

TABLETALK

JANUARY 2021 | \$3

THE
STATE
OF

FOOD
CITY

The State of Our Souls

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL years, Ligonier Ministries has conducted the biennial State of Theology survey to assess society's theological understanding in order to help the church gain a better grasp of what the general population and evangelicals believe about fundamental Christian truths. The results are always sad, but they are never surprising. While we certainly cannot judge people's hearts, we can judge what they claim to believe based on the answers they give. And what people claim to believe sheds light not only on the state of their theology but also on the state of their souls.

The church needs to wake up. The handwriting is on the wall, and it tells us that the evangelical church is in serious trouble—that her theology has been weighed in the balances and is found wanting. This shouldn't surprise us, because mainstream evangelical leaders have been paving this path to ruin for a long time. When they began to feel pressure to conform to the culture, many began to water down the teaching of Scripture and cover up those Christian truths that our culture despises. Naturally, as the evangelical church continued down the path of least resistance, a path that seeks peace with the increasingly secularized culture, many leaders further began to accommodate to culture by attempting to attract the culture and win the culture. But when the culture wouldn't let itself be won, many leaders chose to compromise rather than to stand for the truth. As a result, most of the old, countercultural, evangelical churches have become the new, culturally compromised, mainline churches. They have left many professing Christians with a lowest-common-denominator faith that is almost entirely ignorant of basic Christian theology.

Ultimately, our concern is not only that people do not know theology, but that they do not know God. Ignorance of core Christian teaching reflects ignorance of our triune God and ignorance of what can save the souls of sinners whose most desperate need is to know the only true God of Scripture, not of our imaginations. **10**

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Tabletalk (usps 009-013; ISSN 1064881x) is published monthly by Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, FL 32771. Annual subscription price (12 issues): \$23.00. Periodicals postage paid at Lake Mary, FL, and additional mailing offices. **Postmaster: Send address changes to Tabletalk, c/o Ligonier Ministries, 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, FL 32771.** Unless noted, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation: Required by Title 39 United States Code 3685. Title of publication: Tabletalk. Publication no.: 009013. Date of filing: 10/1/20. Frequency of issue: monthly. No. of issues published annually: 12. Annual subscription price: \$23/yr. usa; \$25/yr. foreign. Location of known office of publication: 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, Seminole Co., FL 32771. Mailing address of headquarters: 421 Ligonier Ct, Sanford, FL 32771. Publisher: Ligonier Ministries. Editor: Burk Parsons. Owner: Ligonier Ministries, a nonprofit educational organization. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: none. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months. Total no. of copies printed (net press run): average/last year: 107,329; last issue: 106,073. Paid/requested circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: average/last year: 0; last issue: 0; (2) Mail subscription: average/last year: 76,259; last issue: 76,367. Free distribution by mail, carrier, or other means: average/last year: 8,728; last issue: 6,163. Total non-requested distribution: last year: 4,647; last issue: 373. Total distribution: average/last year: 99,400; last issue: 91,648. Copies not distributed: average/last year: 7,929; last issue: 14,425. Total: average/last year: 107,329; last issue: 106,073. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete. —Burk Parsons, editor

C O N T E N T S

JANUARY 2021 | VOL. 45 | NO. 1

THE STATE OF THEOLOGY

Keith A. Mathison

4 The State of Theology

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2. There is one true God in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

6-7 **3.** God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

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2020
BIENNIAL
SURVEY

PARTNERED
WITH
LIFEWAY
RESEARCH

THE
State
OF
Theology

Keith A. Mathison

EVERY OTHER YEAR SINCE 2014, Ligonier Ministries has partnered with LifeWay Research to survey the beliefs of Americans on a number of theological and ethical issues. Like past surveys, the 2020 State of Theology survey reveals some encouraging results, but it also reveals confusion and a lack of theological knowledge among evangelicals. In this article, we will take a look at each of the thirty-one questions on the survey in an attempt to help readers understand the orthodox Christian view on these issues as well as the biblical grounds for it.

To take the survey yourself and explore the data, go to www.thestateoftheology.com. New this year is the option to create a group survey that you can send to your friends, family, or church. It's completely confidential and is a great way to start a discussion on what the people in your community believe.

1 GOD IS A PERFECT BEING AND CANNOT MAKE A MISTAKE.

CHRISTIANS STRONGLY AFFIRM that God is a perfect being because to deny that God is a perfect being is to deny that God is God. An imperfect being, by definition, is not God. The great Princeton theologian Archibald Alexander rightly said, “The very idea of God is that of a being infinitely perfect.” God’s work is perfect (Deut. 32:4). His way is perfect (2 Sam. 22:31; Ps. 18:30). His law is perfect (Ps. 19:7; James 1:25). His knowledge is perfect (Job 37:16). All this is true because God Himself is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1 expresses this biblical truth in the following words: “There is but one only, living, and true God: who is infinite in being and *perfection*” (emphasis added; see also Westminster Larger Catechism 7).

The Apostle James makes it clear that to be perfect means to be complete, to lack nothing (James 1:4). Theologically, this idea is most obviously related to God’s attributes of self-existence (aseity) and self-sufficiency (independence). Unlike creatures, whose being is contingent and dependent, God’s being is necessary and independent. In other words, God cannot *not* exist, and God depends on nothing else for His existence. The One who is “I am” does not have the potential to be anything more or less than what He is. He is,

therefore, infinitely and unchangeably blessed in His being, and He is infinitely and unchangeably blessed in His being because His being is infinitely and unchangeably perfect.

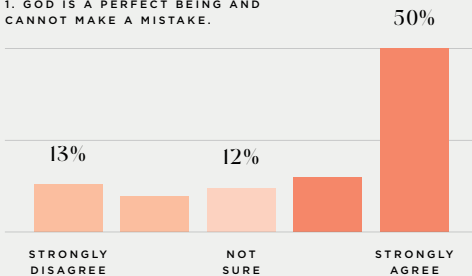
For God to make a mistake, there would have to be in Him some imperfection in His holiness, goodness, knowledge, or wisdom. The fictional pagan gods make mistakes because they are created in the image of man, and human beings are less than perfect in goodness and knowledge. God, on the other hand, is neither malicious nor ignorant. Instead, He is perfect in all His attributes because He is His attributes. He cannot, therefore, make mistakes. To suggest otherwise is blasphemous. ♦

2 THERE IS ONE TRUE GOD IN THREE PERSONS: GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE SON, AND GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT.

IN THIS SHORT SENTENCE we find a concise statement of the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Although the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible, it is a helpful way to speak of a doctrine that is a “good and necessary consequence” of what is expressly taught in the Bible (see WCF 1.6).

The doctrine of the Trinity is grounded in several explicit teachings of Scripture. First, according to Scripture, there is one, and only one, God. We read, for example, in Deuteronomy 4:35, “To you it was

1. GOD IS A PERFECT BEING AND CANNOT MAKE A MISTAKE.



shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.” Second, Scripture affirms that the Father is God. Jesus often speaks of “God the Father” (e.g., John 6:27). Paul speaks numerous times of “God our Father” and “God the Father” (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3).

Third, Scripture also affirms that the Son is God. In the prologue to the gospel of John, the “Word,” who is revealed to be Jesus (1:14), is identified as God (v. 1). Fourth, Scripture affirms that the Holy Spirit is God. He is equated with God in Acts 5:3–4. Elsewhere, the New Testament authors identify the Holy Spirit with Yahweh through their use of Old Testament quotations. Compare, for instance, Isaiah 6:8–10 with Acts 28:25–27 and Psalm 95:7–11 with Hebrews 3:7–11. Fifth and finally, although the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are affirmed to be God, Scripture also distinguishes the three. They are distinguished, for example, by use of the language of sending, loving, speaking, interceding, etc. (see Luke 3:22; John 3:16–17; 3:35; 11:41–42; 14:15; 15:26; Rom. 8:26–27).

The biblical doctrine of the Trinity is summarized in the Nicene Creed:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,

and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spake by the prophets.

The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to the Christian faith. If any element of it is rejected or altered, every other Christian doctrine is negatively affected. ♦

3

GOD ACCEPTS THE WORSHIP OF ALL RELIGIONS, INCLUDING CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM, AND ISLAM.

IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD, it is common for people who believe in God to affirm that God accepts the worship of all religions as long as the worshiper is sincere. There is no evidence for such a view in Scripture, however. In fact, from Genesis to Revelation, Scripture reveals the exact opposite.

This is clearly seen in the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:2). The ancient Near Eastern world in which Israel lived was filled with all manner of religions and “gods.” God rejects these other religions. Why? Because the “gods” of these other religions are actually demons, and the worship of these demons is an abomination (Deut. 32:16–17; Lev. 17:7). The Apostle Paul teaches the same in the New Testament (1 Cor. 10:20).

During His temptation, Jesus quotes Deuter-

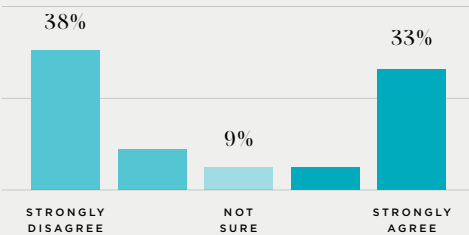
onomy 6:13 to Satan, saying, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matt. 4:10). That is religious exclusivism. In the incarnation, the Word who was with God and who was God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14). He is now the one mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5). There is no other.

Jesus Himself clearly expressed the exclusivity of Christianity when He said: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). “No one” means no one. This is why Peter, when filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaimed the following regarding Jesus: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). For those seeking salvation, there is no one else.

If God accepted the worship of all religions, there would have been no need for the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ because there were plenty of existing religions already during the first century. If God accepted the worship of all religions, there would also have been no need for the Great Commission and the evangelization of the nations. If God accepts the worship of all religions, the evangelism that Jesus commanded is a waste of time.

God does not accept any religion other than the one He graciously provided. He does not accept religions that substitute worship of the creature for worship of the Creator. God does not accept false worship. God does, however, accept the worshipers of any religion when they repent of those religions and trust in Christ. ♦

3. GOD ACCEPTS THE WORSHIP OF ALL RELIGIONS, INCLUDING CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM, AND ISLAM.



4

GOD CREATED MALE AND FEMALE.

A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF human nature is that human beings are male and female. This is the case because God created human beings as male and female: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). The same truth is repeated a few chapters later: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created” (5:1–2). Jesus refers back to this basic fact of creation when the Pharisees pose a question about divorce. He begins His response by saying, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?” (Matt. 19:4).

Nature teaches this same truth, as any student of biology knows. There are noticeable physical differences between males and females due to the way God created the human reproductive system. Every other system in the human body can fully function in a single human body. The digestive system, the respiratory system, the circulatory system, the immune system, etc., can all fully function in an isolated single human being. The reproductive system, on the other hand, requires a male and a female to fully function and to actually reproduce human beings. Because of the fall, birth defects and other abnor-

malities in the reproductive system sometimes occur, but we recognize these as abnormalities only because we clearly know what the normal reproductive system is.

Maleness and femaleness are given biological realities for human beings because God created that reality. It is as much a part of reality as gravity. ♦

5

BIBLICAL ACCOUNTS OF THE PHYSICAL (BODILY) RESURRECTION OF JESUS ARE COMPLETELY ACCURATE. THIS EVENT ACTUALLY OCCURRED.

TO DENY THE BODILY RESURRECTION of Jesus Christ is to deny one of the central tenets of Christianity. It is, in fact, a rejection of Christianity. The Apostle Paul made this abundantly clear when he included the bodily resurrection of Christ in his summary of the Christian gospel (1 Cor. 15:4). He goes on to say, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (v. 14). If that were not clear enough, he then says, “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (v. 17). He says both of these things in the context of a lengthy discussion of bodily death and resurrection.

The Gospels also clearly teach that the resurrection of Jesus was the raising from death of the same body that was crucified. It’s why the tomb was empty (Luke 24:3). When Jesus appears to the disciples after His resurrection, He goes out of His way to make it clear to them that He has been raised bodily:

And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said

this, he showed them his hands and his feet. (Luke 24:38–40)

He goes so far as to tell Thomas to touch the wounds He suffered at the crucifixion (John 20:26–27).

Numerous alternatives to bodily resurrection have been suggested by skeptics over the centuries, but none of them explains the actual evidence we have. The “swoon theory” suggests Jesus did not really die on the cross. He merely fainted, and then the cool air of the tomb revived Him. He rolled the massive stone away and walked out. Given what we know about Roman scourging and crucifixion, this would have required a miracle on par with bodily resurrection.

Others have suggested that the many people who saw Jesus after His death and burial experienced a mass hallucination. A hallucination involves perceiving something that is not actually present in the world outside the mind. In other words, a hallucination is internal to the individual experiencing it. It is completely subjective. In order for the hallucination theory to even approach plausibility, one would have to posit multiple people, one after another, experiencing the same subjective hallucination. On top of that, one would have to suggest that hundreds of people simultaneously experienced the same hallucination (1 Cor. 15:6). In short, one would have to change the very definition of *hallucination* in order for the hallucination theory to be plausible. There are other theories that have been suggested, but like the swoon theory and the hallucination theory, they cannot account for the actual evidence. ♦

6

JESUS IS THE FIRST AND GREATEST BEING CREATED BY GOD.

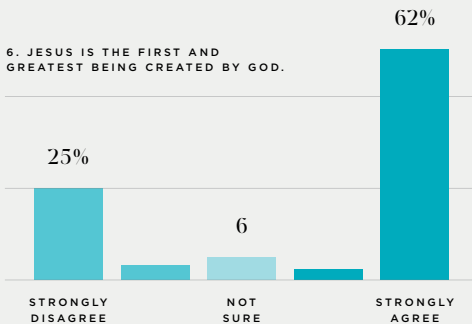
TO AFFIRM THIS STATEMENT is to align oneself with one of the most serious heresies ever to confront the Christian church. The orthodox Christian doctrine, as found in the Nicene Creed, states that the Lord Jesus Christ is “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.” The Nicene Creed was a result of the Arian controversy in the fourth century. Arius, and those who followed him, taught that the Son is the first and greatest being created by God. This puts the Son on the creature side of the Creator-creature distinction, which would mean that the Son is not “God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God” and not “of one substance [Greek *homoousios*] with the Father.”

The original Nicene Creed was produced at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. It was a direct response to the teaching of Arius. After the council, variations on the Arian theme developed along with new heresies regarding the Holy Spirit. The Council of Constantinople met in AD 381 to deal with all this. It supple-

mented the original Nicene Creed to more fully address these new developments. The Nicene Creed summarizes the church’s belief in the teaching of the Scriptures regarding the Holy Trinity.

The Scriptures assert that the Son is on the Creator side of the Creator-creature distinction and has, in coming into the world, assumed a human nature. In short, the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God incarnate. The evidence for this doctrine is found throughout the New Testament. The Word, who is identified with Jesus in John 1:14, is said to be God in John 1:1. The New Testament also repeatedly attributes to Jesus words, deeds, and properties that can be properly said only of One who is truly God. Jesus is rightly worshiped (Matt. 2:2). Jesus encourages His disciples to pray to Him (John 14:14). Jesus forgives sin (Matt. 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–26). Jesus is sovereign over nature (Matt. 8:23–27). Jesus will be the judge on the last day (John 5:22; Acts 10:42). None of these things could be properly said of Jesus if Jesus were not very God of very God. The Son of God is not less than God. He is God. ♦

6. JESUS IS THE FIRST AND GREATEST BEING CREATED BY GOD.



7

JESUS WAS A GREAT TEACHER, BUT HE WAS NOT GOD.

ARIANS, WHO BELIEVE JESUS IS the first and greatest being created by God, affirm that Jesus was a great teacher, but those who believe that

Jesus was a mere man often affirm the same thing. They will say that Jesus was simply a great teacher. Many people in our day affirm something along these lines. What many of them do not understand is that one cannot affirm that Jesus was merely a man and at the same time affirm that He was a great teacher. Why? Because if He was merely a man, what He taught is delusional at best and demonic at worst. Many years ago, C.S. Lewis made the same basic point in his book *Mere Christianity* when he argued that given the things Jesus said and did, He is either a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord.

The problem with the claim that Jesus was merely a great teacher but not God is that His teaching and actions repeatedly included both explicit and implicit claims that He is God. If a teacher is not God and yet claims to *be* God, then that teacher is not a great teacher. He or she is either a liar or insane. So, what did Jesus teach through His words and actions?

Jesus claims to have existed with the Father before the creation of the world (John 17:24). He uses the Old Testament name of God in reference to Himself (8:58). He claims authority to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6; see Isa. 43:25). He encourages His disciples to pray to Him (John 14:13–14). He taught that He is to be the object of men’s faith (14:1). He claims sovereign authority to judge all mankind (5:21–27; see Matt. 28:18). He claims omnipresence (18:20). He claims a kind of knowledge that requires omniscience (11:27). Anyone who is not God

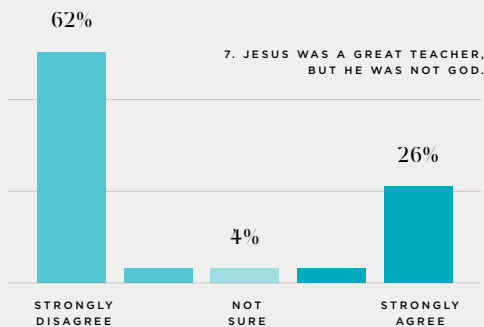
and says all these things is not a great teacher. Jesus said these things. He can be a great teacher only if He is God incarnate. ♦

8

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A FORCE BUT IS NOT A PERSONAL BEING.

THE IDEA THAT the Holy Spirit is a force rather than a person is an old heresy dating back to at least the fourth century, but it has survived to this day. It is the view, for example, of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who argue that the Spirit is God’s “active force.” They argue that Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit’s being “poured out” on someone or “filling” someone. A person cannot be “poured out” or “fill” something, they argue, so the Holy Spirit must not be a person. They argue that when Scripture uses personal language in regard to the Holy Spirit, it is using figurative language.

Those who argue in this way have the facts precisely backward. In the first place, the language of “pouring out” and “filling” is applied to subjects in the Scripture about whose personality there is no doubt. David (a human person) cries out, “I am poured out like water” (Ps. 22:14). Paul (another human person) speaks of being “poured out” like a drink offering (Phil. 2:17; 2 Tim. 4:6). Since we know that David and Paul were real persons, we know that the language of “pouring out” is being used figuratively. What about the lan-



guage of filling? In Jeremiah 23:24, God declares that He fills heaven and earth. This does not mean that God is an impersonal force. Jesus is also said to “fill” all things (Eph. 1:23; 4:10). Jesus, too, is not an impersonal force. In short, if someone is said to be “poured out” or to “fill” something, it is not proof that that someone is not a person.

Additionally, personal language is applied to the Holy Spirit in a multitude of ways and in a multitude of contexts that make it impossible to conclude they are all examples of personification of an impersonal thing. Scripture regularly uses personal pronouns when speaking of the Holy Spirit (e.g., John 15:26; 16:13–14; Acts 10:19–20; 13:2). The Holy Spirit is “He,” not “it.” Scripture ascribes to the Holy Spirit personal properties such as understanding (Isa. 11:2; 1 Cor. 2:10–11) and will (1 Cor. 12:11; John 3:8). Scripture also ascribes numerous personal activities to the Holy Spirit, including speaking (Mark 13:11), revealing (Luke 2:26), guiding (John 16:13), teaching (Luke 12:12), bearing witness (John 15:26), loving (Rom. 15:30), warning (1 Tim. 4:1), and appointing people to office (Acts 13:2).

Has a force such as gravity ever appointed anyone to office? Has a force such as magnetism ever exhibited understanding and will and the ability to speak and love? No. The Holy Spirit does these things because the Holy Spirit is not a force. The Holy Spirit is a personal being, the third person of the Trinity. ♦

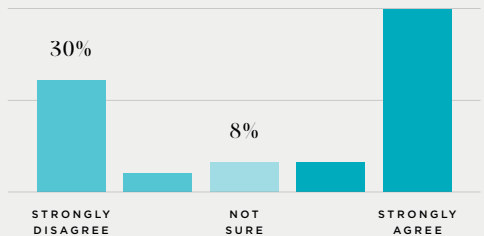
9

THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES A SPIRITUAL NEW BIRTH OR NEW LIFE BEFORE A PERSON HAS FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

THE IMPORTANT THEOLOGICAL TRUTH communicated in this statement is that regeneration precedes faith. Regeneration must occur first because every descendant of Adam is born dead in sin (Eph. 2:1; see Rom. 5:12). Eventually our spiritual death will be followed by our physical death (Gen. 3:19). This is why Jesus said to Nicodemus, “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Those who are spiritually dead—and that includes every human being—must be brought to spiritual life. We must be spiritually resurrected, and this is not something we can do ourselves. It is a sovereign work of God. We cannot be regenerated by having faith because dead people cannot do anything.

Our situation is similar to that of Lazarus (John 11). Lazarus was dead and could do nothing about it. Jesus stepped forward and commanded Lazarus to come out of the grave. It was impossible for Lazarus to respond, however, unless God gave him life first. In a similar way, we are all spiritually dead when Christ comes and commands us to believe in Him. It is impossible for us to respond until

9. THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES A SPIRITUAL NEW BIRTH OR NEW LIFE BEFORE A PERSON HAS FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.



and unless God first gives us spiritual life. God first regenerates us (gives us spiritual life), and as a result we have faith, which itself is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8–10).

Throughout his ministry, Dr. R.C. Sproul often said that this little phrase, “regeneration precedes faith,” captures the essence of Reformed theology. He could not have been more right. ♦

10

THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN TELL ME TO DO SOMETHING WHICH IS FORBIDDEN IN THE BIBLE.

FOR THIS STATEMENT TO BE TRUE, two things would have to be possible, both of which are false. First, the Holy Spirit would have to be able to contradict Himself. Scripture, the Bible, is the very Word of the triune God: “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is closely associated with the inspiration of Scripture: “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 Peter 1:21). In other words, that which is forbidden in the Bible is forbidden by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit cannot command you to do something He Himself has forbidden because He doesn’t contradict Himself (Num. 23:19).

Second, for the Holy Spirit to be able to tell you to do something forbidden in the Bible, the Holy Spirit would

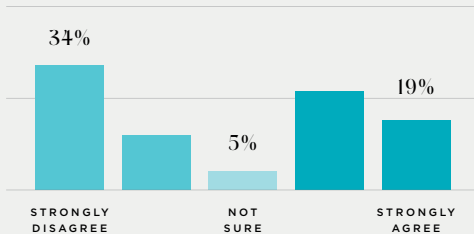
have to be able to sin. Encouraging someone to sin is a sin (Jer. 28:15–17). When God forbids something in Scripture, that law is an expression of His will. Sin, by definition, “is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 14). As John puts it, “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). The Holy Spirit is holy. If a spirit is telling you to do something forbidden in the Bible, you can be certain that it is an unholy spirit. ♦

11

EVERYONE SINS A LITTLE, BUT MOST PEOPLE ARE GOOD BY NATURE.

THE IDEA THAT PEOPLE ARE basically good by nature echoes the ancient Pelagian heresy, which affirmed that Adam’s sin affected Adam alone. According to this view, human nature was not affected by Adam’s fall. Scripture teaches otherwise, asserting that Adam’s sin affected all his natural-born posterity (Rom. 5:12–14). By nature, human beings are “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). This is the theological point behind the phrase *total depravity*—the Tin TULIP. This doctrine is found throughout both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Gen. 6:5; Pss. 14:1–3; 143:2; Eccl. 7:20; Isa. 64:6; Mark 7:18–23; Rom. 1:21–32; 3:10–18, 23; 8:5–8; Gal. 4:3; Eph. 2:1–3; 4:17–19; Titus 3:3).

11. EVERYONE SINS A LITTLE, BUT MOST PEOPLE ARE GOOD BY NATURE.



Christians can become confused because Scripture teaches that human beings were created by God in His image (Gen. 1:26–27), and God calls all that He created good (v. 31). If everything that God created is good, and if God created human nature, then isn't human nature necessarily good? Yes. As originally created, human nature was good. However, part of human nature is the human will. The first human beings had the responsibility to align their created wills perfectly with God's will—to obey Him. Instead, they disobeyed God. Like Satan, they turned their will, as it were, perpendicular to God's will, introducing sin and misery into the world and into their own natures. In other words, they sinned. When they did this, human nature was distorted and corrupted. Like begets like, and all humans are now born with a corrupted and fallen human nature. Human beings are now born slaves to sin.

This is why the claim that “everyone sins a little” is also incorrect. We tend to measure ourselves against other human beings, and we like to pick the absolute worst specimens for comparison. We like to compare ourselves to people like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or Mao Zedong. It's easy to feel good about ourselves if the standard is refraining from killing millions of human beings. But this is not the standard by which the Word of God measures sin. The standard is God's will, and the requirement is perfect obedience to that will. “Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10; see Gal. 3:10). The question is not, Did you refrain from murdering millions today? The question is, Did you perfectly “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” today, and did you perfectly love “your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39)? How often did you fail to do this perfectly? Was it just “a little”? No. We fail to do this a lot, and that means we sin a lot. This is why we need the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. He is the only One who has ever perfectly fulfilled the law. ♦

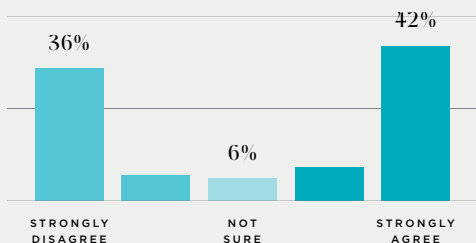
12

EVEN THE SMALLEST SIN DESERVES ETERNAL DAMNATION.

THIS STATEMENT IS DIFFICULT for some Christians to affirm because we frequently lose sight of the true nature of sin. We fail to grasp the true nature of sin because we do not grasp the true nature of the holiness of God. When we begin to understand better the holiness of God, we begin to get a clearer understanding of how utterly evil sin is. To be as blunt as possible, all sin is satanic. Every time we commit any sin, we are following in Satan's footsteps. We are turning against our holy God, spitting in His face, and defiantly saying to Him, “Not Thy will, but my will be done.”

A seemingly “small” sin, eating a piece of fruit, led to the fall of humanity and the curse under which all creation still groans (Rom. 8:18–24). Many people, even Christians, look at this and ask how a just God could inflict such a punishment for eating a piece of fruit. What they fail to realize is that in the act of eating that piece of fruit, Adam and Eve were doing much more than biting and chewing food. They were trusting the serpent rather than God (Gen. 3:3–6) and disobeying a direct command of God (2:17). In doing so, they were choosing to follow Satan rather than God. The moment they acted on that temptation, they became, in effect, Satanists and “children of the devil” (1 John 3:10).

Because God is holy, His will is

12. EVEN THE SMALLEST SIN
DESERVES ETERNAL DAMNATION.

completely holy. It is perfectly pure and good and beautiful. It is light without any darkness (1 John 1:5). To depart from it in any way, even to the smallest degree, is to blasphemously declare that our fallen and corrupt human wills are to be preferred to God's will. Yes, there are degrees of sin (John 19:11). But all sin is a choice of our will over God's will. Once the created will has chosen itself over God, holiness and justice require that it be judged, and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). On its own, that fallen will cannot return to perfect alignment with God's will because it has already become deformed and corrupted. Satan and those angels who followed him did this, and hell was prepared for them (Matt. 25:41). Satan deceived our first parents, and they likewise chose their own will over God's will. By His grace, however, God offers redemption for human beings who repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. ♦

13

GOD COUNTS A PERSON AS RIGHTEOUS NOT BECAUSE OF ONE'S WORKS BUT ONLY BECAUSE OF ONE'S FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

THIS STATEMENT CONCERNS the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Westminster Short-

er Catechism 33 provides us with a good concise summary of this doctrine: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." Justification is an act of grace (Rom. 3:24). Grace, by definition, is a gift, not a wage earned for works we have done (4:4). By this act of God's grace, He pardons all our sins (vv. 6–8), and in Him we "become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). This is because Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed to us (Rom. 4:11; 5:19). We receive this by faith alone (Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:9).

The doctrine of justification by faith alone was at the heart of the sixteenth-century Reformation debate. Over time, Roman Catholic theologians had conflated justification with regeneration and sanctification and had developed a complex doctrine of grace and salvation rooted in their sacramental system. According to Rome, redemption was accomplished objectively by Christ. Its application to people is called justification. This subjective aspect of redemption requires the cooperation of man. In Roman Catholic theology, there are a number of different categories of grace, but key to the doctrine of justification is the idea that grace is God's supernatural gift to man in the work of redemption. The most important distinction for the doctrine of justification is the distinction between actual grace and habitual grace. Actual grace is a gift from God that enables us to act as we ought. Habitual grace is sanctifying/justifying grace that is infused

into the soul, thereby changing the soul and restoring it. The Council of Trent, a sixteenth-century Roman Catholic council, defined habitual grace's effects in terms of regeneration and sanctification. One receives this grace by means of the sacrament of baptism, and if it is lost through mortal sin, it can be regained through the sacrament of penance (i.e., confession or reconciliation).

The Protestant Reformers rejected the idea of human cooperation in the work of justification and distinguished justification from regeneration and sanctification. Instead of saying that we are justified because we have been made inherently righteous, they argued, on the basis of the biblical texts cited above and many others, that our sins are imputed to Christ and His perfect righteousness is imputed to us. We receive this righteousness by faith and by faith alone. Therefore, we are declared righteous (justified) on the grounds of Christ's perfect righteousness that has been imputed to us. This justification cannot be separated from regeneration and sanctification, but it must be distinguished from them. ♦

the Bible is one among many in the broad category of "sacred writings." Christians reject that premise. The "sacred" writings of other religions are nothing more than the works of human imagination. Holy Scripture, on the other hand, is absolutely unique in that it is *theopneustos* or "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). Above and behind its human authors stand the divine Author (2 Peter 1:20–21). It is, therefore, the very Word of God.

The phrase "literally true" is often used by Christians in ambiguous ways that can cause confusion. Everything the divine Author intended to affirm as true in Scripture is true, but sometimes the divine Author chose to use metaphors and other figurative language to teach these truths. Isaiah 55:12, for example, speaks of a time in the future when the hills will sing and the trees will clap their hands. That which God intends to teach here is true, but He uses figurative (nonliteral) language to do so. As John Calvin said about the language in this verse, "They are metaphors, by which he shows that all the creatures bow to the will of God, and rejoice and lend their aid to carry on his work." ♦

14

THE BIBLE, LIKE ALL SACRED WRITINGS, CONTAINS HELPFUL ACCOUNTS OF ANCIENT MYTHS BUT IS NOT LITERALLY TRUE.

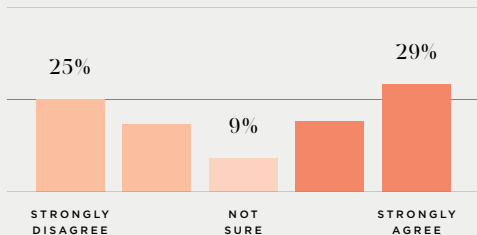
THE ROOT OF THE MISTAKE in this statement is the assumption that

15

THE BIBLE IS 100% ACCURATE IN ALL THAT IT TEACHES.

THE EASIEST WAY TO UNDERSTAND why Christians rightly affirm this statement is to substitute the word *God* for *the Bible* in the statement. God, of course, is 100 percent accurate in all that He teaches. No Christian would deny that statement, but is the substitution of those words legitimate? Yes, because the Bible is God's Word. Paul writes: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). Peter explains how this relates to the human authors: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God

15. THE BIBLE IS 100% ACCURATE IN ALL THAT IT TEACHES.



as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21).

God, then, is the primary author of Scripture, and His Word is truth (John 17:17). He cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Based on the fact that Holy Scripture is God-breathed, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy states: “We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses” (Article 11).

In order to understand what “100 percent accurate” means, we also have to keep in mind other relevant facts about Scripture. For example, God accurately reveals some truths by means of figurative language. This means that to understand what the Bible is accurately teaching, it is absolutely necessary to understand the various genres found in Scripture. Poetry, for example, is not interpreted in the same way that historical prose is interpreted. Both are accurate, but each follows different rules appropriate to the genre. Furthermore, some of what is found in the biblical prose narratives are records of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. These sins are accurately reported, but they are not commended.

In short, Scripture is the authoritative Word of God, and everything God intended to teach in it is 100 percent accurate. Readers, however, have to understand some of the different ways that He taught truths in the Bible. God is always accurate. Our interpretations sometimes are not. ♦

16

MODERN
SCIENCE DISPROVES
THE BIBLE.

TO GET TO THE HEART of this statement and discern whether it is true, we have to take a step back and look at the various relationships among aspects of God’s creation, God’s Word, and the human interpretations of both. God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them (Gen. 1:1). God also breathed out the Holy Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16). God reveals Himself in both (Rom. 1:19–20; Ex. 34:6–7). God’s revelation of Himself in His created works is called general revelation. His revelation of Himself in Scripture is called special revelation. Since God is the One revealing Himself in both, His general revelation and His special revelation cannot contradict each other. Things get more complicated, however, when we bring fallible human beings into the picture.

Human beings can study the stuff of creation (the works of God’s hands) and/or what God reveals about Himself in those works. The natural sciences study the stuff of creation (stars, rocks, oceans, animals, energy, molecules, etc.). Natural theology studies what can be known of God through a consideration of these created things. In a similar way, human beings can also study the materials used to write the Bible and/or what God reveals about Himself in the Bible.

Papyrology, for example, studies the physical materials used to write the Bible (papyrus, inks, etc.). The fields of biblical theology and systematic theology study what can be known about God through a consideration of the content of the biblical texts. Because all these studies are carried out by fallible human beings, the results of any of them can be mistaken. Natural scientists and natural theologians can each misinterpret the stuff of creation in their own particular ways. Papyrologists and theologians can each misinterpret Scripture in their own particular ways.

Modern science, the fallible human study of creation, cannot disprove the Bible, which is God’s special revelation. The only thing that science can potentially disprove is fallible human interpretations of the biblical text, but it has to be remembered that the scientists are also fallible and capable of misinterpretation. Scientists can disprove incorrect interpretations of creation by other scientists. Sometimes science can disprove incorrect interpretations of the Bible. If, for example, someone reads Revelation 7:1 and its language about the four corners of the earth and concludes that the earth is actually a flat square, then the natural science that studies the planet God created can correct that misinterpretation and help us see that Revelation must be speaking metaphorically here. Science cannot disprove the Bible, but it can occasionally disprove faulty human interpretations of the Bible that touch on the stuff of creation. ♦

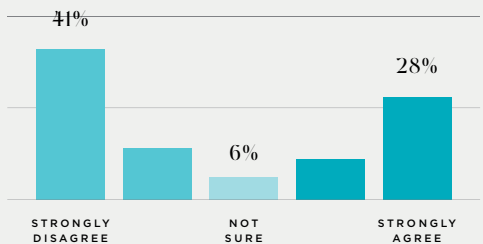
17

GOD WILL ALWAYS REWARD TRUE FAITH WITH MATERIAL BLESSINGS IN THIS LIFE.

THIS STATEMENT REFLECTS the teaching of the so-called prosperity gospel, which is in fact a false gospel. Those who are teaching it are twisting Scripture to make themselves wealthy. God certainly does pour out His blessings on the faithful, but it is not always great material wealth. Paul, for example, proclaims the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph. 3:7–8). He is not talking about Jesus’ money. He’s talking about Jesus. The pursuit of the “riches of Christ” is to be our priority, and that is very often accompanied by suffering and persecution, not fabulous wealth (Matt. 5:10–12; John 15:20; Rom. 5:3; 2 Cor. 1:6; 12:10; Phil. 1:29; 1 Thess. 2:2; 2 Tim. 2:3; 3:12; Heb. 11:36; 1 Peter 3:14; 4:16, 19; 5:9–10).

Jesus Himself warned us of the danger of putting material wealth before God. He said that we are to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth (Matt. 6:19–21). But how can earthly treasure be dangerous? Because it can subtly take our eyes and hearts away from God. Even worse, it can make God a means to a worldly end. True blessing is being content regardless of how much or how little material wealth we have (Phil. 4:11–12). Those who are rich in ma-

17. GOD WILL ALWAYS REWARD TRUE FAITH WITH MATERIAL BLESSINGS IN THIS LIFE.



terial goods are called not to trust in those riches but also to be rich in good works (1 Tim. 6:17–19).

The prosperity “gospel” creates an unbiblical attitude toward the poor. It implies that those who are poor must not have enough faith. This ignores the entire tenor of Scripture. Consider, for example, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Which of these two was truly blessed? The rich man who refused to help the poor and who went to hell? Or Lazarus, the one who prosperity preachers would say didn’t have enough faith but who went to heaven? Over and over, Scripture warns us that material riches can be a danger to faith. Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24–25). Paul said that the love of money is the root of all manner of evils (1 Tim. 6:9–10). The Bible indicates that riches can be deceitful (Mark 4:19). So is the prosperity gospel. ♦

18

HELL IS A REAL PLACE WHERE CERTAIN PEOPLE WILL BE PUNISHED FOREVER.

THERE ARE FEW DOCTRINES that are more commonly denied by professing Christians today than the doctrine of hell, yet Christ Himself said more about the subject than anyone else in Scripture. If Christians, by definition, are those who follow Christ, we cannot simply ignore what He said on this subject. Jesus Him-

self spoke of hell as a fearful reality, a place of eternal punishment for those who die without faith and remain unrepentant.

Jesus speaks of hell as a reality in His Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:22, 29–30). A little later He says: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (10:28). Jesus describes hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (13:42). He says physical mutilation would be preferable to hell (18:8–9; Mark 9:43). Regarding how long the punishment of hell will last, Jesus says that it is as eternal as the bliss of heaven will be for the redeemed (Matt. 25:46; John 3:36). The same word describes the duration of both.

Jesus, who would know better than anyone else, told us in no uncertain terms that hell is real, that hell is eternal, and that hell awaits all who reject Him. We may find this teaching disconcerting. We may find it disturbing. But if we reject it, we are calling Jesus untruthful. ♦

19

THERE WILL BE A TIME WHEN JESUS CHRIST RETURNS TO JUDGE ALL THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE LIVED.

IN THE NICENE CREED, Christians confess that we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ who, after His death and resurrection “ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead.” This creedal statement is a concise summary of biblical doctrine. The biblical account of the ascension of Christ is found in Acts 1:9. The same passage promises that Jesus will return at some unspecified time in the future (Acts 1:11). Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 speaks of Christ’s being seated at the right hand of the Father (vv. 34–36). That is where He is now. He has received His kingdom and all authority in heaven and on

earth (Dan. 7:13–14; Matt. 28:18). He is now putting all enemies beneath His feet (1 Cor. 15:25).

Paul’s most extensive discussion of the future second advent of Christ is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, but he supplements it in other places such as 1 Corinthians 15. As Paul explains, at the second advent of Christ, the dead in Christ will be raised first, and then those Christians who are alive at the time of His return will be caught up with Him (1 Thess. 4:16–17). The dead in Christ will be raised imperishable, and those who are alive will be changed (1 Cor. 15:52). At the final judgment, Jesus will be the judge (John 5:22; Acts 10:42; Rom. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:10). The nature and results of this final judgment are vividly described in Revelation 20:11–15. All stand before the Great White Throne. Those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life are cast into the lake of fire. The redeemed will enter a new heaven and new earth where they will be face-to-face with the Lord forever (Rev. 22:1–5). ♦

that explains both. We see the beginnings of family worship very early in Scripture during the patriarchal period under the leadership of men such as Abraham, who was required to circumcise the males in his household (Gen. 17). At the time of the exodus, each family was to observe the Passover in their home (Ex. 12:3, 26–27). All families were to teach their children the law (Deut. 6:6–7). Jewish worship became more institutionalized with the establishment of the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the sacrifices, but individual worship, family worship, and corporate worship were all observed. After the destruction of the temple, the synagogue was established as a form of corporate worship and was still in existence at the time of Christ and the early church (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Acts 13:5; 17:7).

All three forms of worship are still to be practiced today. As individuals, we are to worship God in private prayer (Matt. 6:6). As families, we are to continue to worship together (Acts 16:15). But neither of these replaces corporate worship. Given the long Jewish history of corporate worship and the fact that the first converts to Christ were Jews (2:41), God would have to have stated clearly that a radical change had taken place in what He expected if corporate worship had suddenly been made optional for Christians. This did not happen. And the early church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42).

Paul’s writings assume corporate worship. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, he writes, “For, in the first place, when you come together as a church...” It is assumed that the Corinthian Christians will be coming together to meet as a church. The same is assumed in 1 Corinthians 14:23 when Paul discusses worship in the corporate gatherings. Corporate worship is required for differently gifted believers to build one another up. It is why the author to the Hebrews writes,

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet

20

WORSHIPING ALONE OR WITH ONE’S FAMILY IS A VALID REPLACEMENT FOR REGULARLY ATTENDING CHURCH.

WORSHIPING ALONE and with one’s family is encouraged in Scripture and in the Reformed tradition. In fact, the Westminster Assembly produced a short Directory for Family Worship

together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb. 10:24–25) ♦

21

CHRISTIANS SHOULD BE SILENT ON ISSUES OF POLITICS.

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF WAYS this statement could be interpreted depending on the assumptions one brings to it. Is it referring to all Christians or some Christians? If only some, which ones? Is it referring to pastors? Is it referring to Christians considered individually or corporately? What does “be silent” mean? Public silence or complete silence? What exactly is an “issue of politics”? Does it mean specific pieces of legislation or specific court rulings? Or does it mean contested ethical issues? How do we define the word *politics*? That word can mean everything from “the art or science of government” to “the total complex of relations between people living in society.” Does it take local circumstances into account? Is the answer for Christians in England different from the answer for Christians in North Korea or Iran?

In the North American context, the question speaks most directly to the post-Enlightenment secularist view of the relation between church and state. The secular view, which is widely assumed in the West, considers religious faith a purely private affair that should have no place in the public square. In other words, secularism insists that Christians should not

express their beliefs publicly; nor should they take stances on political issues based on their Christian faith.

Scripture does not allow Christians to remain silent about their beliefs, and it encourages them to be salt and light in the midst of fallen cultures (Matt. 5:13–16), but Christians disagree on exactly how they should speak to the political and cultural issues they encounter. One reason for this is that Christians come from all tribes, tongues, and nations. They exist and have existed in a huge variety of cultures and countries. Each nation, each political structure, and each culture is different. Scripture does not provide detailed instructions on how Christians should interact with every potential kind of political and cultural context that might arise in history. It provides general principles, and Christians have to use biblically informed wisdom to apply those principles in their specific context. Sometimes they disagree on how best to do that.

In addition to learning the general principles of the law in order to know what is good and what is just, we can also learn by studying the biblical examples of men such as Joseph and Daniel who served pagan rulers and remained faithful to God. We can learn from the prophets who publicly called out both Israelite and pagan rulers when they were in sin. We can learn from the example of Paul and the other Apostles who faithfully proclaimed the gospel and established the church in the midst of the pagan Roman Empire. ♦

22

GOD CHOSE THE PEOPLE HE WOULD SAVE BEFORE HE CREATED THE WORLD.

THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION has been at the center of controversy in the church for centuries, but this is not due to a lack of explicit teaching in Scripture. From beginning to end, Scripture places the salvation of sinners in the sovereign

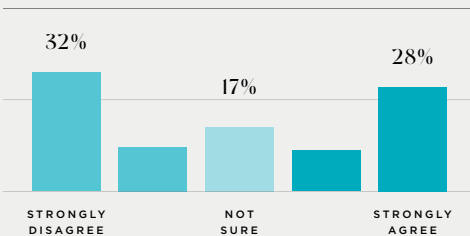
hands of God. God reveals in His Word that He sovereignly works all things according to His will (Eph. 1:11). He also reveals that those who are saved are saved not because of their works but solely on the basis of God’s grace (2 Tim. 1:8–9). We are taught by God’s Word that His election unto salvation occurred before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:3–6; 2 Tim. 1:9). Those whom God predestined for salvation before the foundation of the world He calls in time (Rom. 8:28) and draws to Christ (John 6:44). As creatures of God and as sinners, deserving of God’s wrath, we have no right to question the ethics of election (Rom. 9:20). We know God is good and that all He does is good. When we do not fully understand something, that knowledge alone should be enough for us.

The Canons of Dort helpfully explain the nature of God’s work of election:

Before the foundation of the world, by sheer grace, according to the free good pleasure of his will, he chose in Christ to salvation a definite number of particular people out of the entire human race, which had fallen by its own fault from its original innocence into sin and ruin. Those chosen were neither better nor more deserving than the others, but lay with them in the common misery. He did this in Christ, whom he also appointed from eternity to be the mediator, the head of all those chosen, and the foundation of their salvation. (1.7)

Our response to the biblical doctrine of election should be one of humility rather than arrogance.

22. GOD CHOSE THE PEOPLE HE WOULD SAVE BEFORE HE CREATED THE WORLD.



It is a mystery we can barely begin to fathom. With Paul, we should cry out:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33–36) ♦

23

CHURCHES MUST PROVIDE ENTERTAINING WORSHIP SERVICES IF THEY WANT TO BE EFFECTIVE.

A CHRISTIAN CANNOT AFFIRM this statement without denying everything that Scripture reveals about the nature and purpose of corporate Christian worship. In the first place, worship is to be directed toward God alone. As Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matt. 4:10). Not only is worship to be directed to God alone, but God alone reveals the acceptable way He is to be worshiped (Deut. 12:32; Matt. 15:9). God “may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men” (WCF 21.1).

The idea that worship should entertain those in attendance places the worship of Almighty God in the same

category as a sporting event, a movie, or the circus. It is a blasphemous inversion of the nature of worship; it can turn something that is intended to be God-centered and God-honoring into a man-centered spectacle. Biblical God-centered worship involves prayer with thanksgiving. It is to be done “with understanding, reverence, humility, fervency, faith, love, and perseverance” (WCF 21.3). It involves the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, the singing of hymns and psalms, and the administration of the sacraments. God is to be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4:43). We are called to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28–29).

The idea that the church has to offer entertaining worship services to be “effective” is also importing a worldly concept of “effectiveness” into the church. The church is not called to be “effective.” The church is called to be faithful to her Lord. If the church is faithful, the Lord will add however many to the church that He sees fit (Acts 2:46–47). The simple preaching of Christ and Him crucified may appear ineffective to Madison Avenue, but it has always appeared foolish to the worldly (1 Cor. 1:23). In reality, it is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16). The church is not in the business of entertaining believers or unbelievers. We are to leave that to actors and athletes. The church has a much higher calling, and we abandon it at our own peril. ♦

24

GOD IS UNCONCERNED WITH MY DAY-TO-DAY DECISIONS.

GOD HAS GIVEN US instruction in His Word regarding how we are to walk and please Him (1 Thess. 4:1). Walking involves putting numerous small steps together. Likewise, our spiritual walk involves putting numerous small decisions together. God is concerned with our day-to-day decisions

because God’s will for us is our sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3). He calls us to take up our cross daily and follow Christ (Luke 9:23). To do this daily requires many good daily decisions.

All our decisions are acts of our will. Since our goal is to be more and more conformed to Christ, our goal involves having our wills, by grace, more and more aligned with His will (2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 1:3–5; Phil. 2:12–13; Col. 3:3–10). Our day-to-day decisions, therefore, either contribute to our sanctification or detract from it. For our wills to be aligned with God’s will and for our decisions to please Him, we have to know His revealed will, His law. We find His revealed will, His instruction for us, in Scripture (Ps. 119:105; 2 Tim. 3:15–16).

Regarding God’s will and our decisions, there are several things we have to understand. For instance, we have to understand that God’s law does not tell us what our decision should be in every conceivable circumstance. Scripture doesn’t tell you whether you should go to this college or that college, take this job or that job. Generally speaking, God’s moral law provides broad principles. Wisdom is required to apply those principles in the innumerable different circumstances that Christians will face. Christians should study both the law and the Wisdom Literature of Scripture to develop the wisdom necessary to make good day-to-day decisions.

A second important point to note is that although God is concerned with our day-to-day decisions, not every decision is a decision between good and bad. Not every decision is of the same kind. “Should I rob this bank or not?” and “Should I have the soup

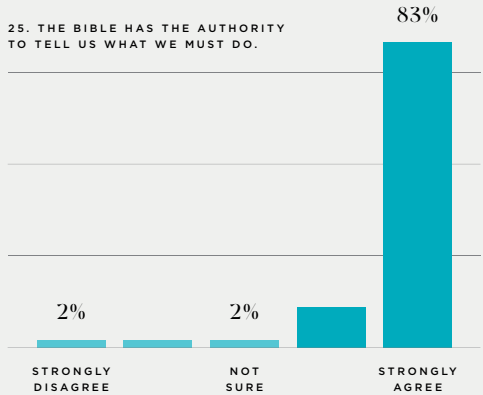
or the salad?” are not the same kind of decisions. One involves a choice between good and evil. The other involves a choice between one good and another good. Eating soup or salad only becomes a sinful choice if you eat without thankfulness to God for that food or you become a glutton. God has numbered the very hairs on our heads (Matt. 10:30). He is certainly concerned with our everyday decisions. ♦

25

THE BIBLE HAS THE AUTHORITY TO TELL US WHAT WE MUST DO.

TO UNDERSTAND WHY this statement must be affirmed by all faithful Christians, one must understand what the Bible is. Paul explains this in his second letter to Timothy: “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (3:16). The word translated “breathed out by God” is *theopneustos*. It literally means “God-breathed.” In other words, the Bible is the very Word of God. The Bible has the authority to tell us what to do because God has the authority to tell us what to do.

It should go without saying that God has the authority to tell us what to do. He is the Creator of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 146:6). He upholds our very existence (Heb. 1:3). He is King and Lord (Ps. 47:6–7). We are, therefore, His creatures and subjects and owe Him obedience. The living God is also infinitely good (34:8). Because the psalmist recognized the perfect goodness of God, he asked God



to teach him His statutes (119:68). The psalmist knew that his Creator had the authority to tell him what to do, and he knew that what God told him to do was good. Jesus also made it abundantly clear that man is to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). ♦

26

LEARNING ABOUT THEOLOGY IS FOR PASTORS AND SCHOLARS ONLY.

CHRISTIANS WILL SOMETIMES affirm this statement because there is some ambiguity in the way the word *theology* is used. It is often used to refer to a formal academic study requiring mastery of ancient languages and other related fields. But that is not the only way the word *theology* is used. The basic meaning of the word is “knowledge of God.” Is knowledge of God for pastors and scholars only? No. We are all called to know God (Col. 1:9–10).

This is why theology is important for all Christians. Theology is the knowledge of God. If we are all called to know God, then we are all called to learn about theology to some degree. This does not mean that a person has to study

theology at the formal academic level. It does mean that we are to do what we can to grow in our knowledge and love of God. This is the most important function of theology, and it is why theology can never be rightly done if it is separated from prayer and praise. Theology and doxology must not be separated.

Studying theology has secondary benefits as well. Learning at least the basics of theology can help all Christians be more discerning and better able to spot the kind of serious errors we have discussed throughout this article. A lack of any theological knowledge leaves Christians open to the wiles of false teachers. There are many wolves in sheep's clothing roaming around the church, harming unwary sheep. Studying theology helps us discern the difference between a counterfeit and the genuine article. It helps us spot the zipper on the back of the wolves' ill-fitting sheep costume. It helps us know and proclaim the truth to a lost world steeped in lies. ♦

27

SEX OUTSIDE OF TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE IS A SIN.

THE FACT THAT SO MANY Christians deny this statement is a clear example of how much Christians have become conformed to this world as opposed to being conformed to Christ. The sexual libertinism that has become the norm in Western culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is gradually becoming the norm in the church as well. All manner of sexual immorality is being excused by professing Christians in flagrant disregard for God's Word, and on those rare occasions when His Word is taken into consideration, it is being twisted beyond all recognition by those who want God to call good evil and evil good in order to justify their lusts.

God takes sexual immorality very seriously.

Over and over, in both the Old and New Testaments, sexual immorality of all kinds is strongly condemned (e.g., Lev. 18; 1 Cor. 6:12–20) and judged (e.g., Gen. 19). Christians are commanded to abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thess. 4:3). In fact, we are to flee from it (1 Cor. 6:18). Why? Because sexual sin is a sin against our bodies, which are united to Christ (1 Cor. 6:15) and are a temple of the Holy Spirit (v. 19).

Marriage is a creation ordinance designed to establish a covenantal bond of faithfulness and unity between a man and a woman and to provide a place for the procreation and raising of children. The marriage bond is an earthly image of the covenantal relationship between God and His people (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 2:2). This is why Israel's apostasy is often compared to adultery (e.g., Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16:14–63; Hos. 1:2). The same analogy is carried over into the New Testament when marriage is used as an image of the relationship between Christ and the church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:21–24).

Sexual intercourse is reserved for marriage because of the unity it creates between a man and a woman. As Jesus explained, the man and the woman “become one flesh” (Matt. 19:5). That unity in the flesh is built on the covenantal bond of unity established by the covenant of marriage. Sex without the marriage bond creates a union of the flesh without the corresponding covenantal union. This is why fornication is contrasted with marriage in Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor. 7; Heb. 13:4). Those who are unable to control their sexual desires are to get married and not commit fornication (1 Cor. 7:2); we are warned that fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of

God (1 Cor. 6:9–10). Those who have committed this sin are not to attempt to justify it. They are called to repent and confess their sin (1 John 1:9). ♦

28

ABORTION IS A SIN.

ABORTION IS SIN BECAUSE murder is sin (Ex. 20:13; Rev. 21:8). Murder is the unjust killing of a human being. Abortion is murder because abortion is the unjust killing of a human being. Every embryology text on every college and university campus states that the fetus is a genetically distinct individual human being from the moment the sperm cell fertilizes the ovum. In other words, conception is the point in the reproductive process where a new individual human being exists. The fetus, therefore, is not a “potential” human being or a “potential” life. It is an actual genetically distinct human being in its earliest and most defenseless stages of development.

This means that abortion is not merely an abstract debate over a woman’s right to choose. That choice involves the life or death of another individual human being. Abortion is not merely a private medical decision involving a woman and her doctor. It always involves a third distinct human being as well. Abortion is not merely the ending of a pregnancy. Abortion is the murder of a human being. Abortion is not a “right” because no one has the right to kill these human beings any more than they have the right to kill any other human beings. No one has the “right” to commit murder.

Many of those who used to defend abortion by claiming that the fetus is not a human being have been forced by science to abandon that argument. Many of them now grant that the fetus is a human being but deny that it is truly a person. In this way, they follow in the footsteps of racists and genocidal mass murderers of the past who have justified their sins and crimes by denying the personhood of those they hurt or killed.

Like those Europeans and Americans who denied that Africans are truly persons and like the Nazis who denied that Jews are truly persons, the pro-abortionists of today deny that children in the womb are truly persons. Because their definition of personhood is arbitrary and not grounded in anything objective, its boundaries depend solely on the whims of those in power. In some places, the mentally handicapped and those suffering from a variety of illnesses and injuries involving the brain are also in danger of being removed from the category of “persons.”

Abortion is quite simply evil. It is a wickedness that stems from our culture’s lust, narcissism, and pride. ♦

29

GENDER IDENTITY IS A MATTER OF CHOICE.

TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING of this statement, we have to have some grasp of the claims of the transgender movement. Over the last several decades, this movement has become very prominent and very vocal. Transgenderism separates the concepts of sex and gender. According to transgender ideology, sex has to do with biological and physical aspects of a human being (including DNA and sexual anatomy). Gender, on the other hand, has to do with a person’s subjective feelings of being masculine or feminine. The transgender person, generally speaking, is one who identifies

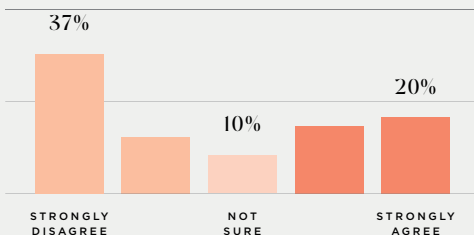
himself or herself with a gender that does not correspond to his or her biological sex. Transgenderism, thus, rejects what it refers to as the “gender binary,” the idea that there are only two genders. Instead, gender exists as a spectrum with an almost limitless number of possibilities.

Transgender ideology stands in direct contrast with Scripture, which teaches that human beings are created in the image of God and are created male and female (Gen. 1:27). There are no other options. Scripture also teaches that our behavior is to correspond with our biological sex. For example, Scripture forbids women from wearing men’s clothes and vice versa (Deut. 22:5).

We cannot choose our biological sex any more than we can choose to be a bird rather than a human. If our subjective experience does not correspond to the real world, for whatever reason, our feelings have to be conformed to reality because reality will never change to match our feelings. If I claim to be a bird trapped in a human body, I can put on a bird mask, say I’m a bird, and even pass laws making everyone else say I’m a bird, but if I leap off the top of a high-rise in an attempt to fly, I am going to die regardless of my feelings.

If the cause of the dissonance between my feelings and the real world is a disorder in the brain like those that cause delusions, hallucinations, and psychoses, then the disorder should be treated appropriately. If the cause of the dissonance is willful rebellion against God’s created order and law, then what is called for is repentance.

Those psychiatrists, psychologists, doctors, legislators, and others who are



pushing everyone to affirm that the dissonance is resolved only by denying the real world may be doing so out of fear of the mob, but whatever the reason may be, they are exacerbating the problem exactly as they would be if they told the man who thinks he is a bird that he really can fly. ♦

30

THE BIBLE’S CONDEMNATION OF HOMOSEXUAL BEHAVIOR DOESN’T APPLY TODAY.

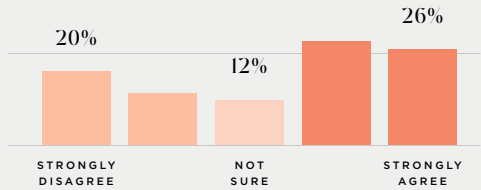
THE FACT THAT a growing number of professing Christians affirm this statement is another example of how much Christians have become conformed to this world as opposed to being conformed to Christ. Scripture repeatedly and clearly condemns homosexual behavior as an abomination. In Leviticus 18:22, for example, homosexual behavior is addressed between child sacrifice and bestiality. In Leviticus 20:13, it is listed alongside incest and bestiality as sins worthy of the death penalty. This indicates that it is among the permanent moral laws of the Old Testament rather than the temporary ceremonial laws found elsewhere in the Pentateuch.

The permanent binding validity of the law against homosexual behavior is confirmed when we discover that it is repeated in the New Testament after the death and resurrection of Christ. In Romans 1:26–27, Scripture speaks of homo-

sexual behavior as a dishonorable passion, an unnatural relation, and a shameless act. All this behavior is a result of God's giving them up to their impure lusts as punishment (1:24–26). Elsewhere Paul says that those who practice homosexuality will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10). He urges his readers not to be deceived about this. Sadly, many contemporary professing Christians are deceiving themselves and others.

Every human faculty has been perverted in one way or another by the fall, and as a result some people are sexually attracted to those of the same sex. Both the desire for sexual and romantic intimacy with a person of the same sex and giving in to the desire are sin. However, there is hope in Christ for those who experience those desires. Redemption includes the restoration of our distorted faculties—our reason and our will and our passions, and it involves putting to death all the works of the flesh. ♦

31. RELIGIOUS BELIEF IS A MATTER OF PERSONAL OPINION; IT IS NOT ABOUT OBJECTIVE TRUTH.



if it is admitted to exist at all, is often relativized.

In classic theological works, opinion, doubt, knowledge, and belief were all ways of responding to a proposition. Opinion meant that you assented to the truth of the proposition while holding out the possibility that it might be false. Doubt meant denying the truth of the proposition while holding out the possibility that it might be true. Knowledge meant assenting to the truth of the proposition on the basis of direct experience. Natural belief meant assenting to the truth of the proposition on the basis of another person's testimony. In this way of thinking, belief, by definition, is not the same as opinion, but both are addressing objective truth. Faith is similar to natural belief, but it is not something that fallen man can do. It is the gift of God.

Jesus Christ claimed to be God incarnate and the only way of salvation (John 14:6). That proposition is either objectively true or it isn't. Every religion in the world either affirms the truth of Christ's claims or else denies it. This means that ultimately every religion is about objective truth. Every religious claim is either objectively true or objectively false based on where it stands in relation to the claims of Jesus Christ. Individuals may think that Christ's claims are true while holding out the possibility that they are false. They may think His claims are false while holding out the possibility that they are true. Neither opinion nor doubt, however, changes the fact that His claims are objectively true. ♦

31

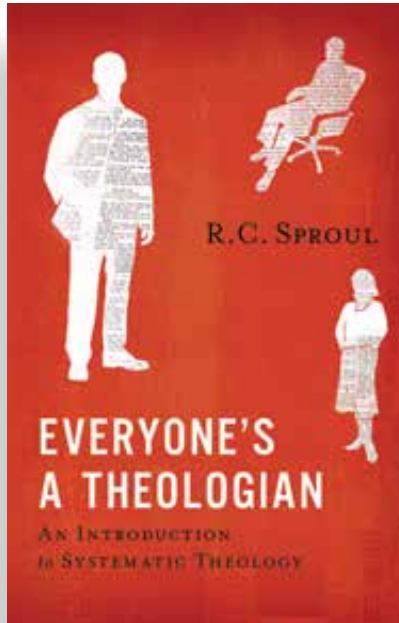
RELIGIOUS BELIEF IS A MATTER OF PERSONAL OPINION; IT IS NOT ABOUT OBJECTIVE TRUTH.

THE USE OF THE WORDS *belief*, *opinion*, and *truth* can be confusing to Christians today because these words have different connotations to different people. Belief is often seen as something one does that is opposed to reason. Opinion is seen as purely subjective and having no binding force. Truth,

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FOR FURTHER STUDY



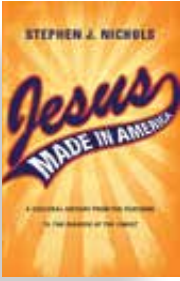
Everyone's a Theologian

R.C. SPROUL

Theology is the knowledge of God, and since everyone is called to know God, everyone is called to do theology (John 17:3). In fact, all of us start to do theology once we begin thinking about God. We are all theologians; the only question is whether we will be good theologians or poor theologians. This introduction to systematic theology by Dr. R.C. Sproul equips readers to be good theologians who are faithful to the Bible's teaching about God and His ways.

Jesus Made in America

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

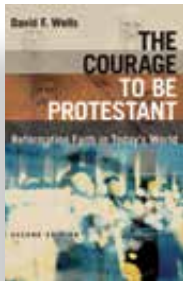
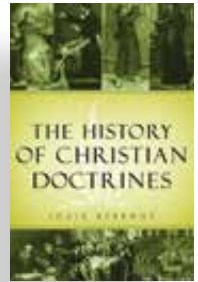


Common views about Jesus in the United States are often shaped more by American culture than by the Bible. It has been this way since the start of the nation. This book traces the history of American depictions of Jesus, exploring how they have frequently been at odds with the Scriptures.

The History of Christian Doctrines

LOUIS BERKHOF

Throughout the history of the church, the people of God have labored to understand what God has revealed about Himself in His Word. This book provides a historical survey of what the church has learned about God from His Word, looking at the development of theology throughout history.



The Courage to Be Protestant

DAVID F. WELLS

Sadly, many Protestants today are Protestant in name only, having abandoned the Reformers' high view of doctrine for the sake of cultural relevance. This important work calls us to return to Protestant distinctives for the sake of discipleship and a coherent Christian witness to the culture.

Stand Firm

JOHN MACARTHUR


This new book considers what Scripture says about the Christian life and our relationship to the culture. It is a helpful guide for serving God faithfully as we endeavor to learn about Him and follow His ways.





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JANUARY 2021 DAILY BIBLE STUDIES

INTO *the* WORD

FIRST CORINTHIANS

CHRISTIANITY IS A relationship and a religion, a personal trust in Christ and a way of life structured by the Word of God. This is evident throughout the New Testament, but it is especially clear in Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth. In 2021, our *Tabletalk* daily studies will cover 1–2 Corinthians, which contain vital instruction on the Christian life.

Many commentators have noted that the Corinthian letters have a special relevance to the modern church. The believers in first-century Corinth lived in a society

not unlike ours, full of sexual permissiveness, wealth, and diverse religious beliefs. Paul’s words to Christians in that kind of culture therefore resonate particularly strongly with us, for we face similar challenges today.

This month, we will look at 1 Corinthians 1:1–3:9, where Paul addresses the problem of factionalism and stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in convincing us of the truth of Christ. That will allow us also to consider the biblical doctrine of regeneration, using Dr. R.C. Sproul’s teaching series *Born Again* as a guide. **TL**

“PAUL’S INTENTION IS PERFECTLY CLEAR—TO ACCOST THE PRIDE OF MAN, THAT NO ONE SHOULD TAKE GLORY IN HUMAN WORKS AND THAT NO ONE SHOULD GLORY IN HIMSELF.”

—*Augustine of Hippo, from Predestination of the Saints* 5.2

ABIDING IN THE WORD

These verses parallel the themes of the studies each week. We encourage you to hide them in your heart so that you may not sin against the Lord:

- Week of January 3 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18
- Week of January 10..... 1 SAMUEL 16:7
- Week of January 17..... JOHN 3:3
- Week of January 24..... DEUTERONOMY 30:6
- Week of January 31..... 1 CORINTHIANS 3:23

TO THE CHURCH OF GOD IN CORINTH

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–3 “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (v. 2).



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

Part of the good news of the gospel is that if we are in Christ, we are regarded as holy. We do not have to make ourselves holy, and in fact we cannot make ourselves holy. Instead, having been set apart to God in Christ, we are to live out that reality. By pursuing personal holiness, we act according to what we truly are in the Lord, and when we sin, we are acting against what the Lord has done for us.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ezekiel 20:12
1 Cor. 1:30–31

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 1–3
Matthew 1

THE WEEKEND

Genesis 4–8
Matthew 2–3

We must know something about the original context of a biblical book to interpret it properly, and understanding the historical context of 1 Corinthians is particularly helpful for understanding this epistle. The city of Corinth, capital of the province of Achaia, was one of the most important cities in the first-century Roman Empire. Located on a narrow isthmus that connected the Peloponnese to the rest of Greece, Corinth was a point of entry into Europe for those traveling from the east. Sailors would transport goods overland through the city from one port to another instead of going around the Peloponnesian peninsula by ship because it enabled them to avoid hazardous sailing conditions. All kinds of people came to the city to benefit from its commercial significance, bringing with them their various religions, philosophies, ethnicities, and more. As such, Corinth was a major city that featured all the benefits and drawbacks one might expect from an important metropolis. One commentator calls it the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world all rolled into one. If you could succeed in Corinth, you could succeed anywhere. So, multitudes of people, with all their virtues and vices, flocked to the city for the prospect of economic gain.

Because of Corinth's strategic location for reaching many different people from around the world, it is little wonder that Paul planted a church in the city, spending eighteen months there sometime between AD 49 and 52 (Acts 18:1–18). First Corinthians is actually the second letter Paul sent to Corinth after leaving the city, as 1 Corinthians 5:9–10 references a letter Paul sent to that church before writing 1 Corinthians. In turn, 1 Corinthians is written in response to a letter sent to Paul from the Corinthian believers (see 1 Cor. 7:1), where they asked the Apostle to take up several matters and questions.

As we will see in our study of 1 Corinthians, the common sins in Corinth made their way into the church. Thus, it is remarkable that Paul, in today's passage, writes that the Christians there were “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2). The fundamental reality for believers, even in our sin, is that we have been set apart as holy unto God in Christ. Having been set apart as holy, we are then called to be holy in practice. We do not make ourselves holy but must live out the holy identity that we possess in Christ. **TC**



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JANUARY 2-3

THE ANXIETY-FREE LIFE

DONNY FRIEDERICHSEN

By numerous measures, people's lives today are safer and better than at any other time in history. Yet, we are constantly crippled by panic and anxiety. What if there was something that would put all the chaos and turmoil of our political systems, global pandemics, societal unrest, and environmental, economic, and ethical problems into perspective? What if you could be free from anxieties? This is the Apostle Paul's wish for you: "I want you to be free from anxieties" (1 Cor. 7:32). But how?

We need to identify the cause of our anxiety. Matthew Henry's commentary on 1 Corinthians laid out five common causes of anxiety. The first is our relationships. Paul's primary point about relationships in 1 Corinthians is this: Undue emphasis on any human relationship adversely affects your relationship with Christ. If your comfort, hope, or rest is in other people, they will eventually let you down, hurt you, or fail you. We must not look to others to fill the place that only Christ can.

The second cause is afflictions. "Mourn as though they were not mourning" (v. 30). Do not indulge in your sorrows. Let go of your sorrow and pain. You invite anxiety into your life when you hold afflictions close to your heart. Instead, meet your sorrow with a holy joy, knowing that God intends good for you (Gen. 50:20; Rom. 8:28).

The third cause is enjoyments. We don't often think of enjoyments as a source of anxiety, but when our pursuit of the next

pleasure becomes primary, the result is anxiety. Matthew Henry said: "Be moderate in mirth and sit loose to the enjoyments you most value. Here is not your rest."

The fourth cause is wealth. Jesus' parable of the great banquet in Luke 14 warns of how wealth can draw us away from what is best. The tighter you grip your possessions, the tighter they grip you.

The fifth cause is worldly concerns. "Those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it" (v. 31). Martin Luther said, "Use what is available but do not sink too deeply into love or desire with it." Consume but take care that you are not consumed. Worldly concerns make fertile the soil of anxiety.

The reason these cause anxiety is a matter of perspective. Paul tells us that the "appointed time has grown very short" (v. 29) and "the present form of the world is passing away" (v. 31). Anxiety takes root when we fail to see life with an eternal perspective. Consider: "In a thousand years, what will I think about this thing which causes me so much anxiety?" The answer is probably not much.

Instead, replace your anxiety with the good, the true, and the beautiful (Phil. 4:8). Fill your life with God's Word, because it is God's Word that points us most clearly to Jesus Christ. He is the wellspring of all that is ultimately good, true, and beautiful. Look to Christ and see your anxieties pass away. **T**

REV. DONNY FRIEDERICHSEN is senior pastor of Lakeside Presbyterian Church in Southlake, Tex.

GOD'S BLESSING ON THE CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 1:4–9 “You are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 7–8).



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

Charles Hodge comments, “Nothing but the righteousness of Christ and the power of God can secure our being preserved and presented blameless in the day of the Lord Jesus.” God keeps His children in faith so that none who have truly been born again can finally fall away. But this is His work, and we must strive to thank God regularly for it, as well as for all the good gifts that He gives us.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 100
1 Corinthians 4:6–7
1 Timothy 4:4
1 Peter 4:7–11

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 9–11
Matthew 4

First Corinthians is an epistle, or letter, and like the other New Testament epistles, 1 Corinthians addresses some very particular issues that were current for its original audience. As we will see particularly in chapters 12–14, the Christians in Corinth had allowed the exercise of spiritual gifts to create strife among them and disorderly worship. Yet Paul does not wait until those chapters to raise the issue of spiritual gifts and their use. He begins dealing with them in today’s passage, right at the beginning of his epistle.

How does the Apostle deal with the issue of spiritual gifts in the Corinthian church? He thanks God that He has given these gifts to the church (1 Cor. 1:4–9). Such a thanksgiving is quite remarkable, as many commentators point out. The Corinthians are having problems related to their giftings by the Holy Spirit, and yet Paul is glad that they have been so gifted. This shows us that real issue is not the gifts in themselves but rather how they are being used. Sadly, any good gift of the Lord can be misused and perverted, but that does not mean the gift itself is a bad thing. When people misuse God’s good gifts, we should reject not the gifts but rather the misuse of them. Because sin remains in us until we are glorified, until we see the Lord face-to-face and are made fully like Him (1 John 1:8–10; 3:2), we always have the potential to abuse the good gifts of God. We can let ourselves get puffed up with spiritual pride because we have certain gifts that others do not. We can overlook significant sins and character flaws on the part of those who have exceptional talent in speaking, teaching, or leading. The way around this is not to reject such gifts but to work to make sure that we and other believers are using them rightly. This begins by acknowledging, as Paul does in today’s passage, that these gifts are from God, not from ourselves. When we keep this in mind, being conscious to thank the Lord for what He has given us, we will remember that we are but stewards of what rightly belongs to God, and we will find greater incentive to use His gifts in the manner He prescribes (see 1 Cor. 4:2; James 1:16–18).

Not only does Paul say that God had gifted the Corinthians “in every way,” but he says that He would sustain them until the end, guiltless in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:5, 8). God never truly regenerates and gifts a person, changing their hearts and granting them faith, without also giving them perseverance. Though Christians sin, God sustains them in Christ until the end. **■**

TROUBLE IN CORINTH

TUESDAY

5

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10–12 “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (v. 10).

We noted in our last study that the Corinthian church, at the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, was experiencing strife related to the misuse of spiritual gifts (see 1 Cor. 12–14). However, other issues were causing trouble among the Corinthian believers as well. As we see in today’s passage, the Christians in Corinth were separating into different factions.

Paul reports in 1 Corinthians 1:11 that some of “Chloe’s people” told him about quarreling in Corinth. These arguments were causing some to separate into different groups, each of which claimed to follow a particular individual (v. 12). Many commentators believe that Chloe was a Christian businesswoman, and her people were probably employees of hers who belonged to the Corinthian church or had met the Corinthian believers in the course of their work. In any case, the disturbance in Corinth was so profound that it motivated Chloe’s people to bring news of the arguments to Paul in Ephesus, where he was living and working when he wrote 1 Corinthians.

What was the nature of the factionalism at Corinth? It probably was not related to differences in foundational doctrine. Paul does not condemn any of the groups listed for the content of their teaching, and Paul was never afraid to condemn any teaching that denied the gospel (Gal. 1:8–9). Instead, it seems that different Christians in Corinth were using their association with particular teachers to try to assert power in the church. We should be clear, however, that this does not mean the named teachers approved of this.

In practice, the factionalism may have looked something like this: The first converts in Corinth might have said, “I follow Paul,” to claim a right to a greater position in the church because they were converted under the ministry of their church’s planter (Acts 18:1–8). Others, possibly because they prized eloquence of speech above all else, may have replied, “I follow Apollos,” and demanded that only the best speakers should lead the church (vv. 24–28). Maybe the individuals who professed, “I follow Cephas [Peter],” had a close personal connection to Peter and believed they should have authority because they knew one of the original twelve disciples (Matt. 10:2). Those who said, “I follow Christ,” might have been individuals who thought they were above the fray altogether, like those today who say, “No creed but Christ,” to argue that they follow no particular church tradition. **TC**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

John Calvin comments, “Then only will there be Christian unity among us, when there is not merely a good agreement as to doctrine, but we are also in harmony in our affections and dispositions, and are thus in all respects of one mind.” Sound doctrine is necessary for true Christian unity, but by itself it is insufficient. We must also love those with whom we agree and not seek to use personal associations to advance ourselves in the church.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Numbers 12
Proverbs 10:12
Ephesians 4:1–3
Philippians 2:1–4

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 12–14
Matthew 5

R.C. Sproul

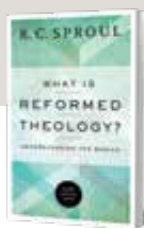
FOUNDER OF LIGONIER MINISTRIES



Dr. R.C. Sproul (1939–2017) dedicated his life to helping people grow in their knowledge of God and His holiness. Throughout his ministry, Dr. Sproul made theology accessible by applying the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life. He was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew’s Chapel in Sanford, Fla., first president of Reformation Bible College, and editor of *Tabletalk* magazine and the *Reformation Study Bible*. Dr. Sproul’s teaching continues to reach millions of people today through the daily podcast *Renewing Your Mind* and hundreds of teaching series, articles, and books, including *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, and *Everyone’s a Theologian*.



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THE SOURCE OF POWER

WEDNESDAY


6

1 CORINTHIANS 1:13–17 “Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (v. 17).

At the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, we have seen, the Corinthian church was plagued by factionalism (1 Cor. 1:10–12). Doctrinal differences did not likely serve as the source of this division; rather, different groups were trying to advance themselves based on their connections to noted figures in the church. Having expressed his knowledge of the situation, Paul in today’s passage explains why such divisions are foolish.

First, Paul asks, “Is Christ divided?” (v. 13). The question answers itself. Christ Himself cannot be divided, so how can brothers and sisters in Christ divide His body? Since Christ has not divided His body based on personal associations, we certainly may not.

Next, Paul shows how wrong it is to improperly use the name of others for advancement in the church by saying that he was not crucified for believers; nor is he the person into whom one is baptized (v. 13). This is true also of any other mere human teacher. It is not wrong, of course, to esteem our fathers and mothers in the faith. Paul himself tells us to give honor to those to whom honor is due (Rom. 13:7). But when we use this honor to justify dividing with those who share the same faith, we have committed a serious sin. Practically speaking, this means that we cannot claim rights for ourselves for inappropriate reasons. For example, we might reason that we have been a member of our church longer than others or we knew its founding pastor.

Paul then expresses his disdain for the Corinthians’ practice by saying he is glad that he baptized only a few people because it means no one can claim him for their side (1 Cor. 1:14–16). In effect, he says, “I am glad you cannot associate me with this nonsense,” which must have had quite an impact on the Corinthians. This leads Paul to state that Christ sent him not to baptize but to preach the gospel—not with eloquence in order not to empty the cross of its power (v. 17). Paul does not mean he had no mandate to baptize, but he is pointing out that the real source of power for Christians is the power of the cross. Furthermore, Paul is not saying that eloquent preaching is wrong. The New Testament is filled with eloquent preaching (for example, the book of Hebrews). Instead, as John Calvin comments, we are to commend the eloquence that “has no tendency to lead Christians to be taken up with an outward glitter of words, or intoxicate them with empty delight, or tickle their ears with its tinkling sound, or cover over the cross of Christ with its empty show as with a veil.” 



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

John Calvin also comments on today’s passage that we should esteem eloquent speech that “tends to call us back to the native simplicity of the gospel.” It is not wrong for our preachers to be well-spoken or to write carefully crafted sermons. The problem comes when speaking is an end in itself and seeks to impress us with rhetoric instead of the cross. Let us encourage our pastors to proclaim the cross.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Exodus 4:1–17
Proverbs 16:23
Acts 18:24–28
1 Corinthians 1:18

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 15–17
Matthew 6

THE WORD OF THE CROSS

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18 “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the
face of God*

The word of the cross is indispensable for salvation and growth in grace. We neglect it at our peril. What this means is that we never go beyond our need for the cross. We can go deeper in our understanding of what the cross accomplished, but we never go beyond the word of the cross. Thus, the atonement must remain central in our study and in the preaching of our churches.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 55:10–11
Jeremiah 1:12
John 3:1–15
Ephesians 1:13–14

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 18–20
Matthew 7

Divisions plagued the first-century Corinthian church as various factions appealed to their associations with noted figures in order to advance themselves in the church. The only solution for the Corinthians, Paul explains, was the preaching of the gospel of the cross of Christ. However important baptism may be, however meaningful one’s personal associations, none of these factors is of first importance (1 Cor. 1:10–17). Moreover, the saving power of the cross does not depend on eloquent rhetoric (v. 17). Indeed, it cannot, as many commentators note. When emphasis is placed on impressing people with one’s speaking talent, the cross cannot cut across all human divisions. The Christian message will remain limited to the educated, which in first-century Corinth was the upper class. Moreover, the problem with focusing on cleverness in speech is that such speech can win the mind, will, and emotions without converting the soul, as one commentator notes. One may also focus on communication style in such a way as to attract vast audiences. But to focus on this at the expense of the gospel is to labor in one’s own power and not the power of Christ crucified.

Our only hope is the “word of the cross,” which is the proclamation of the events of the cross and their meaning. It is the doctrine of the cross, the truth of Christ’s substitutionary atonement that turns away the wrath of God and rescues us from sin, Satan, and death (Rom. 3:21–26; Col. 2:13–15). As Charles Hodge comments on today’s passage, “the doctrine of the cross alone is effectual to salvation.”

In 1 Corinthians 1:18, the Apostle Paul stresses the power of the cross by stating that the “word of the cross” is folly to those who are perishing but the “power of God” for those who are being saved. This statement shows that one’s response to the cross is determined by one’s spiritual state. Only those who are “being saved” will believe the gospel message. Here we have evidence that regeneration precedes faith, that one must be born again by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and granted a new heart receptive to the things of God before he will trust Christ. At the same time, regeneration comes mysteriously through the preaching of the Word. We are “brought . . . forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18). As the gospel is faithfully proclaimed, the Spirit works through the word of the cross to move us to believe that word. This word of the cross also sustains us in salvation, enabling our perseverance unto glory. **TC**

AGAINST WORLDLY EXPECTATIONS

FRIDAY

8

1 CORINTHIANS 1:19–25 “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (vv. 22–24).

In 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, Paul states that the Corinthian believers wrongly tried to use their personal associations with noted Christians to gain church authority. The rest of the chapter explains that such behavior is the worldly way of doing things and incongruous with the power of salvation available only in the cross.

Verse 18, we have seen, reminds us that the word of the cross is the power of God to those who are being saved—believers—but folly to the perishing—the world, which is passing away (1 John 2:17). Why is it foolishness to the world? Because it proves that God effects salvation according to His terms, not our own. Paul argues this in a series of points that begin with his quotation of Isaiah 29:14 in 1 Corinthians 1:19. Isaiah 29 predicts the Assyrian invasion of Judah in the eighth century B.C. and that Judah would be saved by the Lord’s direct intervention and not by human military power. This prediction was fulfilled when the angel of the Lord defeated the Assyrian army, forcing Assyria to withdraw (chs. 36–37). Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, reports that a plague of disease-riddled mice came upon the Assyrian army at that time. So, the angel of the Lord may have used mice to turn Assyria away. In any case, the point in Isaiah 29 is that God would unilaterally save His people in an unexpected way that would cause them to marvel.

That is how God accomplished our final salvation through the cross, which is why Paul quotes Isaiah. Redemption comes in an unexpected, even seemingly foolish, manner—only through the cross (1 Cor. 1:19–20). Most Jews, not knowing the Scriptures, expected a conquering Messiah, not one hung on a tree, cursed in our place by God (see Deut. 21:22–23). They looked for a mighty sign such as the overthrow of the Roman Empire. The Greeks, or gentiles, expected salvation by wisdom, by knowing the secret, hidden truth about the world or the path to follow to earn salvation (1 Cor. 1:22). Nothing could have been more foolish to them than that we are saved by the God-man who dies—according to His human nature—on the cross.

Against worldly expectations, God sovereignly achieved salvation through Christ on the cross. Thus, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (v. 25). The power of salvation comes through apparent weakness. The world’s way of exercising strength via personal associations opposes the way of the cross, so it is wrong to follow the world’s way in the church. **TL**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God alone is the Savior of His people, a fact displayed clearly in the cross of Christ. Only the Lord could use the cross, in all its apparent shame and weakness, to redeem His children. According to His power and wisdom, God has accomplished our redemption through the most unlikely of means—the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Savior.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 43:11
2 Cor. 13:4

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 21–23
Matthew 8

THE WEEKEND

Genesis 24–28
Matthew 9



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JANUARY 9–10

THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR

WILLIAM C. GODFREY

Every new year, God's people have the opportunity to reflect on their times. We often spend the last days of the old year reflecting on the year that has passed with its adversities and blessings. And then we turn to the new year with anticipation and hope.

In Isaiah 61, we read a message of great hope for a new year. Isaiah promises a year that will be known as “the year of the LORD's favor” (v. 2). The promises for this new year are rich. We read glorious words of comfort to those who are afflicted in their inward beings and in their outward circumstances. The message promises comfort to the afflicted of every stripe: the poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the mourners, and the faint in spirit (vv. 1–3).

In Isaiah's context, these afflicted ones are suffering the terrible results of the Babylonian exile. But as a word from the Holy Spirit to God's people in every age, this condition of affliction describes all citizens of heaven living as strangers and exiles in this world.

To these afflicted ones, Isaiah announces the coming of an Anointed One, the Messiah. The Messiah will proclaim the good news of the blessings of the Lord, and He will also provide the blessings He proclaims. We can imagine those in Isaiah's day asking, “Who is this Messiah who will both proclaim the Lord's blessings and provide them to us?” The Lord Jesus Christ is the answer to this question, as Luke 4:16–21 reveals.

In this passage of Luke, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1–2 and sits down to teach. Luke tells us that every eye was fixed on Jesus to hear what He would say about this passage. And here are Christ's awesome words: “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

We should marvel at Christ's words every bit as much as they did that day in the synagogue (see v. 22). Jesus taught plainly that the year of grace that Isaiah foretold was now here. Jesus had come as God's Anointed One to provide blessings to His people. Jesus had come to fix what sin had broken, to repair our inward beings and to restore our outward circumstances.

Isaiah prophesied not only the end to brokenness and affliction but the return of true joy and gladness (Isa. 61:3–7). Jesus Christ has repaired our inward beings by His death on the cross. He is coming again soon in glory to restore our outward circumstances by making all things new. The restoration of the faithful began when Jesus arose triumphantly over death. And Christ will finish His restoring work when He returns to raise us with Him for blessed life in the new creation.

So, as we contemplate the new year and what it holds for us, let us not forget Christ's sure promise: This is the year of the Lord's favor. Let us rejoice and be glad in Him. **11**

REV. WILLIAM C. GODFREY is pastor of *Christ United Reformed Church in Santee, Calif.*

GOD'S CHOICE OF THE FOOLISH


MONDAY

11

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–29 “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (vv. 28–29).

From the earliest days of the Christian church, God’s people have been tempted to do the Lord’s work in a worldly manner. We see this in 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, where we learn that various factions in the first-century Corinthian church attempted to gain power and authority in the church by appealing to their personal connections to Apostles and other noteworthy Christians. That is how the world operates, basing significance and authority on knowing the right people and exalting some figures over others. Such activity operates contrary to the cross, which shows us that the power of salvation comes not through our own connections or use of the world’s wisdom but through the apparent weakness of the cross. Since Christ’s authority came not by appealing to personal connections or by force but only through His obedient death on the cross, Christians can by no means seek authority in the church through any other means but humble service (vv. 18–25; Phil. 2:5–11).

Today’s passage continues the argument that God does not act according to worldly methods by appealing to the kind of people the Lord had saved in Corinth. Paul notes that “not many” of these believers were wise, powerful, or noble by worldly standards. In fact, God saved such people to render null and void the wisdom and strength of the world (1 Cor. 1:26–27). The point is not that the wisdom, knowledge, rankings, wealth, and power celebrated in the world are inherently wrong and cut one off from the possibility of salvation. Paul’s use of the phrase “not many” indicates that some of the Corinthian Christians, though not the majority, possessed qualities esteemed by the world. His point is that these things are irrelevant when it comes to salvation and that so often God chooses what the world does not esteem in order to advance His plan and show that salvation is of Him alone. This has been true from the beginning. For example, against all worldly, cultural expectations, God chose to continue the patriarchal line through Jacob, not his older brother Esau (Gen. 25:23; Rom. 9:10–13).

The Lord works through the lowly so that no one can boast except in His power alone (1 Cor. 1:28–29). For Christians to use their associations with noted and talented church leaders to advance themselves in the church makes us unable to boast in the Lord alone. It takes our eyes off Him and puts them squarely on others, leading us to boast in our connections to them and not in God. 



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God uses the powerless and others whom the world does not expect in order to demonstrate His sovereign power and grace. We should not expect the world to esteem us. So many problems in the church could be avoided if we didn’t care so much what the ungodly world thinks. Let us seek not the world’s approval but the Lord’s approval.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Judges 7
1 Samuel 16:1–13
John 6:41–42
Galatians 1:10

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 29–30
Matthew 10

CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS AND SANCTIFICATION

1 CORINTHIANS 1:30–31 "Because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

John Chrysostom comments that God "gave us Christ so that we should never need anything else for our salvation." We are ever tempted to look to our own works or to the works of others to supplement our salvation. However, today's passage tells us that Christ Himself alone is our salvation. We dare not look to supplement His work, for that means we think His grace and work is insufficient.

Relying on one's personal connection to gifted church leaders for advancement in the church is contrary to the ways of God but in line with the ways of the world. That is because the world prefers those who have the right connections and who have the right talents and strengths. The Lord's wisdom, however, chooses the lowly, saving them through the apparent weakness of the cross, redeeming those with no worldly power or influence in a manner the world never would have chosen. God does this, moreover, so that we can boast in Him alone and not in ourselves or in others (1 Cor. 1:10–29).

The world may not esteem the kinds of people the Lord chooses to save or the way that He acts to bring salvation, but God's view of us is far different. Why? Because, as today's passage tells us, we are in Christ, "who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (v. 30). Here we have one of the most important texts for the biblical doctrine of salvation. Paul does not mean here that Christ came so that we could become wise, righteous, and holy ourselves, although the Holy Spirit does produce such qualities in believers (Gal. 5:22–23). His point, rather, is that Christ actually is these things for us. Paul speaks forensically or judicially here; that is, the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption that we possess before the heavenly court is not found in us. When God must declare whether we are righteous or holy in His heavenly courtroom, the judicial basis for His approval is not anything we do, even the things we do in the power of the Holy Spirit and by His grace. Instead, the very basis for His declaration is Christ Himself, particularly what Christ has done on our behalf.

This forms part of the basis for believing that we are justified—declared righteous by God—based not only on the atoning death of Christ but on His righteousness imputed to us, or put on our record. As John Calvin comments on this verse: "We are on his account acceptable to God, inasmuch as he expiated our sins by his death, and his obedience is imputed to us for righteousness. For as the righteousness of faith consists in remission of sins and a gracious acceptance, we obtain both through Christ." Moreover, that Christ is also our wisdom and holiness reinforces the point that we can be confident before the Lord in Christ because God sees us possessing the very perfection of the Savior. **✠**

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Jeremiah 9:23–24;
23:1–6
Philippians 3:1–11
Hebrews 3:14

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 31–32
Matthew 11:1–19

CHRIST AND HIM CRUCIFIED


WEDNESDAY

13

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5 "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v. 2).

First-century citizens of the Roman Empire prized eloquent, persuasive rhetoric, often elevating the speaker's ability and crafting of phrase above the actual content of what was said. Evidently, the Corinthian Christians loved these kinds of words as well, with at least some of their factionalism based on choosing to elevate well-spoken believers above others. This is clear from 1 Corinthians 1, where Paul contrasts the supposed strength of eloquent speech with the apparent weakness of the cross. But eternal life comes through the truth of the cross, which is the power of God unto salvation even when it is preached ineloquently (1:10-31).

Paul stresses this point again in today's passage when he refers to his ministry among the Corinthians. He has already stated that not many of the Corinthian believers were wise according to worldly standards (v. 26), so they would not have been master rhetoricians. The Apostle expresses his solidarity with the Corinthian believers in this, for he reminds them that he did not come speaking with lofty speech and wisdom (2:1). In fact, he focused not on developing skilled speech but rather on "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (v. 2). The point here is not that it is wrong to speak carefully or to hone one's speaking skills. Rather, Paul means that he did not focus on his speaking abilities at the expense of the content of the preaching. He placed utmost importance on the truth delivered, not the manner of delivery. Charles Hodge notes that in 2:2, "Jesus Christ" refers to His person, and "Him crucified" to His work. Paul unfolded the precious message of who Jesus is and what He has done faithfully but not in the most eloquent manner. Yet, because he explained Christ accurately, he fulfilled his Apostolic task.

This lack of eloquence did not make the message less powerful, nor did the weakness of Paul's person. The gospel still came to the Corinthians in all power (vv. 3-4). Indeed, it had to, for the Word of God always achieves the purposes that God has for it (Isa. 55:10-11). Our eloquence does not make God's Word more powerful even if it is worthwhile to strive to be a good speaker. Moreover, it is good that power is inherent in the Word itself and not in the preacher or his abilities. If it were otherwise, our faith and hope might rest in mere men who preach the Word. Because the power is the Word itself, our faith rests in the author of that Word, the Lord God Almighty (1 Cor. 2:5). 



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God works through His Word when it is faithfully taught and preached, whether the preacher or teacher is eloquent or not skilled in speech. Thus, whether we are ordained church leaders or we simply communicate the Word to others more informally, our primary goal should be to get the content and meaning of Scripture correct. That requires us to be diligent students of God's Word.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Joel 2:11
Zechariah 4:6
1 Corinthians 1:21
1 Peter 1:22-25

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 33-34
Matthew 11:20-30

T H E R E I S

M O R E

T O O U R L I V E S T H A N

“ N O W . ”

I F T H E R E I S N O T , T H E N E V E N

T H E N O W I S M E A N I N G L E S S .

|

R.C. Sproul

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THE HIDDEN WISDOM OF GOD

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–8 “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 understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (vv. 7–8).

**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the
face of God*

Today's passage is a reminder that ultimately, we will not believe in Christ unless the Holy Spirit gives us spiritual eyes to see the truth. That is why, as we work on apologetics and evangelism, we must also pray for the Spirit to give the people to whom we speak new hearts and minds to believe the gospel.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ezekiel 36:26
Acts 8:26–40
Colossians 1:27–28
Hebrews 5:11–14

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 35–36
Matthew 12

Human wisdom has been squarely in focus in 1 Corinthians 1:10–2:5. Paul has labored to show that the cross is at odds with the worldly way of doing things and that those who speak the truth of the cross in weakness are the true servants of God, not those who are wise or clever in speech and use persuasive rhetoric according to the standards of the day. Yet, lest we think the Apostle disdains wisdom altogether, he turns in today's passage to make it clear that there is a wisdom that is to be commended.

The Apostle states in 2:6–7 that he does teach a “secret and hidden wisdom of God” to the “mature.” The word “secret” is the Greek term *mystērion*, which is translated “mystery” in other New Testament texts (e.g., Eph. 3:6). In Paul's letters, a mystery does not refer to something unintelligible or available only to those with a special knowledge. Instead, a mystery is something once hidden but now revealed. Even then, it is something that was not completely hidden but something present more obscurely in the Old Testament and now made crystal clear in the coming of Christ and the revelation of the New Testament. Paul's use of the term “hidden” to refer to this “secret” wisdom (v. 7) confirms that he has in mind a wisdom that is known clearly only in the fuller new covenant revelation.

Of course, this wisdom consists of the truth that God saves people through the crucified and risen Savior (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2). This wisdom is so contrary to the world's wisdom that one can know and believe it only by divine revelation. God's wisdom in the cross says that victory comes through apparent defeat, for only the defeated and disowned were crucified. God's wisdom in the cross says that the way to life passes through death, the death of the Savior who bears the curse we deserve for our sin so that we can have eternal life (John 3:16; Gal. 3:13–14). Ironically, the enemies of the Lord thought they were thwarting His plan when they crucified Christ, the Lord of glory. However, they were actually fulfilling His purposes (Acts 4:27–28). Had they known they were achieving God's ends, they never would have killed Jesus (1 Cor. 2:8).

Such wisdom can be received only by the mature (v. 6), by those who have been given new hearts and minds by the Spirit (John 3:3). The Corinthians were actually part of this group, for they had believed the gospel. But they had temporarily forgotten the wisdom of God in favor of the world and its wisdom. 📖

REVELATION THROUGH THE SPIRIT



1 CORINTHIANS 2:9–11 “These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (v. 10).

Before we move on to our study of today’s passage, we should reflect just a little bit more on the phrase “crucified the Lord of glory” in 1 Corinthians 2:8. This text contributes to our understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* (communication of properties), or the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ. The orthodox, biblical, historical doctrine of Christ says that a true human nature and the true divine nature are united in the one divine person of Jesus Christ. These natures are not changed by the union, and each nature retains its own unique properties. However, since the natures are perfectly united in the one person of Christ, the properties of each nature belong to the one person. So, when Paul says the “Lord of glory” was crucified, He is not saying that Christ endured any change according to His divine nature, such as from life to death, for deity cannot change (Mal. 3:6). The change that happened—passing from life to death in the crucifixion—was according to the human nature of Christ. Yet, because this nature belongs to the person of the Son of God, Paul can say that the Lord of glory was crucified. The One who is the Lord of glory according to His divine nature suffered death according to His human nature.

This suffering and death manifests the wisdom of God, which is not available to the worldly, to those who have not been enabled to believe the gospel (1 Cor. 1:10–2:8). Paul continues this train of thought in 1 Corinthians 2:9, stating that “it is written” that “the heart of man” could not imagine that God would save His people through the atoning death of His Son. The Apostle’s quotation is not from any one Old Testament text but appears to be a paraphrased amalgamation of several texts about the glories of the Lord and the unexpected ways that He intervenes for His people (see, for instance, Ps. 118:23; Isa. 43:19; 64:4). Paul’s point is that the Old Testament foresees salvation through a crucified Messiah and that it takes a special revelation by God to believe it.

First Corinthians 2:10–11 tells us that God the Holy Spirit is the agent who reveals this truth to us. Just as only the soul or spirit of a human being knows his thoughts, only the Spirit of God knows God’s thoughts. Only the Spirit can discern the deep things of the Lord, so only the Holy Spirit can reveal them to us and cause us to believe. People come to faith only through a supernatural act, the divine granting of faith to the elect of God. **✠**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

We do not need a testimony of how God saved us from grievous, public sin to demonstrate the power of the cross. Every act of salvation manifests the work of the Spirit. Even people who live apparently upright lives before their conversions are saved through the sovereign transformation of the Holy Spirit. If we are Christians, let us thank the Lord for changing our hearts and giving us faith.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Jeremiah 31:31–34
Romans 8:26–27

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 37–38
Matthew 13:1–23

THE WEEKEND

Genesis 39–44
Matthew 13:24–58



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JANUARY 16–17

MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN OURSELVES

ERIC KAMOGA

When we follow God's call to count others as more significant than ourselves (Phil. 2:2–4), love produces unity. The humble person values others above himself, seeking others' interests and choosing others over self. In contrast, conceit views oneself as most important, and its partner, selfish ambition, places one's own interests above those of others.

The world, which chooses selfish ambition, perceives the one who submits or lays down his life in love as lesser or weak, but the Trinity's acts of love for humans show that such love does not diminish one's worth. The Father's giving up His Son for us didn't make Him of less value than us, nor did Christ's submission to the Father make Him less God than the Father. Christ counted us significant, laying down His life, yet He is the eternal Son of God, far surpassing humans in worth. His sacrifice did not lessen His worth. The Son manifested His love of the Father by becoming incarnate to reveal the Father, and the Spirit came to reveal the Son, not Himself. The Son and Spirit's seeking the interests of another does not imply that They are less worthy than the One They reveal.

Love demonstrates rather than diminishes the lover's worth. Paradoxically, the lover, as he considers the other more significant, becomes more significant to his beloved. God's love for us does not make us feel more important than God but rather magnifies God's greatness. His love also helps us see our worth. Thus, placing the other before the self manifests both the worth of the lover and of the beloved.

Since God is love, self-conceit is impossible within the Godhead. Because each person of the Trinity perfectly loves the others, other-centeredness is at the core of the nature of the Trinity, which is why the Trinity has perfect unity. God calls us, as His image bearers, to be other-centered. He calls us to love Him and our neighbor by laying down our lives for Him and for our neighbor (Luke 9:24; John 15:12–13; 1 John 3:16). Our neighbors includes those unlike us and “our enemies” (Rom. 5:6–8), whose views and values we find problematic or even unacceptable. God commands the wife to submit to her husband and the husband to lay down his life for his wife (Eph. 5:22–28), for love, via submission or self-sacrifice, places the other before the self without devaluing the lover.

We see love in Moses' and Paul's desire to be cut off for their brothers' sake (Ex. 32:31–32; Rom. 9:1–3) and, ultimately, in Christ, who was cut off for our sake. When love reigns, it engenders unity (John 17:20–26; Eph. 5:28–32)—the lover so intimately identifies himself with his beloved that the beloved and lover become one, sharing joys and sorrows.

When we see what God's command to love entails, we realize how our love often falls short and how we are unable to love without God's working in us the love of Christ, who laid down His life for our forgiveness and transformation, empowering us to love. **T**

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SPIRITUAL TRUTHS FOR THE SPIRITUAL

1 CORINTHIANS 2:12–13 “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.”



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

The first-century Corinthians sought primacy over one another based on their gifts and associations, thinking of some as spiritual and others as not spiritual. Paul eliminates this distinction in today's passage. All Christians are people of the Holy Spirit, so we cannot draw a distinction between spiritual and nonspiritual Christians. All who are in Christ are spiritual and have the same standing before God in Christ.

FOR FURTHER STUDY


Numbers 11:29
John 3:8
Colossians 1:9–14
Jude 20

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 45–46
Matthew 14:1–21

Pneumatology, or the doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, is one of the major categories of systematic theology. Like other categories of systematic theology, pneumatology seeks to use the entire Bible in formulating doctrine. Nevertheless, certain biblical texts stand out as particularly important for our understanding of the Spirit.

First Corinthians 2 plays a key role in our understanding of the Holy Spirit. Thus far, our study of this chapter has focused primarily on the work of the Spirit, particularly in His task of revealing the truth of the gospel of Christ crucified and persuading us of its truth (vv. 6–10). Yet, we dare not miss the fact that 1 Corinthians 2 has vital things to tell us about the person of the Holy Spirit as well. For instance, verses 10–11 offer confirmation of the deity of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us in these verses that the Holy Spirit “comprehends the thoughts of God.” Scripture reveals a strong distinction between the Creator and His creatures, manifest in the Creator’s possession of certain attributes that we do not have, including omniscience, or the knowledge of all things. As a consequence of omniscience and the infinity of the divine nature, the thoughts of God are higher than our thoughts and can be known fully only by Him (Isa. 55:8–9). Since the Holy Spirit can comprehend the thoughts of God, and since only God can do that, the Spirit must therefore be God.

We cannot know God and His thoughts fully, but we can know Him and His thoughts truly—if the Spirit reveals God to us (1 Cor. 2:6–10). The first-century Corinthian Christians had received the Spirit’s revelation, for they had come to trust in Jesus (Acts 18:1–11). They were, however, neglecting the Spirit in their pursuit of worldly wisdom that sought to use personal associations for self-advancement and to exalt themselves as more spiritual than others. Paul calls them away from this in 1 Corinthians 1–2, reminding the Corinthians of the wisdom of the cross, which stands against all sinful self-advancement. And in 2:12–13, the Apostle directs them away from the world and back to the Spirit of God, who speaks through the Apostle not in words of human wisdom but with spiritual truths to the spiritual. Effectively, the Apostle calls the entire audience spiritual and thus able to receive the truths of God’s Spirit, provided they are listening and not following the ways of the world. All who trust in Christ are spiritual and have access to the Spirit’s wisdom. 

POSSESSING THE MIND OF CHRIST

TUESDAY


19

1 CORINTHIANS 2:14–16 “The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ” (vv. 15–16).

Worldly wisdom has its appeal, which is why Christians perennially struggle not to live by it. We are tempted to prize talent over character, to be pragmatic rather than principled, to use our connections to assert ourselves in the church, to view our gifts as more necessary and better than others’ gifts.

Twenty-first-century believers are not the first to succumb to worldly wisdom from time to time. Indeed, until Jesus returns, the worldly way of doing things will remain enticing because the presence of sin remains until we are glorified (Rom. 7:7–25). Our only hope is to be changed by the Holy Spirit so that we begin to reject worldly wisdom and embrace the wisdom of God, displayed preeminently in the cross. This is the wisdom that engages in service instead of sinful self-advancement, lives by spiritual principles instead of mere pragmatics, and that does not prize our own gifts and callings above others. This is the humble way of Christ crucified, who came not to exploit His advantages at the expense of others but to serve (Phil. 2:5–11).

Paul has commended this wisdom to the Corinthians—and to us as well—noting that it comes only by the Spirit to those whom the Spirit regenerates (1 Cor. 1:10–2:13). In today’s passage, Paul brings this part of his argument to a conclusion by stressing that the “natural person,” with his worldly wisdom, is unable to discern this truth (2:14). It is not that the natural man is intellectually incapable of recognizing the content of spiritual wisdom as the Apostle has described it. The problem, instead, is moral. Hard hearts cannot believe that the wisdom of God is the right way or that Christ, in His apparent weakness on the cross, is the Almighty Savior. Only the person renewed by the spirit—the “spiritual person”—can believe this.

On the other hand, the “spiritual person,” because of the work of the Spirit, can judge, discern, or believe all these truths. This spiritual person is understood or judged by no one, that is, not by the “natural person” (v. 15). Paul does not mean that Christians cannot rightly be evaluated by others or that we are accountable to no one outside ourselves. He is saying that the unregenerate do not know what to make of believers. They will think us foolish and will not accept that our beliefs and lives formed by the Spirit are good and proper. That should not worry us, for by the Spirit we have the mind of Christ (v. 16). We know and believe His thoughts given to us in His Word and confirmed in us by the Holy Spirit. 



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

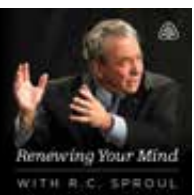
Sin remains in us until we are glorified, so we will sometimes live by worldly wisdom and not the wisdom of God in Christ. If we are in Christ, however, there is hope, for our new hearts given by the Spirit cannot be content while we are living contrary to the Lord. When we see ourselves following the wisdom of the world, we must seek renewal according to the mind of Christ, feeding on His Word and asking Him to help us heed His wisdom.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 30:6
Proverbs 1:10
Romans 12:1–2
James 3:13–18

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 47
Matthew 14:22–36



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REGENERATION REQUIRED

JOHN 3:1–3 “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3).



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

The phrase *born-again Christian* is redundant. After all, if regeneration is required to be a citizen of God’s kingdom, there is no such thing as a Christian who is not born again. Sadly, however, many people are counting on their birth to Christian parents or on being a church member to secure their salvation. Neither will suffice. Let us not put our confidence for salvation in such things but instead let us trust in Jesus.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 51:1
Ezekiel 36:26
1 Peter 1:3–5
1 John 3:1–10

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Genesis 48–49
Matthew 15:1–28

The wisdom of God displayed in the crucifixion of Christ cannot be received by the natural or unspiritual person. We can come to believe it only through the work of the Holy Spirit, as Paul has told us throughout 1 Corinthians 2. The work of the Spirit to give us new hearts that are able to believe God’s revelation and trust in the Christ of the gospel is also known as the act of regeneration. We will now take a break from our studies in 1 Corinthians to consider what the Bible as a whole has to say about regeneration. Dr. R.C. Sproul’s teaching series *Born Again* will guide us.

We may not hear the word *regeneration* all that often in common discourse, but that does not mean we hear no talk of regeneration. Another phrase associated with the concept became quite familiar even to secular people in the 1970s with the election of Jimmy Carter, a self-professed “born-again Christian,” as president of the United States. Even today, it is easy to find bumper stickers, billboards, tracts, and other materials featuring the question, “Have you been born again?” Regeneration deals with the issue of what it means to be “born again.” In fact, the English word *regeneration* comes into the language from two Greek words that can be rendered “born again.”

Importantly, every Christian church has some doctrine of regeneration because it is almost impossible to miss Jesus’ mandate that we be “born again.” Christ insists on this in His well-known meeting with Nicodemus, which is recorded in John 3:1–21. There, Jesus tells Nicodemus unequivocally that “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). We can see from this text that regeneration is required to become a citizen of the Lord’s kingdom and an heir of eternal life. Other texts, such as Ezekiel 11:19–20, point us to our need of having our hearts of stone, set against God, replaced with hearts of flesh that love our Creator.

Regeneration, the new birth, is not optional. Pharisees such as Nicodemus found this concept difficult because many of them believed they were part of God’s kingdom simply because they were physical descendants of Abraham. They were wrong. Mere physical descent does not avail for salvation. The Holy Spirit must change our hearts so that we can become children of God (John 3:5–8; 8:31–59). **TC**

THE MYSTERY OF REGENERATION



JOHN 3:4–8 “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (v. 8).

Jesus makes it absolutely clear to us in John 3:3 that we must be born again if we are to enter the kingdom of God and inherit eternal life (John 3:1–3). This means, as we have seen, that we are not children of God simply by our relation to other Christians. Instead, being “born again”—regeneration—is a spiritual reality. The Holy Spirit must change our hearts so that we can believe the gospel. We must receive living hearts of flesh to replace our stone hearts that are dead in Adam (Ezek. 11:19–20; Rom. 5:12–21).

Understanding that we must be born again by the Spirit of God does not mean that we know exactly how He accomplishes this aspect of our redemption. Much of the Spirit’s work in our lives is mysterious, in fact. We know the reality of the Holy Spirit, yet we cannot grasp all that He does. This is particularly true of the inner, invisible work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Jesus tells us as much in John 3:4–8, and especially in verse 8. Christ compares the movement of the Spirit to the blowing of the wind, an easy comparison for him to make, since the Hebrew word for “wind” (*ruach*) and the Greek word for “wind” (*pneuma*) are the same words used for “spirit.” The work of the *pneuma*, or “spirit,” is like the *pneuma*, or wind, as both are invisible, largely unpredictable, and uncontainable.

Although we can see the effects of the wind in the bending of tree branches, the waving of tall grass, and the scattering of leaves, we cannot see the wind itself. That does not make the wind any less real or powerful. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. None of us can observe with our eyes the moment that He gives someone a new heart. No one can describe exactly how He does it. Still, we can observe the changes that the Spirit effects in a person.

The work of God the Holy Spirit can be seen most plainly in the spiritual fruit that He produces in the lives of His people (Gal. 5:22–23). Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control—these and more are what we see in people who have been born again. Not all the fruits are present in equal measure, but they are all present to some degree. When it comes to spiritual things, those who have not been born again produce no fruit. Moreover, the fruits we see are not perfect in this life, for sin remains until we are glorified (1 John 1:8–9). But the fruits are truly present. Evidences of these qualities in our lives provide objective proof of the subjective transformation effected in regeneration.



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Christians should be on the lookout for the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. At the same time, we dare not become fearful when we realize that the fruit we produce is often immature. We are looking for the presence of true fruit, not perfect fruit. And we do not look for these things in order to merit salvation but as proof that we are in Christ and thus citizens of His kingdom.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Joel 2:28–29
Matthew 3:8
1 Timothy 1:17
1 John 4:2–3

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR
Genesis 50–Exodus 1
Matthew 15:29–16:4

THE BEGINNING OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

EPHESIANS 2:1–10 “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (vv. 4–5).



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

We will not be entirely free from the presence of sin until we are glorified. One day we will be perfectly like Jesus (1 John 3:2). That day has not yet arrived, since we are still on this side of heaven. But when the Spirit changes our hearts, He also comes to live within us to enable us to fight sin in our lives. We are not in a losing war against sin, so let us be encouraged this day to say no to evil and yes to righteousness. The Spirit will help us do so.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ezekiel 37:1–14
1 Timothy 1:15–17

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 2–4
Matthew 16:5–28


THE WEEKEND

Exodus 5–8
Matthew 17

The precise timing of regeneration continues to be an issue that professing Christians disagree on. In the broader evangelical movement, several different views of regeneration are common. Frequently, well-known evangelical preachers speak as if regeneration is a consequence of faith or as if it follows faith. Other views of regeneration equate it with conversion, effectively identifying the moment we come to faith with the moment we get a new heart. Finally, there is the Reformed view that says regeneration precedes faith and is necessary for us to exercise faith in the Savior.

Ultimately, the biblical evidence demonstrates the truth of the Reformed view. Certainly, because regeneration is invisible, we cannot always tell the difference between regeneration and conversion. We cannot always make a sharp distinction in time between the point at which the Spirit gives us a new heart and the point when we first believe. Nevertheless, regeneration must precede faith according to John 3:3. Jesus says that we cannot even see the kingdom of God until we are born again, and how can we enter the kingdom if we cannot see it? In regeneration, the Spirit opens our spiritual eyes to the truth of Christ, and then we trust Him.

Ephesians 2:4–5 also supports the Reformed view of regeneration. Before we came to know Jesus as Savior, we all were dead in our sins, spiritually speaking. The death metaphor is important, of course, because dead people cannot do anything. We cannot will ourselves back to physical life. Our only hope is for someone to restore us to the land of the living. Being spiritually dead, we cannot raise ourselves to life. We do not want—indeed, we cannot want—anything to do with the one true God apart from the Spirit’s work. The initiative is His. The Holy Spirit raises us to new spiritual life, and we trust in the Savior. Thus begins our spiritual pilgrimage, as in our sanctification we seek to become more and more like Christ.

Since regeneration starts but does not conclude our spiritual walk, being born again does not end the struggle with sin. Actually, it intensifies this struggle. Regeneration ends the dominion of sin over us and reorients us toward the way of Christ. Yet the presence of sin remains, and we war against it (Rom. 7:7–25). We are called to put to death the lusts of the flesh. We thus are to remain vigilant, knowing that regeneration begins this war within us. 



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JANUARY 23-24

PRESERVED THROUGH PILGRIMAGE

ROBERT VANDOODEWAARD

Many Christians look forward to going to conferences or camps year after year. There is a familiar journey, with anticipation building as landmarks are passed along the way. Finally there is the joy of seeing old friends and listening to cherished teachers. For the ancient Hebrew, going to the temple for feasts must have been something like this, yet for them the journey was likely far more difficult than our annual journeys are for us. Psalm 121 is a “Song of Ascents” that many of them would have sung as they traveled, and it gave them the hope that the Lord preserves His people throughout their pilgrimage.

In order to get to Jerusalem, many Israelites had to walk hundreds of miles. They had to pass through valleys and dry places, alongside cliffs and past caves. They walked through wilderness areas where there were predators and bandits. Many would come by way of the paths along the Jordan River valley, which meant they later had to climb thousands of feet to get to the temple. As the psalmist considered that difficult climb, he wrote, “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come?” (v. 1). It is a question for anyone facing a journey, a trial, or even death itself. Where does your help come from? How will you get through this day?

The right answer is found in the next verse: “My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” This line is really a tremendous confession of faith. The hills were big, the challenges sobering. Yet the psalmist confessed that his

help came from Jehovah, the truly existing God, who keeps all His promises and who is the Maker of the heavens and the earth. He is the Lord of the hills and the valleys. This is a firm profession of faith in almighty God.

In many Reformed churches, this truth, as it is echoed in Psalm 124:8, is the opening of every church service. “Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.” It is often called the *votum*, which means “vow.” It is not a phrase to take lightly or to recite mechanically. It is an appropriate confession of God’s people as they start a week, and it ought to be our confession as we draw ever nearer to the heavenly throne of Jehovah. Without Him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). In the person and finished work of Christ, who has ascended to the true Holy of Holies, we find our help and our hope. Even more, He has promised to send the Helper, the Holy Spirit, for the advantage of His disciples (John 16:7).

Those who confess this help have a great hope. It is poetically illustrated by the Lord’s care for pilgrims in the rest of Psalm 121. The Lord sustains, watches over, protects, and preserves His children. Though many would face dangers, and all eventually would die, the psalm ends with an eternal promise: “The *Lord* will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and forevermore” (Ps. 121:8). **T**

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GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN REGENERATION

ACTS 9:1–19 “Falling to the ground, [Saul] heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do’” (vv. 4–6).



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

The Lord is sovereign in regeneration because He is sovereign in salvation. This is good news for us because it means God never fails to save those whom He has chosen. And it also means that we can glorify only the Lord for our redemption.

Different conceptions of regeneration exist even among Bible-believing Christians, and these differences are some of the most significant reasons for division in the church today. Why do these differences exist? Largely because we differ over the way that God works in regeneration. Fundamentally, all views of regeneration encapsulate one of two views of the way that God works in His people to bring them to new spiritual life: monergism or synergism.

In synergism, we are speaking of a “working together.” That is, human beings and God cooperate to achieve the new birth in human souls. To be sure, the Lord takes the initiative. He calls out to the hearts of unbelievers to change, even giving them enough grace to be able to say yes to this call. Nevertheless, God does not guarantee that we will embrace Him. The choice is finally up to us. We get enough grace to be “barely alive,” as it were, and we must do the rest to be fully revived from spiritual death. The problem, of course, is that the Bible never says we cooperate with God in being made alive. We come into the world spiritually dead, and He alone makes us alive, with no help from us (Ps. 51:5; Eph. 2:4–5). Furthermore, in putting regeneration after our faith, synergism does not uphold Jesus’ teaching in John 3:3. If we must be born again before we can see the kingdom of God, we must be born again before we can believe the gospel.

Monergism, on the other hand, consists of a “working alone.” God and God alone acts in regeneration. The Holy Spirit sovereignly transforms our souls, bringing us to full spiritual life. The Lord not only enables us to choose Jesus, but He also guarantees we will choose Him. In God’s monergistic work of regeneration, we are not born again because we trust Jesus; we trust Jesus because we are born again.

Today’s passage helps to confirm that God’s work in regeneration is sovereign and monergistic. There is no hint that Saul of Tarsus was willing to consider, let alone follow, Jesus the Messiah before that pivotal day on the road to Damascus. Saul actually was dead set on destroying the body of Christ. That all ended when Jesus spoke to him. Saul offered no resistance when Christ knocked him to the ground. The Holy Spirit changed his heart, ensuring that Paul would become the Apostle to the gentiles (Acts 9:1–19). God did not merely ask Saul to believe; He guaranteed that he would believe. **11**

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 30:6
1 Samuel 3
Ezekiel 36:26
Acts 10

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 9–10
Matthew 18:1–20

THE IMMEDIACY OF REGENERATION

TUESDAY

26

LUKE 1:39–45 “When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 41).

God is sovereign, and He works alone in the act of regeneration, as we saw in our look at monergism and synergism. That raises the issue of whether God uses means to bring a person from spiritual death to spiritual life. Does He use any created tools to regenerate sinners, or does He act directly?

What we are talking about is the immediacy of regeneration, and we affirm that regeneration is immediate. But we are not talking about immediate in the sense of time. Often, when we say something happens immediately, we mean that it happened in the moment. For example, a child who immediately obeys her parents acts right after they finish giving her an order. That is not what we mean when we say regeneration is immediate. Instead, we mean that God acts directly on the heart and soul of a person. He does not, for example, regenerate us in the act of baptism, as some theological traditions teach. Water baptism is not a means that God works in to guarantee regeneration in all who are baptized, though it is a sign of regeneration that the Lord is pleased to give to His people to strengthen their faith.

To say that God acts immediately to regenerate people is not to say that the Lord never works through means. He ordinarily creates faith in us through the preaching of the gospel, for we cannot be saved unless we hear about our sin and the work of Christ (Rom. 10:14–17). But the actual change of heart from which faith comes is produced in us directly and immediately by God. Only He can bring dead sinners to life (Eph. 2:4–5).

Today’s passage is typically used to support the immediacy of regeneration. When Mary came to Elizabeth, John the Baptist leaped in his mother’s womb in response to the presence of Christ in Mary’s womb (Luke 1:41). No gospel was preached to John at this point. He was not baptized or circumcised. Yet, he leaped in the womb because he recognized Jesus’ presence. Such joy is possible in Christ’s presence only for those who have been given new life, so it is likely that John had that new spiritual life. And being in his mother’s womb, it could have come only if God had acted on him directly. His faith came later, after his birth, when he was capable of belief, but his faith was evidence of prior regeneration; his faith was not itself regeneration. Similarly, if we have saving faith, then we know we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. **TD**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

We may not be able to pinpoint the exact time of our regeneration, but one thing is for sure: a person is either regenerate or he is not. There is no partial regeneration. Even if we may not feel particularly holy at times, if we have trusted in Christ, we have been regenerated and have been set apart unto Him. May that knowledge encourage us to live changed lives, full of love for God and neighbor, that are the fruit of a regenerate life.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Nehemiah 8:1–8
Jeremiah 1:4–5
Acts 2:1–41
1 Corinthians 2:12

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 11–12
Matthew 18:21–35

REGENERATION LASTS FOREVER

PHILIPPIANS 1:6 “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

**CORAM DEO**

*Living before the
face of God*

Everyone who has been a Christian for any length of time likely knows somebody who seemed to be a believer but yet has renounced the faith. Today, if you know such a person, pray for him, asking God to draw him back. And let us pray daily that the Lord will keep us in faith and give us the courage to repent when we have fallen.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Samuel 11–12
2 Chron. 33:1–20
Luke 15:11–32
Romans 8:31–39

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 13–16
Matthew 19:1–15

Regeneration is required for salvation. Regeneration is mysterious, operating apart from our sight. Regeneration precedes faith. Regeneration is the sovereign and immediate work of God. But that is not all that the Bible says about regeneration. We must now consider one final aspect of the biblical teaching on the matter—namely, the permanence of regeneration. Looking at the entire scope of divine revelation, we see that regeneration lasts forever.

Many passages of Scripture tell us that once the Holy Spirit renews us and grants us faith, He preserves us in that state for all eternity. Christians can fall into grievous sin. Some may even deny the faith for a time. However, the Lord never allows one of His true, reborn children to fall away finally. If a person with authentic faith seems to fall away, he will return to Christ before he draws his final breath.

Philippians 1:6 is one of the most important and clearest texts on this subject. Paul asserts that God will certainly bring to completion the good work that He begins in us. We need not doubt that our Creator will preserve us unto glory. He never abandons the work of renewal that He begins in regeneration, but He sees it through to glorification. In truth, we would be without hope if it were otherwise. Left to ourselves, none of us would continue in a state of grace and faith. Sin is real and powerful, and it leads only to death (Rom. 6:23). Without the Lord’s preserving work, the sin that remains would overtake us and snuff out any spiritual life that we have. But God preserves His children. This is not a passive work wherein we just sit back and relax. The Apostle also tells the Philippians to work out their salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Those who have been born of God seek to love and serve Him. Ultimately, however, this seeking comes from the Lord. Paul also tells us that God is at work in us to will and to work for His good pleasure (v. 13). His power and grace are what keep us in the faith, not our efforts.

Nevertheless, we cannot grow complacent. When we have sinned, we must repent and return to the Lord, knowing that He will certainly restore us (1 John 1:8–10). Those who continue in conscious sin, thinking that grace will abound, have misunderstood grace and likely have never truly believed in Christ in the first place (Rom. 6:1–4). Furthermore, we must pray for those who seem to have fallen away. Until they die, there remains hope for their return to Christ and His church. We cannot write anyone off as unsavable. **✠**

UNSPIRITUAL PEOPLE

THURSDAY

28

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–4 “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (v. 1).

Today we return to our study of 1 Corinthians. Paul has just concluded his long exposition of the wisdom of God in the cross, which is contrary to the worldly wisdom that led to divisions among the Corinthian believers. God’s wisdom, manifested in the apparent weakness of the cross, leads to service and self-denial. It is at odds with the Corinthian factionalism, where people used the worldly method of appealing to personal associations and to their giftings to exalt themselves. Because such wisdom is counterintuitive to unregenerate people, it must be revealed by the Holy Spirit. Such wisdom formed the heart of Paul’s teaching, and it is received only by the spiritual, the regenerate (1 Cor. 1:10–2:16).

Paul was frustrated with the Corinthians over their factionalism because in reality they were spiritual people who had trusted Christ and should have known all this (see Acts 18:1–11). Yet, as Paul says in today’s passage, he could not address them as spiritual people “but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). He should not have had to review with them the truth of God’s wisdom in the cross, for that was the spiritual milk that he gave to them in planting the church. The Apostle gave them that milk—that basic teaching—when he ministered to them in person because they were not ready for solid food, the deeper things of the gospel. Tragically, when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, they remained unable to receive solid food even though they should have been prepared for it (v. 2). This was not an inherent inability; otherwise Paul could not have expressed frustration with the Corinthians throughout the Corinthian letters. The Corinthians were unable because they were choosing to be worldly and unprepared for further gospel teaching beyond what they had received (vv. 3–4). John Chrysostom comments, “The Corinthians’ inability to receive solid food was not by nature but by choice, so they were without excuse.”

Finally, the difference between spiritual milk and spiritual solid food is one of degree, not kind. Otherwise, Peter could not commend Christians of all maturity levels to long for the pure spiritual milk of God’s Word (1 Peter 2:2). Spiritual milk (the basics of the faith) and spiritual solid food (the deeper points and application of the gospel) both concern Christ, as John Calvin comments. We do not grow beyond the gospel, but we do go deeper into it. The Corinthians had chosen to not go deeper. Let us not repeat their mistake. **TC**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Charles Hodge comments on today’s passage, “Every thing which God has revealed is to be taught to every one just so fast and so far as he has the capacity to receive it.” Spiritual solid food is not secret, esoteric knowledge of the faith. It is simply what has been publicly revealed but which first requires an understanding of other doctrines. Let us pursue knowledge of the basics so that we can know the fuller truths of the gospel.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Nehemiah 8:13
Mark 4:34
2 Timothy 2:15
2 Peter 3:18

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 17–19
Matthew 19:16–30

GOD GIVES THE GROWTH

1 CORINTHIANS 3:5–9 “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor” (vv. 7–8).

**CORAM DEO**

Living before the face of God

Augustine of Hippo calls us to renounce the pride that can come with glorying in our gifts or in the gifts of others. He comments, “Since the apostles would not have accomplished anything if God had not given the increase, how much more true is this of you or me, or anyone else of our time, who fancies himself as a teacher.”

God expands His church through us.

The power and results are His, not ours.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Hosea 14:4–7
John 15:1–11

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Exodus 20–22
Matthew 20:1–16

THE WEEKEND

Exodus 23–26
Matthew 20:17–21:32

Since the first-century Corinthian Christians had been converted through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit and His revelation of the gospel to them (Acts 18:1–11; 1 Cor. 1:4–9; 2:1–16), they were in fact spiritual people. Yet, as is often the case with spiritual people—that is, believers in Christ—the first-century Corinthians were not acting in a spiritual way but were following worldly wisdom. Paul makes this point again in 1 Corinthians 3:4, where he says that their factionalism that pitted one teacher against another embodied what it means to act in a “merely human” way.

Why is it merely human to divide into factions and use personal connections and affinities to try to gain position in the church? Because it means we are looking to human beings and their gifts and talents for power, forgetting that all who are in Christ have the true God in common and that any success we have in ministry comes from Him. The Lord does give different gifts to His people, and some, such as the Apostles, have gifts that are more prominent than others, but that does not mean the growth and health of the church are due finally to those individuals. The church’s growth and health, rather, come from God. This is the heart of Paul’s argument in today’s passage.

To focus on the gifted individual and not the gift giver is contrary to the ways of God because it denies the sovereign power of God in the gospel to convert and edify the elect (see 1:10–31). Believers, by the grace of God, may play a significant role in the kingdom of God. Yet, they do not determine the expansion and success of this kingdom. This is true even of noted Christian teachers such as Apollos and founding Apostles such as Paul. Each believer is gifted by God and granted a task such as planting the gospel through preaching or facilitating the growth of believers’ faith and practice through edifying instructions. Nevertheless, any growth that comes is from God, just as a farmer can credit the growth of his crops only to the Lord, despite the efforts he puts into it (3:6–7). In the grand scheme of things, we are but servants who work according to God’s design, and He effects spiritual growth, not us (v. 5).

Thus, it is foolish to pit one orthodox teacher against another or to divide into factions to oppose the sound efforts of others. We are all on the same team, as it were, if we are in Christ. God means for us to be unified as we fulfill the Great Commission (vv. 8–9). The work is His work, and He is one. **TC**



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
JANUARY 30–31

FAITHFUL WOUNDS

AARON L. GARRIOTT

The average Facebook user has more than three hundred friends, while a large percentage of users have vastly more. Yet, it seems that while people have more “friends” than ever, we’ve never had so few friends. We might have one hundred “friends” who know what we had for dinner but no friends who know the deep-rooted sins of our hearts. Most people want fellowship and community, but we typically want it on our own terms—if and when it’s pleasant. The first sign of discomfort and we’re out.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between three tiers of friendship: utility (mutual benefit), pleasure (enjoyable company), and goodness/virtue (common character and genuine care). Most of our friendships fall under the first two categories; they tend to be shorter and involve less commitment. But the friendship of virtue is what we would call in modern parlance “true friendship” that lasts. Most only have a few of these friendships in their lifetime, if at all. These friendships typically take years to form, and crossing the threshold from pleasantries to virtue is difficult. One of the ways we know that a friendship falls in this third tier is if the friend has liberty to offer us correction, and vice versa. Only a true friend will muster up the courage to lovingly offer correction to us when it’s needed. As well, only a true friend—and a maturing Christian—will choose to receive the correction rather than spurning it. The Proverbs frequently commend correctability as virtuous:

The reproofs of discipline are the way of life. (Prov. 6:23)

Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life. (10:17)

The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. (15:31)

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (27:6)

Conversely, he who snubs rebuke is foolish:

He who rejects reproof leads others astray. (10:17)

If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame. (18:13)

He who is often reproofed, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing. (29:1)

Indeed, by comparing a loving rebuke to a wound, Solomon acknowledges that receiving reproof is painful. If it weren’t, we wouldn’t be so quick to avoid it. As it is, we all have natural defense mechanisms erected in our own hearts—the inner self-advocate who rises to our defense when we are corrected. We spurn correction to our own shame. Christians ought to be quick to receive reproof, for we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). Are you correctable? Let us be as open to correction as David: “Let a righteous man strike me—it is a kindness; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it” (Ps. 141:5). **TC**

REV. AARON L. GARRIOTT is managing editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, resident adjunct professor at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla., and a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church in America.

The Meanest Man in Texas

A MIND RENEWED. A LIFE TRANSFORMED.

Ligonier Ministries regularly hears stories of minds that have been renewed and lives that are being transformed through the gospel outreach you enable with your generosity. The Ligonier team hopes this letter encourages you as it did us. This is Brett's story.

SOME CALLED ME “the meanest man in Texas.” I cannot imagine a worse human being than I was before my conversion. I grew up with a chip on my shoulder, bounced around from foster homes to orphanages to a juvenile reformatory, and then finally I was sentenced to prison. I was mean and hateful and never smiled. When I first arrived in prison, I quickly saw that you had to be mean to survive. That wouldn't be a problem for me, so I set out to show people just how mean I was. I stayed in constant trouble, getting in fights and refusing to work. Once, I attacked a guard with a piece of broken glass. Another time, I hit a guard in the mouth with a jagged piece of metal.



In 1984, I joined a prison gang. Once that was discovered, I was put in administrative segregation (solitary confinement), where I stayed for the next twenty-one years.

In 2004, I was in “super seg” at the Estelle High Security Unit in Huntsville, Tex. I lived in a cell by myself, with only a narrow sheet of plexiglass to see out. I'd gone months without talking to anyone when, one day, I noticed some guy waving at me from across the run. I quickly jumped out of the way, thinking to myself, “What's this dude's prob-

lem?” The next day, he was waving at me again. I turned off my light so he couldn't see me, but I was watching him from the darkness of my cell to see what he was about. He stood there for a few minutes, then sat back down on his bunk and started reading his Bible. “OK, he's one of those,” I thought to myself. I decided I'd mess with his head the next time he tried to flag me down.

The next day, the opportunity presented itself. When he waved at me, I stood there at my window glaring at him. He smiled back at me and started making funny motions with his hand. I realized he was trying to use sign language to communicate with me, so I shook my head and continued to glare at him. Sign language was how inmates in “super seg” communicated, because you couldn't be heard through the solid doors. I saw that he wanted to teach me sign language, so I decided, why not? Over the next few days, he taught me the alphabet.

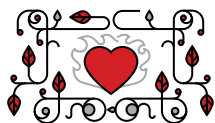
Once I learned the alphabet and could read the words he spelled out, he told me his name and he asked me if I was a Christian. I told him, “No.” He held up a small magazine in his hand and asked me if I wanted to read it. It was *Tabletalk*. I really didn't, but I decided to humor him. So, I shot my line under the door (a string with a comb tied to the end of it), he tied the magazine to it, and I pulled it across the run and under my door. Later that day, I picked up the issue of *Tabletalk* and began to flip through it, then started to read. It was actually really interesting. When I was done, I asked him if he had any more. He did. Then he told me about *Renewing Your Mind*, which came on a local radio station.

I started listening to Dr. Sproul every day. Then I requested a Bible and started reading God's Word. I didn't know it at the time, but God was preparing me to come into His kingdom. One day, I felt a strange presence in my cell. I felt that everything was going to be OK. Never had I felt that way before. Usually, I'd felt that I was doomed. I had even contemplated suicide before, but now I knew there was light at the end of the tunnel. I got down on my knees and asked the Lord to come into my life. Since that moment when God called me to Himself, my life has totally changed.

I renounced the gang, and in 2006 I was released from solitary confinement. After completing the G.R.A.D. (gang renouncement and disassociation) program, I was placed on a minimum-security unit. In 2007, I began taking college courses. Over the last decade and more, I've received an A.A. degree in humanities, an A.S. in business administration and management, an A.A.S. in welding technology, and a B.S. in behavioral science. I am now pursuing a master's degree in humanities from the University of Houston—Clear Lake, the only master's program available inside a U.S. prison. In addition, I have been taking courses from Ligonier Connect for several years.

Now, I've been accepted by a Christian halfway house in Lubbock, Tex., so I have a place to go after prison. I have spent thirty-seven years of my life in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. And by God's grace, I am a Christian. I will live my life for Christ each and every day, no matter where I am or what my circumstances are. Ligonier Ministries will always be a part of my life, whether or not I ever leave prison. In all things, I put my trust in Christ.

**BY GOD'S GRACE, I AM A
CHRISTIAN. I WILL LIVE
MY LIFE FOR CHRIST
EACH AND EVERY DAY.**



Hungry and Thirsty for Righteousness

DENNIS E. JOHNSON

JESUS SAID, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6). Have you ever been really hungry? Not just because lunch was five hours ago and dinner isn’t quite ready, but languishing and weakened by days without food, on the verge of starvation? Have you been desperately thirsty? Not slightly parched after a jog, your thirst quickly quenched by a swig of sports drink, but dying from dehydration under an unrelenting sun?

Jesus painted the picture of hunger and thirst for people who had actually experienced the desperation of lacking life’s basic necessities. He was saying, “When you are as *desperate for righteousness* as you would be if you were starving and expiring in a wasteland, God will satiate your hunger and quench your thirst, flooding your life with the righteousness for which you long.”

But what is this soul-satisfying food and drink called “righteousness”? The Bible speaks of righteousness in four related ways, all of which should make our spiritual mouths water: (1) justice, (2) character, (3) rightness with God, and (4) the Lord our righteousness.

JUSTICE

Two word families in English reflect a sin-

gle word family in Greek. On the one hand, we have “right,” “righteous,” and “righteousness.” On the other, we have “judge,” “justice,” “justify,” and “justification.” Behind both of these families is a group of Greek words that share a single root that encompasses both justice and righteousness. So Israel’s judges must follow “justice, and only justice” (Deut. 16:20). By faith, says Hebrews 11:33, some of Israel’s leaders “enforced justice” (translated “righteousness” in our beatitude).

So, Jesus is pronouncing blessing on those who “hunger and thirst for *justice*.” Today we hunger for justice, as we watch whole neighborhoods, communities, and societies ripped apart by injustice. Jesus expected His followers specifically to hunger for justice, for they would be persecuted for justice’s sake and for Jesus’ sake (Matt. 5:10–11). As the souls of martyrs await the last judgment, they cry, “How long before you will judge and avenge our blood?” (Rev. 6:9–10). They hunger for justice. Our hunger for a world freed from injustice will be satisfied only in the new heavens and earth, in which justice dwells (2 Peter 3:13).

RIGHTEOUS CHARACTER

If we identify with victims of injustice, we thirst to see God put wrongs right. If we are

consistent, then, we hunger to become people characterized by righteousness. In this same sermon, Jesus says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). Then He shows how deep real righteousness goes: it excludes not only murder but also sullen anger and insulting words; not only adultery but also lustful fantasies. It entails costly promise keeping and truth telling.

God summons us to “pursue righteousness” (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22). We are to “practice righteousness” because our Lord is righteous and because righteous character and conduct flow from our new birth (1 John 2:29; 3:7, 10). Such justice of heart is the fruit of God’s grace (Phil. 1:10–11) and cultivated by His fatherly discipline (Heb. 12:11).


RIGHTNESS WITH GOD

As we face our own failures to practice what is right, our righteousness-hungry hearts are far from satiated. Knowing that He is the righteous Judge who will not acquit the wicked (Ex. 23:7), we thirst for a rightness with God that we cannot achieve. This rightness with God is the free gift of His grace, which we receive through faith alone. This gift of right standing with God—our sins forgiven, Christ’s righteousness credited to us (Isa. 53:5–6, 11–12; 61:10; Zech. 3:1–5)—is the heart of the good news: “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). We long to “be found in [Christ], not having a righteousness of [our] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8–9).

In Jesus, our hunger and thirst for rightness with God are immediately, completely satisfied when God’s Spirit draws us to trust His Son. This justification assures us of God’s love, arousing our hunger for the righteousness of character that reflects Jesus the righteous One.

THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

God’s gifts of rightness with Himself (justification) and growing character-righteousness (sanctification) come in the great gift of His Son. Jeremiah predicted that God would raise up a righteous Branch, whose name would be “the LORD is our righteousness” (Jer. 23:5–6). When the Lord our righteousness arrived in person, the Apostle Paul declared: “Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Psalms thirsted for the God who is our righteousness: “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1–2). Their thirst for justice in society, for personal righteousness, and for merciful acquittal could be satisfied only in communion with God Himself. As God’s gracious Spirit sets our hearts aflame, we too taste the blessedness of resting in the gift of rightness with God, leaning on His righteousness-producing strength and longing for the new heavens and earth, the home of righteousness. 

GOD’S GIFTS OF RIGHTNESS WITH HIMSELF AND GROWING CHARACTER- RIGHTEOUSNESS COME EMBODIED IN HIS SON.

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FOR THE CHURCH

Honoring the Watchmen on the Wall

JOHN P. SARTELLE SR.

I WAS ENJOYING THE BOOK when the author asked a question that has dwelled in my soul for the last thirty years: “Are you turning your theology into your biography?” Now, the proper way of asking the question more correctly is “Are you turning biblical theology into your biography?” I suppose everyone is turning whatever they happen to believe into their biography. We usually do that automatically. But as followers of Jesus the Christ, we are called to turn the theology of God’s Word into the way that we live. That is more difficult than merely living out whatever we choose to believe. It is far more convenient to conform to the gods we have made in our own image than to conform to the Son of God. I was born with a nature that seeks escape from the binding cords of God’s being and Word.

Why am I beginning an article encouraging church members to follow the leadership of the elected or appointed leaders of the church with a paragraph about God’s calling to turn biblical theology into biography? In my senior years (a younger friend told me last week that I am old), my advice as a minister is solicited more than ever by church members who are disgruntled with their church leadership. I have found that

many times they are not living out the biblical theology they claim to love. They tend to look at these men and just focus on the disagreement and the personality of that particular leader. In their thinking they echo the words of James about Elijah: “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.” They are right. Every elder, deacon, or minister is a man with a nature just like theirs. However, biblical theology tells us that just as the Christian life has a supernatural beginning, the service of a man as a minister, elder, or deacon has a supernatural beginning.

How did our Christian lives begin? We had hearts that were dedicated to living free from the restraints of God. Our ears were deaf and our eyes were blind to Him. We were quite literally spiritually dead. He supernaturally raised us from that deadness. He gave us ears to hear and eyes to see. Jesus called that transformation being born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is a supernatural act by the living God in our lives. In like manner, an individual does not make himself a minister, elder, or deacon. He is called and anointed to that position by the Holy Spirit. How did Paul describe the elders of the church at Ephesus? “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made

you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit of the living God appoints and anoints the elders of His church. There are similar passages about deacons. "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (6:3). Again, the emphasis is on men filled with the Holy Spirit. Most of us are in churches that elect ministers, elders, and deacons, but we are given very clear descriptions in Scripture as to what God-anointed men look like. In 1 Timothy 3, the Holy Spirit gave us models to help us identify the men He has anointed.

We don't seek to listen to officers of the church because they are popular in the church or good businessmen. We follow and seek their guidance because they are anointed and appointed by God to their position. That is what our theology teaches us.

There is another factor to be considered. The Bible teaches a plurality of elders. As a minister, I love this truth of Scripture. Sadly, some ministers want the church to be a dictatorship. Of course, we know who the dictator will be in such cases. God knew that there would be such temptations. So, we have a plurality of leaders anointed by God in each church. They meet and discuss all the issues of the church. They balance each other, because individually they have their own idiosyncrasies. It should be a joint wisdom that comes out of their counsel. They may have information that the general congregation does not have.

They have a heavy load to carry. They may make decisions that are not popular in the world around the church. They may be forced to take disciplinary actions toward individual members who are in danger

because of personal sin. They are seeking only to protect a wandering sheep from destruction. They may be forced to confront a minister who is denying the cardinal doctrines of Scripture from the pulpit. None of these acts are easy. I saw an entire denomination become apostate because the elders of local churches were either ignorant of biblical theology or were not bold enough to stand and confront the false

prophets that were in their pulpits. We want to blame the seminaries, and certainly they were at fault. But where were the godly elders in the local congregations? Where were the watchmen on the wall?

Thus far, I have been writing to members of local congregations. I must say just a few words to the ministers, elders, and deacons in those congregations. Usually, in your deliberations there will be unity. But occasionally, there will be close divisions. Caution is required in such cases. When elders disagree even though all of them are schooled in God's Word and their love for the gospel cannot be questioned, then they must work that much harder at listening to each other. A godly governing body that is divided can be used of Satan to divide the church unless much wisdom is exercised.

There is so much more to be said. But I must bring this article to a close. I encourage you to pray for your ministers, elders, and deacons. Talk to them. Love them. Ask them to pray with you and seek their wise counsel. Why? Because you need to make biblical theology your biography. **TD**

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THE EMPHASIS IS ON MEN FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.



Unseen Righteousness

VICTOR CRUZ

EVERYBODY CAN RELATE to the words of a little kid playing or doing something in the presence of his parents: “Look, Mommy; look, Daddy!”

We were created to enjoy and find delight in the eyes of our Creator and in the eyes of other human beings. We were designed to be seen, to be known, and to be loved. What a pleasure it is to be celebrated, and what a joy it is to be praised for our achievements. What pride there is in knowing that people around us speak well of us.

But the fall turned a legitimate need into something dark and destructive. Our natural desire for attention became self-centeredness; the need to be appreciated gave birth to envy. We live in a fallen world where we struggle to balance our need for acceptance and our desires to win, to beat others, to be better than the rest, and to be recognized in public for our good deeds.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus warning His listeners about practicing our righteousness to be seen by people. He says: “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:1). What a tempta-

tion it is to do something good, something that is honorable, and to let others know about it in order to receive praise.

As a church planter, I have been writing many ministry reports to those supporting my work. It has been twenty-three years of sending pictures of people in need being served, people gathering for worship for the first time, facilities being remodeled, and new believers being baptized. All these things are exciting and good, but there is always a hidden feeling of being successful, a feeling of being able and capable. The worst part comes when my heart compares myself to others and I feel that I must be loved because of my accomplishments.

The desire to be adored is the sin that we find in Satan. He was the most beautiful creature ever created, but he wanted to take God’s place. He wanted to be loved and worshiped as God. Instead of being thankful to God, he decided to rebel against his creator and pursue his own glory (Ezek. 28:11–14; Isa. 14:12–14). The Apostle Paul warns Timothy not to appoint elders lightly, especially a man who is not mature in the Christian faith, so that he does not fall into the condemnation of the devil, which is pride

(1 Tim. 3:6). These examples, sadly, express what happens when we promote ourselves to be exalted.

Jesus continues His warning against pride over our good deeds by saying, “For then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:1). The truth is that our good deeds please God, and He rewards what we do for His honor and glory. Every Christian must dedicate his or her life to the service and well-being of all in our spheres of influence. However, even in the midst of our best efforts, there is always a stain of sin on our good deeds. We are broken and we are selfish. It is inevitable that our motivations will still be polluted with sin. Jonathan Edwards describes the struggle between wanting to be holy and the sin under the surface of godliness:

Remember that pride is the worst viper that is in the heart, the greatest disturber of the soul's peace and sweet communion with Christ; it was the first sin that ever was, and lies lowest in the foundation of Satan's whole building, and is the most difficultly rooted out, and is the most hidden, secret and deceitful of all lusts, and often creeps in, insensibly, into the midst of religion and sometimes under the disguise of humility.

We can try to be humble. We can try to obey God. We can try to be faithful. Yet, in all this, we will always fall short of a perfect heart that would seek not its own glory but rather the glory of God. If this is the human condition—even when we

want to do good—what is the solution for such a broken nature?

God has provided a wonderful remedy for our sin, and it is His loving grace. As Christians, we understand that we cannot fulfill God's command. We cannot love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind. But in Jesus, we understand that we have been made just because He obeyed the law in our place.

**GOD HAS
PROVIDED A
WONDERFUL
REMEDY FOR
OUR SIN,
AND IT IS HIS
LOVING GRACE.**

He lived the life that we cannot live, and He died the death we deserve to pay the price of our sin. Now, through faith in Christ, having put our trust in His redemptive work made on our behalf, we know that we are loved freely. This is not for any specific reason within us, not for our accomplishments or success,

not even for our wonderful faith or our faithfulness. No, we are loved because it pleased God to love us, even before we were born (Rom. 8:28–30). The grace of the gospel liberates us from our empty efforts to be loved. We need to remember that because we are in Jesus, now we are seen, we are loved, we are adopted, we are embraced, and we have a Father who says, “I see you,” even when nobody else sees us doing good.

The next time that you feel sinfully proud for doing something good and nobody knows about it, glance toward heaven and be thankful that your pride has been forgiven. If for any reason other than pride you must tell others about it, do not feel guilty. Remember that God is pleased with you because you are in Christ. **TC**

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The Context of the Westminster Assembly

GREG A. SALAZAR

MY EXPERIENCE over the years as a confessional Presbyterian has been that many who subscribe to or draw heavily on the Westminster Standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Westminster Larger Catechism, and the Westminster Shorter Catechism) as the basis for their theological views understand the standards in a manner largely disembodied from the historical context in which they were written. For that reason, it has been often overlooked, or at least greatly underappreciated, that the Westminster Assembly (the ministerial gathering where the standards were crafted) took place at an all-important time in English and Protestant history—namely, the English Civil War (1642–51).

For those who love theology, the temptation can be strong to bypass the assembly's historical context and to focus on interpreting and applying its doctrinal truths to the contemporary church. Grasping the historical context can be perceived as a necessary evil endured for the sake of appeasing church historians. However, understanding the historical context is integral, not incidental, for a full and robust interpretation, exposition, and application of the confessional, catechetical,

and ecclesiastical documents that arose from the Westminster Assembly. Indeed, without an understanding of the assembly's context, these confessional documents are easily misinterpreted, and the richest of components of these confessional formulations are certainly overlooked. This article will explore the historical context of the Westminster Assembly and end with three reasons why all those who draw on the standards and want to understand their theology should continue studying the assembly's historical context.

POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE ASSEMBLY

The Westminster Assembly took place after a decade of reform under King Charles I and Archbishop William Laud, who persecuted members of the Puritan movement. In 1637, Laud attempted to reform Scotland by mandating that the Scottish church utilize a new version of the Book of Common Prayer, which had been revised in a distinctly Roman Catholic direction. The people rebelled, and a full-blown Scottish revolution ensued. Unfortunately for Charles, his invasions in 1638 and 1639 failed as most of the soldiers were more sympathetic to the Scots than they were to the king. This

forced Charles to call Parliament to raise an army to fight the Scots.

The fact that Charles called Parliament in the first place is a testimony to the direness of his situation. Indeed, Charles had not called Parliament, and thus he had ruled alone, for eleven years, a period known as the Personal Rule, after his dissolution of the 1629 Parliament because of its growing sympathy to Puritanism. After this suspension of Parliament, many Puritans left for New England in anticipation that Charles and his fellow anti-Calvinists were headed for a collision with Puritans. By 1640, however,

on Parliament's side, and the New Model Army led by Oliver Cromwell was dominant over Royalist forces. By January 1647, Charles was captured and in the custody of Parliament. While the king had been apprehended, there was significant division over what to do next. Some demanded that he be executed, while others wanted a compromise. The stalemate was finally resolved on December 6, 1648, when New Model Army soldiers prevented eighty-five members of Parliament who were against the execution of the king from entering the House of Commons (an event known

THE SEEDS OF WHAT WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY WERE PLANTED IN 1641.

the king had no money and was forced to call Parliament in an effective admission that the Personal Rule had failed. The recall of Parliament in 1640 was a disaster for the king, and the next Parliament was even worse for him, ending with a radical gathering demanding “root and branch” reform of the church and state.

In 1641, Archbishop Laud was arrested and put on trial. In January 1642, Charles fled from London to Oxford after a series of unsuccessful attempts to seize political control of the country. This geographical departure effectively reinforced, and opened up physical space between, the two parties. Surrendering London, the political stronghold, to their enemies had devastating implications for Charles and his Royalist supporters. Although war was now likely, it was obvious that the Royalists were in a weaker position. Men and money were

as Pride's Purge), effectively guaranteeing Charles' fate. He was tried for treason and beheaded on January 30, 1649. To date, he is the only English monarch ever to be executed.

REFORMING THE REFORMATION

Since this was a time when political stability and ecclesiastical reform were seen as inseparably linked, as Parliament—which contained a number of influential Puritans—gained political power it pursued a reformation of religion. The seeds of what would eventually become the Westminster Assembly were planted in 1641 with petitions for “a free synod to Reform the Reformation itself” that would not only reverse Laudian reform but establish a purity of worship, polity, and doctrine. Parliament also crafted the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), a contract between it



and the Scottish rebels stating that Parliament supported the Scots in their rebellion over the prayer book. Although Parliament wanted the king's consent, Charles condemned the Westminster Assembly and Solemn League and Covenant as treasonous against the king.

On June 12, 1643, Parliament released a summoning ordinance to gather together "an Assemblie of Learned and Godlie divines... for the Settling of the Government and the Litturgie of the Church of England." In *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly*, Chad Van Dixhoorn has shown how assembly members were chosen by Parliament through an advisory board made up of clergymen. The support of major Puritan leaders and the existence of personal relationships between invited members and the selection committee were the primary factors in determining who was invited to the assembly. The total number of invited participants was 120, although the average attendance of most sessions was between seventy and eighty divines, as the members are called. Also, the terminological parallels between the Westminster Assembly summons and the Solemn League and Covenant reveals that attendance at the Westminster Assembly was the definitive litmus test for Calvinist clergy regarding their political allegiance. Although initially there was some desire for international participation in the assembly, as happened with the Synod of Dort, this never came to fruition. The assembly eventually convened on July 1, 1643, to redefine and refine orthodoxy in England after a tumultuous decade of Laudian reform. This body was the intellectual engine behind Parliament and the Puritan revolution and became one of the most formidable institutions in Britain during this time.

The assembly met extensively over a decade of turmoil—1,330 times from 1643 to 1652—and then appeared to meet for another year, likely on a weekly basis. The divines gathered Monday through Friday, beginning their days at 6 a.m. with a lecture and prayer, followed by a sermon from a probationary minister, and then held committee meetings. The plenary sessions began at nine a.m. and consisted of debating the day's proposition until lunch (usually breaking between noon and two p.m.). After lunch were further committee meetings until around five p.m. or later. In all, Van Dixhoorn notes that at least 2,400 people were present on 11,300 separate occurrences during the assembly. While the divines' initial aim was to reform the Thirty-Nine Articles, eventually they pursued a full-scale reformation of English worship, doctrine, and church government.

There were many practical matters involved in the divines' attendance at the assembly, including many divines' relocating their families to London to participate. This explains why only half of those invited were present at the opening ceremony. Members were paid four shillings per day for their labors, though in the end, members only received half of the final remuneration that was due to them. Understanding the context allows us to appreciate the literal blood, sweat, and tears that went into crafting these principal documents. This reveals that far from being armchair theologians, these men understood that the matters they were considering were truly matters of life and death. They pursued their ministry in the midst of a gruesome civil war that divided the country and resulted in the execution of the king. As a result of these labors, they produced not only the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms but also

the Directory of Worship, a psalter, and other shorter papers. They also examined more than two thousand preachers and some heretics.

THREE PRACTICAL REASONS TO CONTINUE STUDYING THE ASSEMBLY

Since this article has merely scratched the surface of the assembly's context, I want to end with three reasons one should continue studying its historical context. First, understanding the historical context of the Westminster Assembly cultivates theo-

logical integrity. Since these documents arose from a specific period in the history of the church, to study them in their historical context is to study them on their own terms. Many secular scholars have studied the Bible, theology, and church history in the service of their own secular goals. Likewise, all too often, confessional theologians and pastors have made the same error by distorting the Westminster divines' positions in service of defending their own theological views. Understanding the divines on their own terms will guard us from making this mistake.

Second, understanding the historical context can give insight into theological meaning. Theological (and especially polemical) statements were often crafted in response to competing doctrinal positions

on various issues. Thus, understanding the various figures and movements to which the divines were responding can aid one in understanding the meaning and motivations underpinning these doctrines. Finally, studying theology in its historical context produces the most practical and experientially edifying application. There has been quite a lot of hagiography (embellished history) written on the Westminster Assembly. Perhaps what is most unfortunate about this is that real history, rather than hagiography, is the most prac-

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tical kind of history. Indeed, when the imagined romanticism of the assembly is stripped away and we see these divines for who they were—greatly gifted, but struggling against their own sin and finitude—we are reminded that God used sinners to advance His kingdom. Despite living in a time of pandemic, political turmoil, and deep unrest, we can have confidence that the same God who preserved, provided for, and reformed His church will likewise sustain, sanctify, and use it, despite the sin, weakness, and failures that permeate both it and our society. ■

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