judged individually, no doubt, at least in part, concerning how faithful each person was to his or her corporate responsibilities. “So then each of us will give an account of *himself* to God” (Rom. 14:12).

As for the manner of this judgment, we do not merely “show up” but are laid bare before him. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:5, the Lord “will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” Murray Harris is right that “not merely an appearance or self-revelation, but, more significantly, a divine scrutiny and disclosure, is the necessary prelude to the receiving of appropriate recompense.”¹²

Is it not sobering to think that every random thought, every righteous impulse, every secret prayer, hidden deed, long-forgotten sin, or act of compassion will be brought into the open for us to acknowledge and for the Lord to judge? And all this, we are reminded, is without any “condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

Most Christians are by now familiar with the term used in 2 Corinthians 5:10 translated judgment “seat” (*bema*). The use of this word “would have been particularly evocative for Paul and the Corinthians

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since it was before Gallio's tribunal in Corinth that Paul had stood some four years previously (in AD 52) when the proconsul dismissed the charge that Paul had contravened Roman law (Acts 18:12–17). Archaeologists have identified this Corinthian bema which stands on the south side of the *agora*.”¹³

Christ is himself the judge, consistent with what we read in John 5:22 where he declared that “the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son.” The standard of judgment is “what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.” Reference to the “body” indicates that the judgment concerns what we do in this life, not what may or may not be done during the time of the intermediate state itself. We will receive from the Lord “what is due.”

In other words, and somewhat more literally, we will be judged “in accordance with” or perhaps even “in proportion to” deeds done. The deeds are themselves characterized as either “good” (those which “please” Christ, as in 2 Cor. 5:9) or “bad” (those which do not please him).

Finally, the result of the judgment is not explicitly stated but is certainly implied. All will “receive” whatever their deeds deserve. There is a reward or recompense involved. Paul is slightly more specific in 1 Corinthians 3:14–15. There he writes, “If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” The reward is not defined, and the likelihood is that the loss suffered is the reward that would have been given for obedience.

Jesus mentions a great reward in heaven but doesn't elaborate (Matt. 5:12). In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25; cf. Luke 19:12–27) he alludes to authority or dominion of some sort, but over whom or what? Paul says that “whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord” (Eph. 6:8). According to 1 Corinthians 4:5, following the judgment “each one will receive his commendation from God.” Both Romans 8:17–18 and 2 Corinthians 4:17 refer to a glory that is reserved for the saints in heaven.

And of course we should consider the many promises in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3, although it is difficult to know if they are bestowed now, during the intermediate state, or only subsequent to the second coming, and if they are granted in differing degrees

depending on service and obedience or are equally distributed among God's children (see Rev. 2:7, 10, 17, 23; 3:5, 12, 21; cf. also Matt. 18:4; 19:29; Luke 14:11; James 1:12).

Two closing comments are in order. First, our deeds do not determine our salvation but demonstrate it. They are not the root of our standing with God but the fruit of it, a standing already attained by faith alone in Christ alone. The visible evidence of an invisible faith is the good deeds that will be made known at the judgment seat of Christ.

Second, we must not be afraid that, with the exposure and evaluation of our deeds, regret and remorse will spoil the bliss of heaven. If there be tears of grief for opportunities squandered, or tears of shame for sins committed, the Lord will wipe them away (Rev. 20:4a). The ineffable joy of forgiving grace will swallow up all sorrow, and the beauty of Christ will blind us to anything other than the splendor of who he is and what he, by grace, has accomplished on our behalf.

Hell and Eternal Punishment

Perhaps the most explicit description of hell and eternal punishment is found in Revelation 14. There we read:

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (vv. 9–11)

This issue has become an evangelical battleground. Is the torment of the lost a conscious experience that never ends? Or is the punishment a form of annihilation in which, after a just season of suffering in perfect proportion to sins committed, the soul ceases to exist? Does the ascending smoke of their torment point to the unending conscious *experience* of suffering they endure? Or does it signify a lasting, irreversible *effect* of their punishment in which they are annihilated? Those who argue for the latter view contend that there will be no rest day or night from torment

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while it continues or *as long as it lasts*. But whether or not it lasts forever or eternally must be determined on other grounds.¹⁴

Whereas space does not allow interaction with arguments on both sides of this debate, suffice it to say that there is considerable biblical evidence to support the Confessional Statement's affirmation of eternal conscious punishment. For example, we must keep in mind that the word group that includes "destroy" and its synonyms is used in a variety of ways, some of which do not require or even imply the cessation of existence. Usage indicates that destruction can occur without extinction of being. And before we conclude that the "fire" of hell consumes and utterly "destroys" its object, leaving nothing, we must acknowledge that this is metaphor, and thus not press the terms to prove something about hell's duration they were never intended to communicate.

Hell in the New Testament is described as utter darkness and as a lake of fire. How do these two descriptions coexist if they are strictly literal? Thus, we must be cautious in drawing rigid doctrinal conclusions about the supposed "function" of fire in hell. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder about Matthew 18:8, which speaks of those who are thrown into the eternal fire. As D. A. Carson says, "One is surely entitled to ask why the fires should burn forever and the worms not die [cf. Mark 9:47–48] if their purpose comes to an end."¹⁵

We should also note that there are as many texts where *aiōn*, often rendered "age," means "eternal" as there are where it refers to a more limited period of time. This argument is indecisive on both sides of the debate. We must also be careful in making emotional appeals to what we, finite humans, consider just recompense for the enormity of our sins. Carson rightly asks whether the magnitude of our sin is established by our own status "or by the degree of offense against the sovereign, transcendent God."¹⁶ The essential thing, notes John Piper, "is that degrees of blameworthiness come not from how long you offend dignity, but from how high the dignity is that you offend."¹⁷ Our sin is deserving of infinite punishment because of the infinite glory of the One against whom it is perpetrated.

To suggest, as some do, that eternal suffering means that God does not achieve consummate victory over sin and evil, fails to realize that only sin that goes *unpunished* would indicate a lapse in justice and a

defeat of God's purpose. The ongoing existence of hell and its occupants would more readily reflect on the glory of God's holiness and his righteous opposition to evil than it would on any supposed cosmological dualism.

Perhaps the idea of endless punishing is less offensive when the idea of endless sinning is considered. If those in hell never cease to sin, why should they ever cease to suffer?¹⁸ If one should argue that people pay fully for their sins in hell and at some point cease to sin, why can't they then be brought into heaven (thereby turning hell into purgatory)? If their sins have *not* been fully paid for in hell, on what grounds does justice permit them to be annihilated?

Finally, one must explain Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 20:10–15. Regardless of what one thinks about the identity of the beast and false prophet, no evangelical denies that Satan is a being who both thinks and experiences feelings and sensations. Thus here is at least one such "person" who clearly suffers eternal conscious torment. "We may not feel as much sympathy for him as for fellow human beings, and we may cheerfully insist that he is more evil than any human being, but even so, it is hard to see how the arguments deployed against the notion of eternal conscious suffering of sinful human beings would be any less cogent against the devil."¹⁹

Heaven on Earth

The eschatological hope of the Christian is inescapably earthly in nature. God's ultimate aim in the redemption of his people has always included the restoration of the natural creation. As we noted above, the "kingdom of God" refers primarily to the reign or rule of God over his people. Thus to believe and receive the kingdom is to submit to the yoke of God's sovereignty. On the other hand, God's rule manifests itself and is realized in a specific historical and earthly realm. Therefore, we cannot speak meaningfully of the kingdom of God apart from the promise of the land originally given to the Patriarchs.²⁰

Some insist that the land was figurative in purpose, a prophetic type of heavenly or spiritual blessings which are either being fulfilled now by the church or will be fulfilled in the age to come. The earthly Canaan, therefore, was never designed to be literally possessed as an eternal

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inheritance but was to serve as a model of a future blessing, heavenly and spiritual in nature.

But, as Ladd so helpfully reminds us, “the biblical idea of redemption always includes the earth.”²¹ Many evangelicals envision the fulfillment of the earthly dimension of God’s kingdom promise in a one-thousand-year interregnum, subsequent to the second coming of Christ but before the inauguration of the eternal state (Rev. 20:1–10). This millennial age will serve as the time and place (at least initially) wherein the Old Testament promises of God’s earthly rule over his people will be fulfilled.

It is in this way that Christ’s kingdom might also be disclosed in history, as a testimony to his ultimate triumph over the powers of sin and darkness. Others believe that the Old Testament prophetic promise of God’s rule over his people in the land will be fulfilled in the new earth, which inaugurates the eternal state. According to this view, the Old Testament promise of a messianic reign among God’s people in the land will be literally fulfilled. It will be fulfilled, however, not on the present, unredeemed earth, but on the new earth described in Revelation 21–22.

The principal Old Testament text relating to the new heavens and new earth is found in Isaiah 65:17–25 (see also 66:22). It’s important to note that this text poses a problem for all eschatological views, whether premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial. The difficulty we face is found in verses 20 and 23. There we read that in the new heavens and new earth there shall not be “an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed” (v. 20). And in verse 23 it appears to suggest that people during that time will bear children. If Isaiah is describing conditions that obtain in the eternal state, and his reference to the new heavens and new earth would appear to indicate that such is the case, all Christians, and not those of only one particular eschatological perspective, must account for the less-than-consummate experience of God’s people.

We may find help in addressing this problem by taking note of one possible way of interpreting prophetic literature:

Prophecy is characteristically cast in terms of the limited understanding of the person to whom it was given. That is to say, the language of prophecy is conditioned by the historical and cultural setting in which

the prophet and the people found themselves. . . . [Thus] the future kingdom is beheld as an extension and glorification of the theocracy, the most common representation of which is its condition in the reigns of David and Solomon. The prospect for the future, accordingly, is portrayed in terms of *the ideal past*, in terms both familiar and pleasing to the contemporaries of the prophet. This phenomenon has been termed “recapitulation eschatology,” i.e., the future is depicted as a recapitulation or repetition of the past glory of the kingdom.²²

Garlington’s point is that Old Testament authors may, on occasion, speak of the future in terms, images, and concepts borrowed from the social and cultural world with which he and his contemporaries were familiar. Since he cannot fully grasp how his words find fulfillment in a distant time and altogether new world transformed by the coming of Christ, he clothes the eschatological purposes of God, including the glory of the new heaven and new earth, in the beliefs, fears, and hopes of those to whom they are originally delivered. Thus, when prophets speak about the future, they may choose to employ terms and realities that exist in their own past and present experience, such as the land, the law, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood.²³

It should also be noted that the fulfillment of such prophecies, cast in terms of those contemporary realities with which the original audience was conversant, would often go beyond and transcend them. There is often an element of escalation or intensification in the fulfillment of any particular promise.

Thus, one of the ways in which the original author of this prophecy might communicate the realistic future glory of the new heaven and new earth to people who were necessarily limited by the progress of revelation to that point in time was to portray it in the hyperbolic or exaggerated terms of *an ideal present*.²⁴ One can well imagine the impression upon the original audience to whom Isaiah wrote of an age in which a person dying at one hundred is thought of as an infant, an age in which the all too familiar anguish of childbirth is a thing of the past.

The New Testament expands greatly upon this theme of the new heavens and new earth as the focal point of God’s restoration of all things. This is most clearly seen first in Hebrews 11 and then in Revelation 21–22. In the former we are told that when Abraham finally arrived in the land of promise he only sojourned there, as a stranger and exile, “as

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in a foreign land” (Heb. 11:9, 13). Should one ask how he could be said to receive this land as an inheritance when he had no right of ownership, the text is quick with its answer: “For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (v. 10).

This is the city which God has prepared for them (Heb. 11:16), mentioned again in Hebrews 12:22 as the “city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” We read again in 13:14 that “here [that is, on this present earth] we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” This surely refers to the heavenly Jerusalem of Hebrews 12:22, the city that has foundations (Heb. 11:10).

Relevant here is Revelation 21, where we read that John “saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (vv. 9–11). The reason, then, why Abraham was a sojourner and exile in Canaan was that he viewed that earthly land to be a type of the heavenly and more substantial land/country. The focus of the Old Testament land promise was on land, to be sure, but on the heavenly land (or “country,” Heb. 11:16) of the new earth with its central feature, the New Jerusalem.

Thus Abraham, to whom the land of Canaan was originally promised, anticipated its consummate and everlasting fulfillment in the heavenly Jerusalem. Abraham is heir, not merely of Canaan, but of the world (Rom. 4:13). Indeed, according to Hebrews 11:9–10, it was Abraham’s expectation of permanent and perfect blessing in the heavenly city that enabled him to submit patiently to the inconvenience and disappointments during his pilgrimage in Canaan.

This is confirmed yet again in Hebrews 11:13–16. The patriarchs themselves “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (v. 13). They died without receiving the promise, having only seen it from afar. Their ultimate hope was not focused on any this-earthly-inheritance, but, as verse 16 indicates, on “a better country, that is, a heavenly one.”

The exalted life in the new heavens and new earth is unpacked with even more vivid imagery in Revelation 21–22. Space permits only a brief summation of the glories of our eternal destiny in the presence of God.

The relationship between this present earth and the new earth is one of both continuity and discontinuity, even as there is between our present, corruptible bodies and our future, incorruptible, and glorified

bodies. We will be in heaven the same, though transformed, people that we are now. Yet, the heaven and earth to come are also said to be “new” (*kainos*), a word which typically indicates newness of quality, not time.

One element of discontinuity is the absence of the sea in the new creation, which was typically regarded as symbolic of evil, chaos, and anti-kingdom powers with whom Yahweh must contend (see Job 26:7–13; Isa. 17:12,13; 27:1; 51:9–10; 57:20; Jer. 46:7–12; Rev. 17:8; 21:1). As Ladd has noted, in ancient times the sea “represented the realm of the dark, the mysterious, and the treacherous” (cf. Ps. 107:25–28; Ezek. 28:8; Dan. 7:3ff.).²⁵ This is John’s way of saying that in the new creation all such evil, corruption, unbelief, and darkness will be banished.

The fullness of God’s presence among his people necessarily demands the banishment of any and all forms of suffering associated with the old creation. Gone forever are the debilitating effects of sin (Rev. 21:3–4). Gone are the tears caused by grief and pain and moral failure (in fulfillment of Isa. 25:8). Gone is death, because its source, sin, will have been eradicated. Gone are mourning, crying, and pain. All such experiences are linked to the “first things” which have now “passed away.”

The New Jerusalem is said to have “the glory of God” (Rev. 21:11). Whereas in the Old Testament the physical temple was the place where God’s glory resided and was manifested, in the new creation God’s presence will abide in and with his people. The absence of “night” (Rev. 21:25b) points to the unhindered access to God’s radiant presence as well as the fact that there will be no darkness to dim the brilliance of divine splendor. Indeed, as Revelation 22:5 indicates, the absence of darkness is due to the continual illumination that God himself provides.

In Revelation 22:1 we find the first of several examples where John links the end of history with its beginning. In the consummation are features that characterized the beginning of time. It is not as though the end is a *reversal* to the beginning, “but the circumstances of the beginning are viewed as prophetic of the nature of God’s purpose in history. In all respects, however, the last things surpass the first in overwhelming measure, as we see in this paragraph.”²⁶ If Genesis 3 tells the story of paradise lost, Revelation 22 tells of paradise regained. Heaven (on earth) is but the glorious consummation of God’s original design for the garden of Eden.

And what will we do in heaven? We will serve God (Rev. 22:3). We will

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see God (v. 4a; see Ex. 33:20; Matt. 5:8; John 17:24; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 John 3:1–3). We will enjoy the depths of intimacy with him (Rev. 22:4b). We will experience the fascination of his presence (v. 5a; cf. Num. 6:24–26). We will reign forever and ever (Rev. 22:5b).

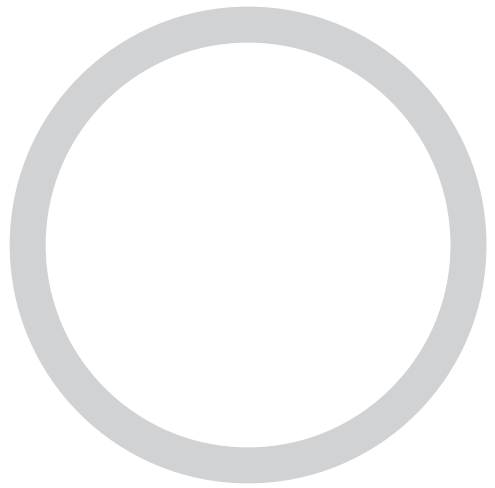
Conclusion

What Christians have traditionally referred to as “heaven” is, as we have seen, eternal life in the presence of God on the new earth. It is there, as the Confessional Statement makes clear, that “God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.” We can do no better than to conclude with the words of Jonathan Edwards:

If we can learn anything of the state of heaven from the Scripture, the love and joy that the saints have there, is exceeding great and vigorous; impressing the heart with the strongest and most lively sensation, of inexpressible sweetness, mightily moving, animating, and engaging them, making them like to a flame of fire. And if such love and joy be not affections, then the word “affection” is of no use in language. Will any say, that the saints in heaven, in beholding the face of their Father, and the glory of their Redeemer, and contemplating his wonderful works, and particularly his laying down his life for them, have their hearts nothing moved and affected, by all which they behold or consider?²⁷

Appendix

The Gospel Coalition Foundation Documents



The Gospel for All of Life: Preamble

We are a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We have become deeply concerned about some movements within traditional evangelicalism that seem to be diminishing the church's life and leading us away from our historic beliefs and practices. On the one hand, we are troubled by the idolatry of personal consumerism and the politicization of faith; on the other hand, we are distressed by the unchallenged acceptance of theological and moral relativism. These movements have led to the easy abandonment of both biblical truth and the transformed living mandated by our historic faith. We not only hear of these influences; we see their effects. We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

We believe that in many evangelical churches a deep and broad consensus exists regarding the truths of the gospel. Yet we often see the celebration of our union with Christ replaced by the age-old attractions of power and affluence, or by monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament. What replaces the gospel will never promote a mission-hearted faith anchored in enduring truth working itself out in unashamed discipleship eager to stand the tests of kingdom-calling and sacrifice. We desire to advance along the King's highway, always aiming to provide gospel advocacy, encouragement, and education so that current- and

next-generation church leaders are better equipped to fuel their ministries with principles and practices that glorify the Savior and do good to those for whom he shed his life's blood.

We want to generate a unified effort among all peoples—an effort that is zealous to honor Christ and multiply his disciples, joining in a true coalition for Jesus. Such a biblically grounded and united mission is the only enduring future for the church. This reality compels us to stand with others who are stirred by the conviction that the mercy of God in Jesus Christ is our only hope of eternal salvation. We desire to champion this gospel with clarity, compassion, courage, and joy—gladly linking hearts with fellow believers across denominational, ethnic, and class lines.

Our desire is to serve the church we love by inviting all our brothers and sisters to join us in an effort to renew the contemporary church in the ancient gospel of Christ so that we truly speak and live for him in a way that clearly communicates to our age. As pastors, we intend to do this in our churches through the ordinary means of his grace: prayer, the ministry of the Word, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the fellowship of the saints.

The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement

1. **The Triune God.** We believe in one God, eternally existing in three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who know, love, and glorify one another. This one true and living God is infinitely perfect both in his love and in his holiness. He is the Creator of all things, visible and invisible, and is therefore worthy to receive all glory and adoration. Immortal and eternal, he perfectly and exhaustively knows the end from the beginning, sustains and sovereignly rules over all things, and providentially brings about his eternal good purposes to redeem a people for himself and restore his fallen creation, to the praise of his glorious grace.
2. **Revelation.** God has graciously disclosed his existence and power in the created order, and has supremely revealed himself to fallen human beings in the person of his Son, the incarnate Word. Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in human words: we believe that God has inspired the words preserved in the Scriptures, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, which are both record and means of his saving work in the world. These writings alone constitute the verbally inspired Word of God, which is utterly authoritative and without error in the original writings, complete in its revelation of his will for salvation, sufficient for all that God requires us to believe and do, and final in its authority over ev-

ery domain of knowledge to which it speaks. We confess that both our finitude and our sinfulness preclude the possibility of knowing God's truth exhaustively, but we affirm that, enlightened by the Spirit of God, we can know God's revealed truth truly. The Bible is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it teaches; obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; and trusted, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. As God's people hear, believe, and do the Word, they are equipped as disciples of Christ and witnesses to the gospel.

3. **Creation of Humanity.** We believe that God created human beings, male and female, in his own image. Adam and Eve belonged to the created order that God himself declared to be very good, serving as God's agents to care for, manage, and govern creation, living in holy and devoted fellowship with their Maker. Men and women, equally made in the image of God, enjoy equal access to God by faith in Christ Jesus and are both called to move beyond passive self-indulgence to significant private and public engagement in family, church, and civic life. Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women, such that marriage ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and his church. In God's wise purposes, men and women are not simply interchangeable, but rather they complement each other in mutually enriching ways. God ordains that they assume distinctive roles which reflect the loving relationship between Christ and the church, the husband exercising headship in a way that displays the caring, sacrificial love of Christ, and the wife submitting to her husband in a way that models the love of the church for her Lord. In the ministry of the church, both men and women are encouraged to serve Christ and to be developed to their full potential in the manifold ministries of the people of God. The distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men is grounded in creation, fall, and redemption and must not be sidelined by appeals to cultural developments.
4. **The Fall.** We believe that Adam, made in the image of God, distorted that image and forfeited his original blessedness—for himself and all his progeny—by falling into sin through Satan's temptation. As a result, all human beings are alienated from God, corrupted in every aspect of their being (e.g., physically, mentally, volitionally, emotionally, spiritually) and condemned finally and irrevocably to death—apart from God's own gracious intervention. The supreme need of all human beings is to be reconciled to the God under whose just and holy wrath we stand; the only hope of all human beings is the undeserved love of this same God, who alone can rescue us and restore us to himself.
5. **The Plan of God.** We believe that from all eternity God determined in grace to save a great multitude of guilty sinners from every tribe and language and people and nation, and to this end foreknew them and chose them. We believe that God justifies and sanctifies those who by grace have faith in Jesus, and that he will one day glorify them—all to the praise of his glorious grace. In love God commands and implores all people to repent and believe, having set

his saving love on those he has chosen and having ordained Christ to be their Redeemer.

6. **The Gospel.** We believe that the gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ—God’s very wisdom. Utter folly to the world, even though it is the power of God to those who are being saved, this good news is christological, centering on the cross and resurrection: the gospel is not proclaimed if Christ is not proclaimed, and the authentic Christ has not been proclaimed if his death and resurrection are not central (the message is “Christ died for our sins [and] was raised”). This good news is biblical (his death and resurrection are according to the Scriptures), theological and salvific (Christ died for our sins, to reconcile us to God), historical (if the saving events did not happen, our faith is worthless, we are still in our sins, and we are to be pitied more than all others), apostolic (the message was entrusted to and transmitted by the apostles, who were witnesses of these saving events), and intensely personal (where it is received, believed, and held firmly, individual persons are saved).
7. **The Redemption of Christ.** We believe that, moved by love and in obedience to his Father, the eternal Son became human: the Word became flesh, fully God and fully human being, one Person in two natures. The man Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel, was conceived through the miraculous agency of the Holy Spirit, and was born of the virgin Mary. He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father, lived a sinless life, performed miraculous signs, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, arose bodily from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven. As the mediatorial King, he is seated at the right hand of God the Father, exercising in heaven and on earth all of God’s sovereignty, and is our High Priest and righteous Advocate. We believe that by his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute. He did this so that in him we might become the righteousness of God: on the cross he canceled sin, propitiated God, and, by bearing the full penalty of our sins, reconciled to God all those who believe. By his resurrection Christ Jesus was vindicated by his Father, broke the power of death and defeated Satan who once had power over it, and brought everlasting life to all his people; by his ascension he has been forever exalted as Lord and has prepared a place for us to be with him. We believe that salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved. Because God chose the lowly things of this world, the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are, no human being can ever boast before him—Christ Jesus has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.
8. **The Justification of Sinners.** We believe that Christ, by his obedience and death, fully discharged the debt of all those who are justified. By his sacrifice, he bore in our stead the punishment due us for our sins, making a proper, real, and full satisfaction to God’s justice on our behalf. By his perfect obedience he satisfied the just demands of God on our behalf, since by faith alone that per-

fect obedience is credited to all who trust in Christ alone for their acceptance with God. Inasmuch as Christ was given by the Father for us, and his obedience and punishment were accepted in place of our own, freely and not for anything in us, this justification is solely of free grace, in order that both the exact justice and the rich grace of God might be glorified in the justification of sinners. We believe that a zeal for personal and public obedience flows from this free justification.

9. **The Power of the Holy Spirit.** We believe that this salvation, attested in all Scripture and secured by Jesus Christ, is applied to his people by the Holy Spirit. Sent by the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit glorifies the Lord Jesus Christ, and, as the other Paraclete, is present with and in believers. He convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, and by his powerful and mysterious work regenerates spiritually dead sinners, awakening them to repentance and faith, and in him they are baptized into union with the Lord Jesus, such that they are justified before God by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. By the Spirit's agency, believers are renewed, sanctified, and adopted into God's family; they participate in the divine nature and receive his sovereignly distributed gifts. The Holy Spirit is himself the down payment of the promised inheritance, and in this age indwells, guides, instructs, equips, revives, and empowers believers for Christ-like living and service.
10. **The Kingdom of God.** We believe that those who have been saved by the grace of God through union with Christ by faith and through regeneration by the Holy Spirit enter the kingdom of God and delight in the blessings of the new covenant: the forgiveness of sins, the inward transformation that awakens a desire to glorify, trust, and obey God, and the prospect of the glory yet to be revealed. Good works constitute indispensable evidence of saving grace. Living as salt in a world that is decaying and light in a world that is dark, believers should neither withdraw into seclusion from the world, nor become indistinguishable from it: rather, we are to do good to the city, for all the glory and honor of the nations is to be offered up to the living God. Recognizing whose created order this is, and because we are citizens of God's kingdom, we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God. The kingdom of God, already present but not fully realized, is the exercise of God's sovereignty in the world toward the eventual redemption of all creation. The kingdom of God is an invasive power that plunders Satan's dark kingdom and regenerates and renovates through repentance and faith the lives of individuals rescued from that kingdom. It therefore inevitably establishes a new community of human life together under God.
11. **God's New People.** We believe that God's new covenant people have already come to the heavenly Jerusalem; they are already seated with Christ in the heavenlies. This universal church is manifest in local churches of which Christ is the only Head; thus each "local church" is, in fact, the church, the

household of God, the assembly of the living God, and the pillar and foundation of the truth. The church is the body of Christ, the apple of his eye, graven on his hands, and he has pledged himself to her forever. The church is distinguished by her gospel message, her sacred ordinances, her discipline, her great mission, and, above all, by her love for God, and by her members' love for one another and for the world. Crucially, this gospel we cherish has both personal and corporate dimensions, neither of which may properly be overlooked. Christ Jesus is our peace: he has not only brought about peace with God, but also peace between alienated peoples. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both Jew and Gentile to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. The church serves as a sign of God's future new world when its members live for the service of one another and their neighbors, rather than for self-focus. The church is the corporate dwelling place of God's Spirit, and the continuing witness to God in the world.

12. **Baptism and the Lord's Supper.** We believe that baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained by the Lord Jesus himself. The former is connected with entrance into the new covenant community, the latter with ongoing covenant renewal. Together they are simultaneously God's pledge to us, divinely ordained means of grace, our public vows of submission to the once crucified and now resurrected Christ, and anticipations of his return and of the consummation of all things.
13. **The Restoration of All Things.** We believe in the personal, glorious, and bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ with his holy angels, when he will exercise his role as final Judge, and his kingdom will be consummated. We believe in the bodily resurrection of both the just and the unjust—the unjust to judgment and eternal conscious punishment in hell, as our Lord himself taught, and the just to eternal blessedness in the presence of him who sits on the throne and of the Lamb, in the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness. On that day the church will be presented faultless before God by the obedience, suffering and triumph of Christ, all sin purged and its wretched effects forever banished. God will be all in all and his people will be enthralled by the immediacy of his ineffable holiness, and everything will be to the praise of his glorious grace.

Theological Vision for Ministry

I. How should we respond to the cultural crisis of truth? (The epistemological issue)

For several hundred years, since the dawning of the Enlightenment, it was widely agreed that truth—expressed in words that substantially correspond to reality—does indeed exist and can be known. Unaided human reason, it was thought, is able to know truth objectively. More recently, postmodernism has critiqued this

set of assumptions, contending that we are not in fact objective in our pursuit of knowledge, but rather interpret information through our personal experiences, self-interests, emotions, cultural prejudices, language limitations, and relational communities. The claim to objectivity is arrogant, postmodernism tells us, and inevitably leads to conflicts between communities with differing opinions as to where the truth lies. Such arrogance, they say explains, in part, many of the injustices and wars of the modern era. Yet postmodernism's response is dangerous in another way: its most strident voices insist that claims to objective truth be replaced by a more humbly "tolerant" and inclusively diverse subjective pluralism—a pluralism often mired in a swamp that cannot allow any firm ground for "the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Such a stance has no place for truth that corresponds to reality, but merely an array of subjectively shaped truths. How shall we respond to this cultural crisis of truth?

1. We affirm that truth is correspondence to reality. We believe the Holy Spirit who inspired the words of the apostles and prophets also indwells us so that we who have been made in the image of God can receive and understand the words of Scripture revealed by God, and grasp that Scripture's truths correspond to reality. The statements of Scripture are true, precisely because they are God's statements, and they correspond to reality even though our knowledge of those truths (and even our ability to verify them to others) is always necessarily incomplete. The Enlightenment belief in thoroughly objective knowledge made an idol out of unaided human reason. But to deny the possibility of purely objective knowledge does not mean the loss of truth that corresponds to objective reality, even if we can never know such truth without an element of subjectivity. See CS-(2).
2. We affirm that truth is conveyed by Scripture. We believe that Scripture is pervasively propositional and that all statements of Scripture are completely true and authoritative. But the truth of Scripture cannot be exhausted in a series of propositions. It exists in the genres of narrative, metaphor, and poetry which are not exhaustively distillable into doctrinal propositions, yet they convey God's will and mind to us so as to change us into his likeness.
3. We affirm that truth is correspondence of life to God. Truth is not only a theoretical correspondence but also a covenantal relationship. The biblical revelation is not just to be known, but to be lived (Deut 29:29). The purpose of the Bible is to produce wisdom in us—a life wholly submitted to God's reality. Truth, then, is correspondence between our entire lives and God's heart, words and actions, through the mediation of the Word and Spirit. To eliminate the propositional nature of biblical truth seriously weakens our ability to hold, defend, and explain the gospel. But to speak of truth only as propositions weakens our appreciation of the incarnate Son as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the communicative

power of narrative and story, and the importance of truth as living truly in correspondence to God.

4. How this vision of truth shapes us.
 1. We adopt a “chastened” correspondence-theory of truth that is less triumphalistic than that of some in the older evangelicalism. But we also reject a view of truth that sees truth as nothing more than the internally coherent language of a particular faith-community. So we maintain, with what we hope is appropriate humility, the principle of *sola Scriptura*.
 2. Though truth is propositional, it is not only something to be believed, but also to be received in worship and practiced in wisdom. This balance shapes our understanding of discipleship and preaching. We want to encourage a passion for sound doctrine, but we know that Christian growth is not simply cognitive information transfer. Christian growth occurs only when the whole life is shaped by Christian practices in community—including prayer, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, fellowship, and the public ministry of the Word.
 3. Our theoretical knowledge of God’s truth is only partial even when accurate, but we nevertheless can have certainty that what the Word tells us is true (Luke 1:4). It is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we receive the words of the gospel in full assurance and conviction (1 Thess 1:5).

II. How should we read the Bible? (The hermeneutical issue)

1. Reading “along” the whole Bible. To read along the whole Bible is to discern the single basic plot-line of the Bible as God’s story of redemption (e.g., Luke 24:44) as well as the themes of the Bible (e.g., covenant, kingship, temple) that run through every stage of history and every part of the canon, climaxing in Jesus Christ. In this perspective, the gospel appears as creation, fall, redemption, restoration. It brings out the purpose of salvation, namely, a renewed creation. As we confess in CS–(1), [God] providentially brings about his eternal good purposes to redeem a people for himself and restore his fallen creation, to the praise of his glorious grace.
2. Reading “across” the whole Bible. To read across the whole Bible is to collect its declarations, summons, promises, and truth-claims into categories of thought (e.g., theology, Christology, eschatology) and arrive at a coherent understanding of what it teaches summarily (e.g., Luke 24:46–47). In this perspective, the gospel appears as God, sin, Christ, faith. It brings out the means of salvation, namely the substitutionary work of Christ and our responsibility to embrace it by faith. As we confess in CS–

(7), Jesus Christ acted as our representative and substitute, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

3. How this reading of the Bible shapes us.

1. Many today (but not all) who major in the first of these two ways of reading the Bible—that is, reading along the whole Bible—dwell on the more corporate aspects of sin and salvation. The cross is seen mainly as an example of sacrificial service and a defeat of worldly powers rather than substitution and propitiation for our sins. Ironically, this approach can be very legalistic. Instead of calling people to individual conversion through a message of grace, people are called to join the Christian community and kingdom program of what God is doing to liberate the world. The emphasis is on Christianity as a way of life to the loss of a blood-bought status in Christ received through personal faith. In this imbalance there is little emphasis on vigorous evangelism and apologetics, on expository preaching, and on the marks and importance of conversion/the new birth.
2. On the other hand, the older evangelicalism (though not all of it) tended to read across the Bible. As a result it was more individualistic, centering almost completely on personal conversion and safe passage to heaven. Also, its preaching, though expository, was sometimes moralistic and did not emphasize how all biblical themes climax in Christ and his work. In this imbalance there is little or no emphasis on the importance of the work of justice and mercy for the poor and the oppressed, and on cultural production that glorifies God in the arts, business, etc.
3. We do not believe that in best practice these two ways of reading the Bible are at all contradictory, even though today, many pit them against each other. We believe that on the contrary the two, at their best, are integral for grasping the meaning of the biblical gospel. The gospel is the declaration that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has come to reconcile individuals by his grace and renew the whole world by and for his glory.

III. How should we relate to the culture around us?

(The contextualization issue)

1. By being a counter-culture. We want to be a church that not only gives support to individual Christians in their personal walks with God, but one that also shapes them into the alternative human society God creates by his Word and Spirit. (See below, point 5c.)
2. For the common good. It is not enough that the church should counter the values of the dominant culture. We must be a counter-culture for

the common good. We want to be radically distinct from the culture around us and yet, out of that distinct identity, we should sacrificially serve neighbors and even enemies, working for the flourishing of people, both here and now, and in eternity. We therefore do not see our corporate worship services as the primary connecting point with those outside. Rather, we expect to meet our neighbors as we work for their peace, security, and well-being, loving them in word and deed. If we do this we will be “salt” and “light” in the world (sustaining and improving living conditions, showing the world the glory of God by our patterns of living; Matt 5:13–16). As the Jewish exiles were called to love and work for the shalom of Babylon (Jer 29:7), Christians too are God’s people “in exile” (1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1). The citizens of God’s city should be the best possible citizens of their earthly city (Jer 29:4–7). We are neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic about our cultural influence, for we know that, as we walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents, we will receive persecution even while having social impact (1 Peter 2:12).

How this relationship to culture shapes us.

1. We believe that every expression of Christianity is necessarily and rightly contextualized, to some degree, to particular human culture; there is no such thing as a universal a-historical expression of Christianity. But we never want to be so affected by our culture that we compromise gospel truths. How then do we keep our balance?
2. The answer is that we cannot “contextualize” the gospel in the abstract, as a thought experiment. If a church seeks to be a counter-culture for people’s temporal and eternal good, it will guard itself against both the legalism that can accompany undue cultural withdrawal and the compromise that comes with over-adaptation. If we seek service rather than power, we may have significant cultural impact. But if we seek direct power and social control, we will, ironically, be assimilated into the very idolatries of wealth, status, and power we seek to change.
3. The gospel itself holds the key to appropriate contextualization. If we over-contextualize, it suggests that we want too much the approval of the receiving culture. This betrays a lack of confidence in the gospel. If we under-contextualize, it suggests that we want the trappings of our own sub-culture too much. This betrays a lack of gospel humility and a lack of love for our neighbor.

IV. In what ways is the gospel unique?

This gospel fills Christians with humility and hope, meekness and boldness, in a unique way. The biblical gospel differs markedly from traditional religions as

well as from secularism. Religions operate on the principle: “I obey, therefore I am accepted,” but the gospel principle is: “I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey.” So the gospel differs from both irreligion and religion. You can seek to be your own “lord and savior” by breaking the law of God, but you can also do so by keeping the law in order to earn your salvation.

Irreligion and secularism tend to inflate self-encouraging, uncritical, “self-esteem”; religion and moralism crush people under guilt from ethical standards that are impossible to maintain. The gospel, however, humbles and affirms us at the same time, since, in Christ, each of us is simultaneously just, and a sinner still. At the same time, we are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared believe, yet we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope.

Secularism tends to make people selfish and individualistic. Religion and morality in general tend to make people tribal and self-righteous toward other groups (since their salvation has, they think, been earned by their achievement). But the gospel of grace, centered on a man dying for us while we were his enemies, removes self-righteousness and selfishness and turns its members to serve others both for the temporal flourishing of all people, especially the poor, and for their salvation. It moves us to serve others irrespective of their merits, just as Christ served us (Mark 10:45). Secularism and religion conform people to behavioral norms through fear (of consequences) and pride (a desire for self-aggrandizement). The gospel moves people to holiness and service out of grateful joy for grace, and out of love of the glory of God for who he is in himself.

V. What is gospel-centered ministry?

It is characterized by:

1. Empowered corporate worship.

The gospel changes our relationship with God from one of hostility or slavish compliance to one of intimacy and joy. The core dynamic of gospel-centered ministry is therefore worship and fervent prayer. In corporate worship God’s people receive a special life-transforming sight of the worth and beauty of God, and then give back to God suitable expressions of his worth. At the heart of corporate worship is the ministry of the Word. Preaching should be expository (explaining the text of Scripture) and Christ-centered (expounding all biblical themes as climaxing in Christ and his work of salvation). Its ultimate goal, however, is not simply to teach but to lead the hearers to worship, individual and corporate, that strengthens their inner being to do the will of God.

2. Evangelistic effectiveness.

Because the gospel (unlike religious moralism) produces people who do not disdain those who disagree with them, a truly gospel-centered church should be filled with members who winsomely address people’s hopes and aspirations with Christ and his saving work. We have a vision for a church

that sees conversions of rich and poor, highly educated and less educated, men and women, old and young, married and single, and all races. We hope to draw highly secular and postmodern people, as well as reaching religious and traditional people. Because of the attractiveness of its community and the humility of its people, a gospel-centered church should find people in its midst who are exploring and trying to understand Christianity. It must welcome them in hundreds of ways. It will do little to make them “comfortable” but will do much to make its message understandable. In addition to all this, gospel-centered churches will have a bias toward church planting as one of the most effective means of evangelism there is.

3. Counter-cultural community.

Because the gospel removes both fear and pride, people should get along inside the church who could never get along outside. Because it points us to a man who died for his enemies, the gospel creates relationships of service rather than of selfishness. Because the gospel calls us to holiness, the people of God live in loving bonds of mutual accountability and discipline. Thus the gospel creates a human community radically different from any society around it. Regarding sex, the church should avoid both the secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of it. It is a community which so loves and cares practically for its members that biblical chastity makes sense. It teaches its members to conform their bodily being to the shape of the gospel—abstinence outside of heterosexual marriage and fidelity and joy within. Regarding the family, the church should affirm the goodness of marriage between a man and a woman, calling them to serve God by reflecting his covenant love in life-long loyalty, and by teaching his ways to their children. But it also affirms the goodness of serving Christ as singles, whether for a time or for a life. The church should surround all persons suffering from the fallenness of our human sexuality with a compassionate community and family. Regarding money, the church's members should engage in radical economic sharing with one another—so “there are no needy among them” (Acts 4:34). Such sharing also promotes a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the oppressed, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak. Regarding power, it is visibly committed to power-sharing and relationship-building among races, classes, and generations that are alienated outside of the Body of Christ. The practical evidence of this is that our local churches increasingly welcome and embrace people of all races and cultures. Each church should seek to reflect the diversity of its local geographical community, both in the congregation at large and in its leadership.

4. The integration of faith and work.

The good news of the Bible is not only individual forgiveness but the renewal of the whole creation. God put humanity in the garden to cultivate

the material world for his own glory and for the flourishing of nature and the human community. The Spirit of God not only converts individuals (e.g., John 16:8) but also renews and cultivates the face of the earth (e.g., Gen 1:2; Psalm 104:30). Therefore Christians glorify God not only through the ministry of the Word, but also through their vocations of agriculture, art, business, government, scholarship—all for God’s glory and the furtherance of the public good. Too many Christians have learned to seal off their faith-beliefs from the way they work in their vocation. The gospel is seen as a means of finding individual peace and not as the foundation of a worldview—a comprehensive interpretation of reality affecting all that we do. But we have a vision for a church that equips its people to think out the implications of the gospel on how we do carpentry, plumbing, data-entry, nursing, art, business, government, journalism, entertainment, and scholarship. Such a church will not only support Christians’ engagement with culture, but will also help them work with distinctiveness, excellence, and accountability in their trades and professions. Developing humane yet creative and excellent business environments out of our understanding of the gospel is part of the work of bringing a measure of healing to God’s creation in the power of the Spirit. Bringing Christian joy, hope, and truth to embodiment in the arts is also part of this work. We do all of this because the gospel of God leads us to it, even while we recognize that the ultimate restoration of all things awaits the personal and bodily return of our Lord Jesus Christ (CS-[13]).

5. **The doing of justice and mercy.**

God created both soul and body, and the resurrection of Jesus shows that he is going to redeem both the spiritual and the material. Therefore God is concerned not only for the salvation of souls but also for the relief of poverty, hunger, and injustice. The gospel opens our eyes to the fact that all our wealth (even wealth for which we worked hard) is ultimately an unmerited gift from God. Therefore the person who does not generously give away his or her wealth to others is not merely lacking in compassion, but is unjust. Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, and comes to wealth through giving all away. Those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost. We cannot look at the poor and the oppressed and callously call them to pull themselves out of their own difficulty. Jesus did not treat us that way. The gospel replaces superiority toward the poor with mercy and compassion. Christian churches must work for justice and peace in their neighborhoods through service even as they call individuals to conversion and the new birth. We must work for the eternal and common good and show our neighbors we love them sacrificially whether they believe as we do or not. Indifference to the poor and disadvantaged means there has not been a true grasp of our salvation by sheer grace.

Conclusion

The ministry we have outlined is relatively rare. There are many seeker-driven churches that help many people find Christ. There are many churches seeking to engage the culture through political activism. There is a fast-growing charismatic movement with emphasis on glorious, passionate, corporate worship. There are many congregations with strong concern for doctrinal rigor and purity and who work very hard to keep themselves separate from the world. There are many churches with a radical commitment to the poor and marginalized.

We do not, however, see enough individual churches that embody the full, integrative gospel balance we have outlined here. And while, in God's grace, there is an encouraging number of bright spots in the church, we see no broad movement yet of this gospel-centered ministry. We believe such a balance will produce churches with winsome and theologically substantial preaching, dynamic evangelism and apologetics, and church growth and church planting. They will emphasize repentance, personal renewal, and holiness of life. At the same time, and in the same congregations, there will be engagement with the social structures of ordinary people, and cultural engagement with art, business, scholarship, and government. There will be calls for radical Christian community in which all members share wealth and resources and make room for the poor and the marginalized. These priorities will all be combined and will mutually strengthen one another in each local church.

What could lead to a growing movement of gospel-centered churches? The ultimate answer is that God must, for his own glory, send revival in response to the fervent, extraordinary, prevailing prayer of his people. But we believe there are also penultimate steps to take. There is great hope if we can unite on the nature of truth, how best to read the Bible, on our relationship to culture, on the content of the gospel, and on the nature of gospel-centered ministry. We believe that such commitments will drive us afresh toward Scripture, toward the Christ of Scripture, toward the gospel of Christ, and we will begin to grow in our ability, by God's grace, as churches, to "act in line with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14). We are ashamed of our sins and failures, grateful beyond measure for forgiveness, and eager to see afresh the glory of God and embody conformity to his Son.

Notes

Chapter 1: Gospel-Centered Ministry

1. See D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 61–64.
2. Cf. Tim Keller, “The Gospel and the Poor,” *Themelios* 33:3 (2008): 8–22 (available at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/publications>).
3. Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity: or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, revised and corrected by Edward Hickman (1834; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:164.
4. See esp. Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity,” which lays out two “reasons” for the work. The first is “the general state and nature of mankind. . . . [M]en are made in the image of God, and on this account are worthy of our love. . . . [W]e are made to subsist by society and union with another. God hath made us with such a nature, that we cannot subsist without the help one of another” (2:164). Edwards gives us the more intellectual grounding of creation theology: all human beings are made in the image of God and have worth; the creation is good; humans are built for *shalom*, for interdependence. But then Edwards lays out a second reason for doing justice: we have been the recipients of the blood of Christ who though “rich” became poor so that through his poverty we might become rich. Edwards uses the gospel to get at his readers’ “affections”: “What a poor business it will be, that those who hope to share these benefits, yet cannot give something for the relief of a poor neighbor without grudging! . . . How unsuitable it is for us, who live only by kindness to be unkind! What would have become of us, if Christ had been so saving of his blood, and loth to bestow it, as many men are of their money or goods? or if he had been as ready to excuse himself from dying for us, as men commonly are to excuse themselves from charity to their neighbour?” (2:165). One could argue that this is heaping guilt on the readers, but Edwards is not saying, “Because you don’t help the poor, God will reject you,” but, “Because Jesus was rejected in your place so that God now accepts you, how can you reject these folks?” It is, as Stephen Charnock would say, making people “miserable by mercy,” using joy and love to create humble conviction and change.
5. James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
6. See D. A. Carson, “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 89–104.

Chapter 2: Can We Know the Truth?

1. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 96–102.
2. *Ibid.*, 99.
3. *Ibid.*, 100.
4. The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®).
6. The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.
7. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 41.

8. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, Collected Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, 5 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 1:110, 178.
9. John Calvin, cited in J. I. Packer, “Calvin the Theologian,” in *John Calvin: A Collection of Essays*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 162.
10. K. Scott Oliphint, “*Non Sola Ratione*: Three Presbyterians and the Postmodern Mind,” in *The Practical Calvinist: Essays in Honor of Claire Davis*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2002), 382.
11. K. Scott Oliphint, “The Old-New Reformed Epistemology,” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 210.
12. *Ibid.*, 211.
13. The Gospel Coalition Theological Vision for Ministry.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Stan Telchin, *Betrayed!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen Books, 1981), 11, 22.

Chapter 3: The Gospel and Scripture: How to Read the Bible

1. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®).
2. From his sermon entitled “How We May Read the Scriptures with Most Spiritual Profit,” as quoted in Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 53.
3. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 275.

Chapter 4: Creation

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®).
2. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1991), 1.

Chapter 5: Sin and the Fall

1. Matthew White, “Deaths by Mass Unpleasantness: Estimated Totals for the Entire 20th Century,” <http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat8.htm>.
2. Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 433–34.
3. Quoted in Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 61.
4. Quoted in Harold G. Coward, *The Perfectibility of Human Nature in Eastern and Western Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 83.
5. Jonathan Edwards, *The Complete Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth, repr. 1995), 1:145.
6. Quoted in Blocher, *Original Sin*, 83–84.
7. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 221.
8. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®).
9. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth, 1978), 2:69.
10. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 3:64–65.
11. See Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), 436–39.

12. The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.
13. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 229.
14. R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 323.
15. *Ibid.*, 313, 324.
16. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 248.
17. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Plight of Man and the Power of God* (Ada, MI: Baker, 1982), 57.

Chapter 6: The Plan

1. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.12.3 (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iv.xiii.html>).
3. Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 60.
4. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (repr., Chicago: Moody, 2010), 58–59.
5. Owen’s original wording is cited by Ryle, *Holiness*, 76–77.

Chapter 7: What Is the Gospel?

1. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.
2. This portion of the story relates to the themes of “Creation of Humanity,” “The Fall,” “The Plan of God,” “The Redemption of Christ,” and “The Justification of Sinners” in The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.
3. This portion of the story relates to the themes of “The Power of the Holy Spirit,” “The Kingdom of God,” “God’s New People,” “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper [i.e., means of grace],” and “The Restoration of All Things” in The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.
4. “How Tedious and Tasteless the Hour,” John Newton (1779).
5. This portion of the story relates to the themes of “How should we relate to the culture around us?” and “What is gospel-centered ministry?” in The Gospel Coalition Theological Vision for Ministry.

Chapter 8: Christ’s Redemption

1. Here and throughout this chapter are excerpts from The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement, which has been reproduced in full in the appendix of this volume.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.
3. Frank Houghton, “Thou Who Wast Rich” (1894–1972).
4. Thomas Kelly, “Look, Ye Saints! The Sight Is Glorious” (1809).

Chapter 9: Justification

1. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.
2. Donald Smarto, *Pursued: A True Story of Crime, Faith, and Family* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 105.
3. *Ibid.*, 105–6.
4. *Ibid.*, 119–20.
5. James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (1867; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1955), 222.

6. Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 251.
7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics 20–21, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1.
8. Thomas Cranmer, “Sermon on Salvation,” in *First Book of Homilies* (1547; repr. London: SPCK, 1914), 25–26.
9. Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1959), 705, 715.
10. *Ibid.*, 704.
11. Morris, *Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 260.
12. Thomas Cranmer, quoted in Edmund P. Clowney, “The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith,” in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1992), 17.
13. Thomas Chalmers, quoted in Donald Grey Barnhouse, *The Invisible War* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1965), 116.
14. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 190.
15. *Ibid.*, 190.
16. *Ibid.*, 202.
17. Smarto, *Pursued*, 122.
18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.10.
19. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 178.
20. Pieter W. Van Der Horst, “Jewish Funerary Inscriptions,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 18:5 (1992): 55.
21. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther’s Works, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1963), 26:126.
22. Martin Luther, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: An Expositional Commentary*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 2:91–92.
23. “Justification,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 646.
24. J. C. Ryle, *Justified!*, Home Truths, Second Series (London: S. W. Partridge, 1854–71), 12.
25. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2.
26. John Calvin, “Antidote to the Canons of the Council of Trent,” in *Tracts and Treatises in Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1851; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958), 3:152.
27. William Cowper, quoted in James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 1:372.

Chapter 10: The Holy Spirit

1. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 21.
2. This list is culled from Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 60–61.
3. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®).
4. Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, 37.
5. While the Bible clearly teaches that the Spirit was sent by both the Father and the Son, it is less clear whether the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son. According to the earliest version of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 389), the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” The phrase “and the Son” (*filioque*) was famously added at the Council of Toledo in AD 589, leading to a schism between the Eastern and Western churches.

The controversy that ensued was part political, part theological, and part misunderstanding. The Western tradition fits well with the biblical emphasis on the Spirit's work to remake us in the image of Christ and safeguards against notions of salvation that put the Spirit's work at the center apart from Christ. But those defending *filioque* (as I would) must still listen carefully to Eastern concerns. See Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 201–20.

6. See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 534–39.

7. Jonathan Edwards, “The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God,” in *Jonathan Edwards on Revival* (1741; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995), 121.

8. See John Piper, *Finally Alive* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 30–31.

9. *Ibid.*, 39–42.

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.1.1.

11. *Ibid.*

12. John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 161.

13. According to Ferguson, *Holy Spirit*, 100.

14. John Stott, *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 43.

15. J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 57.

16. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1943; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1996), 178.

17. See Graham Cole, *Engaging with the Holy Spirit: Real Questions, Practical Answers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 49, 81, 97.

18. See Rom. 1:11; 5:15–16; 6:23; 11:29; 2 Cor. 1:11; Heb. 2:4.

19. On this point, charismatics and noncharismatics are in agreement. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1016; Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), 47.

20. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 120.

Chapter 11: The Kingdom of God

1. Don Cupitt, “Post-Christianity,” in *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World, ed. Paul Heelas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 218.

2. Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 2–3.

3. Richard J. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2002), 50–51.

4. *Ibid.*, 68.

5. John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980), 196ff.

6. The primary definition of both the Hebrew word *malkuth* and the Greek word *basileia* describes the rank, authority, and sovereign rule exercised by a king. The kingdom may make reference to the realm, sphere, place, or people, but these are secondary definition entries to that of a sovereign kingly rule (see Pss. 103:19; 145:11, 13; Dan. 2:37).

7. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.

8. The Gospel Coalition Confessional Statement.

9. Graeme Goldsworthy, “The Kingdom of God and the Old Testament,” <http://www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XXII/22-4.htm>.

10. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 12.
11. Richard Pratt, "What Is the Kingdom of God?" <http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/th/TH.h.Pratt.kingdom.of.god.html>.
12. Goldsworthy, "Kingdom of God and the Old Testament."
13. George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 19.
14. Pratt, "What Is the Kingdom of God?"
15. Ibid.
16. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 20.
17. John Piper, "Book Review of *The Kingdom of God* by John Bright," http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByTopic/30/2687_Book_Review_of_The_Kingdom_of_God_by_John_Bright/.
18. George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 15.
19. Tim Keller, "Preaching the Gospel," *PT 123 Gospel Communication* (Spring 2003): 58–59.
20. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 35.
21. Piper, "Book Review."
22. Craig Koester, "The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament," *CBQMS*, 22 (1989): 102.
23. Ibid., 102. John 1:51 ("You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man").
24. Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 51.
25. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 182.
26. Piper, "Book Review."
27. Richard J. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, Didsbury Lectures, 1996 (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), viii, 35.
28. Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*, 17.
29. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 160.
30. Tim Keller, "A Gospel for the More Secular," <http://redeemer.com/resources>, and especially his *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).
31. Tim Keller, John 12 sermon, www.redeemer.com/sermons.
32. Confessional Statement: "Good works constitute indispensable evidence of saving grace . . . we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God. It therefore inevitably establishes a new community of human life together under God."
33. Ibid.: "We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, doing good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of God."
34. Tim Keller, "Preaching the Gospel," 33–34.
35. The Gospel Coalition Theological Vision for Ministry.
36. Schwartz, *Paradox of Choice*, 215–17.
37. Timothy Keller, "Preaching in a Postmodern City," (unpublished version), 21.
38. Ibid.

Chapter 12: The Church: God's New People

1. This chapter represents an exposition of the eleventh point, "God's New People," of the Foundation Documents of The Gospel Coalition.

2. All Scripture quotations in this chapter are the author's translation.
3. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 467.
4. Timothy Keller, *Gospel Christianity* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2003), 22.
5. Cornelius Plantinga, as quoted by Keller in *Gospel Christianity*, 16.
6. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 44.
7. Quoted in Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years 1899–1939* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 141–42.
8. C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, vol. 2: The Full Harvest* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 246.
9. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 344.
10. Dionysius, quoted by Eusebius in *Eusebius: The History of the Church*, trans. G. A. Williamson (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1965), 7.22.
11. Tertullian, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), *Apology* 39.
12. C. H. Spurgeon, *The New Park Street Pulpit* (Pasadena, CA: Pilgrim, 1855), 1:208–9.

Chapter 13: Baptism and the Lord's Supper

1. D. Marion Clark, "Baptism: Joyful Sign of the Gospel," in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 171.
2. James V. Brownson, *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 24–25.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this chapter are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.
4. Clark, "Baptism," 179.
5. Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 138.
6. Obviously, Presbyterian paedobaptists do not draw the same conclusion from Romans 6 as to the mode of baptism (i.e., going down to "the watery grave") that credobaptists do, as explained below.
7. Clark, "Baptism," 177.
8. Of the writing and reading of books on baptism there is (it seems) no end. But here are a few of the very best credo- and paedobaptist presentations of the respective arguments that look at both Scripture and Christian history. (1) *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2006); an impressive set of essays from noted credobaptist scholars. (2) *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009). Professor Wright was my *Doktorvater* at the University of Edinburgh, and though a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) elder, he was a convinced credobaptist and a formidable student of the history of infant baptism. This book has strong credo and paedo presentations, as well as a Bunyan-style compromise view. (3) George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962); an exhaustive, scholarly study that argues the believers-only baptism view. (4) Geoffrey Bromiley, *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979). Bromiley was a noted historical theologian, and though small and meant for a popular audience, this little book is an able presentation of the paedobaptist view. (5) Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978). A critique of infant baptism from a covenantal believers baptism position. (6) *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg

Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003); a collection of essays arguing the paedobaptist view ably. (7) Rowland Ward, *Baptism in Scripture and History* (Melbourne: New Melbourne Press, 1991); a brief, but helpful presentation of the issues from a paedobaptist perspective that focuses on mode. (8) Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM, 1960); a survey of the Patristic evidence, asserting a paedobaptist interpretation of the material. (9) Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); a credobaptist rejoinder to Jeremias by a noted scholar. (10) Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism: A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland* (London: SCM, 1963). Jeremias responds to Aland, still advocating a paedobaptist interpretation of the Patristic data. (11) Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). A noted scholar of Patristics, out of the Campbellite tradition, Ferguson presents a massive survey of the evidence from the church Fathers. He concludes, mode: immersion; purpose: forgiveness and regeneration (at least from Tertullian on). Needless to say, both credobaptist and paedobaptist members of The Gospel Coalition would draw different conclusions from the evidence, but Ferguson's work is important.

9. James Orr, "Baptismal Regeneration," in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), 1:397.

10. Stephen Charnock, *The Doctrine of Regeneration* (repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 99–100.

11. Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 167.

12. John Calvin, *Treatises on the Sacraments: Catechism of the Church of Geneva, Forms of Prayer, and Confessions of Faith*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2002), 173.

13. Richard D. Phillips, "The Lord's Supper: An Overview," in *Give Praise to God*, 197.

14. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1960), 2:1362 (§4.17.2).

15. Phillips, "The Lord's Supper," 198–99.

16. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1370 (§4.17.10).

17. For a fuller treatment of these passages, including a discussion of the often illegitimately appealed to John 6, see J. Ligon Duncan III, "True Communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, vol. 3 (Ross-shire: Mentor), 429–75, esp. 450–71.

18. Donald Macleod puts it forcefully: "The question of the Lord's presence in the Sacrament is not raised by the New Testament material itself." *Priorities for the Church* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 122.

Chapter 14: The Restoration of All Things

1. Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®).

2. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 204.

3. *Ibid.*, 223.

4. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 139; emphasis in original.

5. *Ibid.*, 151.

6. *Ibid.*, 165.

7. *Ibid.*, 227–29.

8. George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 131–32, emphasis added.

9. There are two reasons for this. First, the “building” or “house” in v. 1b stands in a parallel relationship with “home” in v. 1a. Since the latter refers to our earthly, unglorified body, it seems reasonable to conclude that the former refers to our heavenly, glorified body. Secondly, the description in v. 1b (“not made with hands,” “eternal,” and “in the heavens”) is more suitable to the glorified body (see esp. 1 Cor. 15:35–49). Paul’s point would be that our heavenly embodiment is indestructible, not susceptible to decay or corruption or dissolution.

10. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 174.

11. Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 406.

12. *Ibid.*, 405.

13. *Ibid.*, 406.

14. A brief but exceptionally helpful treatment of this issue is provided by D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 515–36.

15. *Ibid.*, 525.

16. *Ibid.*, 534.

17. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed., rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 122.

18. See Rev. 22:10–11. On this latter text Carson comments: “If the holy and those who do right continue to be holy and to do right, *in anticipation of the perfect holiness and rightness to be lived and practiced throughout all eternity*, should we not also conclude that the vile continue in their vileness *in anticipation of the vileness they will live and practice throughout all eternity?*” (*Gagging of God*, 533); emphasis in original.

19. *Ibid.*, 527.

20. See the promise as given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:7; 17:8), and in turn to Isaac (Gen. 26:1–5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13–14; 35:12), and Moses (Ex. 6:4, 8; 13:5–11; 32:13; 33:1; Num. 10:29; cf. Num. 11:12; 14:23; 32:11; Deut. 12:8–11).

21. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, 59. In this regard, see esp. Matt. 5:5 and Rev. 5:10.

22. Donald Garlington, “Reigning with Christ: Revelation 20:1–6 and the Question of the Millennium,” in *Reformation and Revival Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1997): 61; emphasis in original.

23. This is the contention of Christopher Wright in his article, “A Christian Approach to Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel,” in *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, ed. P. W. L. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

24. G. K. Beale rightly reminds us that “the progress of revelation reveals enlarged meanings of earlier biblical texts, and later biblical writers further interpret prior canonical writings in ways that amplify earlier texts. These later interpretations may formulate meanings of which earlier authors may not have been conscious, but which do not contravene their original organic intention but may ‘supervene’ on it. This is to say that original meanings have ‘thick’ content and that original authors likely were not exhaustively aware (in the way God was) of the full extent of that content. In this regard, fulfillment often ‘fleshes out’ prophecy with details of which even the prophet may not have been fully cognizant.” *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 381.

25. George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 276.

26. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1974), 330.

27. Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 2:114.

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to reclaim the core
of our beliefs...**