THE Outlook

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DEDICATED TO THE EXPOSITION AND DEFENSE OF THE REFORMED FAITH | 75 YEARS: 1951–2026



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Formed for His Glory: Living the Life God Prepared for You ■
Through Storm to Rest: A Meditation on Genesis 8:1–22 ■ Rethinking Evangelism ■
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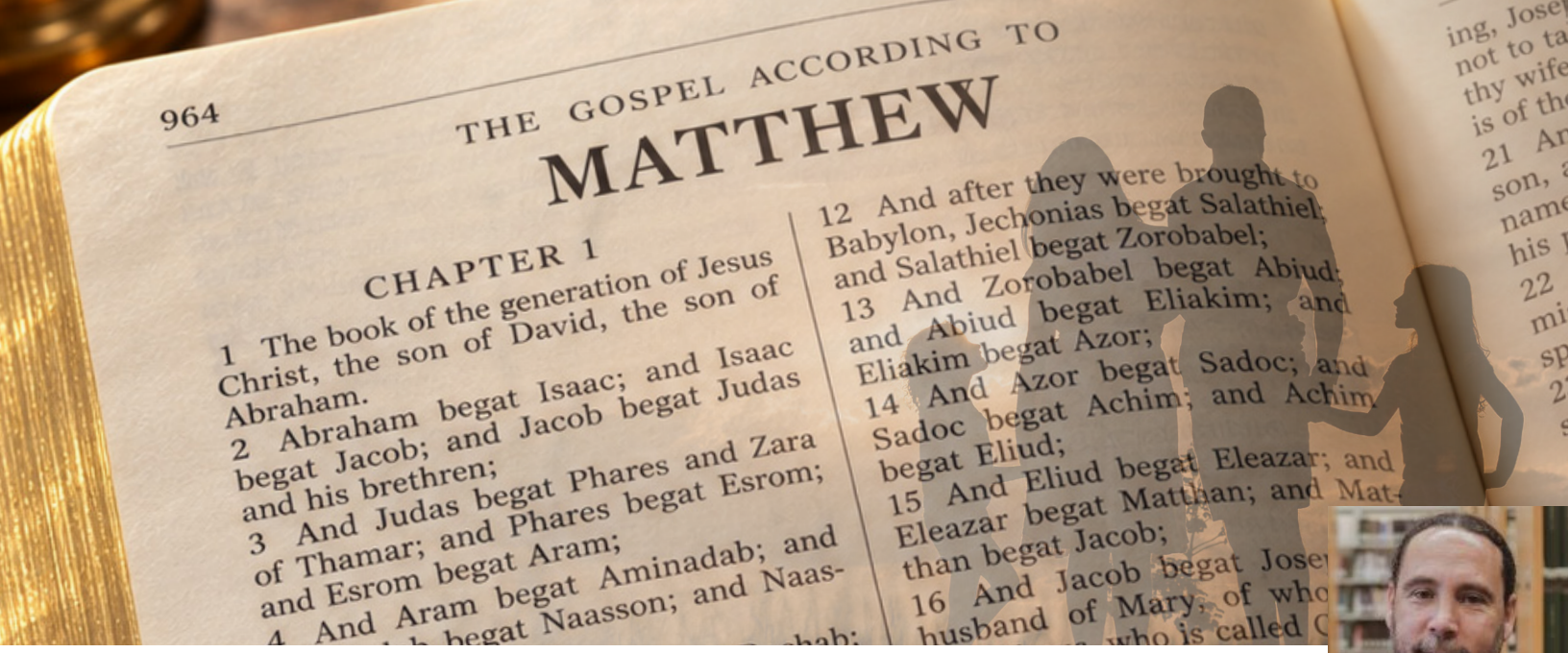
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The *Family* Jesus Came to Save

The Incarnation and God's Mission to the Nations

FAMILY PICTURES TELL US A LOT ABOUT WHO WE ARE. In many homes, there is a hallway or wall with family pictures. Sometimes the pictures are arranged chronologically; on one end, pictures of our oldest photographed relatives take us back in time. We can tell when the picture was taken by the photograph quality, clothing and backgrounds. On the other end, the pictures look more recent. Hairstyles have changed, clothing has changed, and the most recent pictures usually include photographs of ourselves, sometimes to our embarrassment. What do all these pictures tell us about ourselves? They tell us where we came from and something about our identity. Family photos give us a sense of belonging and sense of purpose in the world.

While the Bible does not contain family photographs, it does contain something very similar: genealogies. Genealogies are the Bible's way of connecting people in the present with the past to form a sense of identity. They tell the family story, preserve inheritance, and create a sense of expectation. This is all true of the genealogy in Matthew 1, which gives the family lineage of Jesus from Abraham to David, through a long list of names, down to Jesus Himself. By telling the origin story of where Jesus the Christ comes from, Matthew is not only telling us important things about Jesus, but also important things about God the Father and the plan of God to bring the Gentiles into the family of God.

The genealogy in Matthew 1, in many ways, sets the stage for the Great Commission as it reveals the heart of God for the nations and answers the question: How did we get here? This is the reason for the Incarnation: the Son of God became man to save a people for Himself to become a part of His forever family.

A Family Tree Like No Other

One of the first things that we notice about Matthew's genealogy is that it is notably selective. Every genealogy is selective in a certain sense. They may not tell us everything, but they do tell us everything that is important, often highlighting a particular theme or emphasis. Matthew's genealogy shows the line of Jesus beginning with Abraham. Luke's genealogy, by contrast, goes all the way back to Adam, who is called the "son of God" (Luke 3:38). Luke clearly has a different audience and goal in mind, and therefore a different approach than Matthew. Luke's audience is largely Gentile, whereas Matthew's audience is largely Jewish. Matthew highlights the "Son of David" thread in his genealogy in ways that are important and even provocative. What kind of king would have a family like this?

Those familiar with Hebrew genealogies would be quickly struck by the fact that Matthew includes five women in his genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Most Hebrew genealogies only include the names of men. Land was ordinarily passed down from fathers to their oldest son, and genealogies were akin to legal documents, proving the ownership of property and inheritance. In ancient agrarian life, land was hugely important, and a genealogy would help settle ownership controversies and disputes. Matthew's genealogy, however, does far more than that. What is striking about Matthew's genealogy, is that three, possibly four of the women that he includes are Gentiles! This would certainly catch the eye of a Hebrew reader in the first century; in fact, it would be shocking! And not only does he include the names of women, he includes the names of women whose stories are either embarrassing or uncomfortable. The precise vocabulary he uses intensifies that.

A Family Marked by Sin and Grace

The first woman Matthew alludes to is Tamar. Likely a Gentile, Tamar was the widow of one Judah's sons, Er. Er was wicked, and the Lord put him death. His brother, Onan, failed to do what the law required—to raise up an heir for his dead brother with Tamar, to preserve her and to preserve the family inheritance. The Lord put him to death as well. Judah to provide Tamar another husband as he was supposed to; so she remained a widow in her father's house.

But after some time, Tamar deceived Judah by dressing up like a prostitute and going to a place where men sought their services. She intentionally seduced Judah and became pregnant by him, although he never knew that the woman he thought was a prostitute was actually his daughter-in-law. When it became known that Tamar was pregnant, Judah sought to put her to death, until Tamar craftily presented items she had taken from Judah when he slept with her. The point of the story is its awkwardness. Matthew does not withhold the name of Tamar, thus eclipsing her story. Rather, he intentionally includes her story showing that the family of Jesus is anything but perfect. Jesus came into this world, into a very broken family.

This is further illustrated by the story of Rahab. I have always felt somewhat sad for Rahab. History has forever nicknamed her "Rahab the prostitute." She is called this five times in the Bible, including two times in the New Testament. What a sad way to be remembered! She is not called "Rahab the convert" or "Rahab who hid the spies," but "Rahab the prostitute." Surely, she put this profession behind as she joined the people of Israel with her family after God destroyed her city of Jericho.

But the story of God's people is one that tells the truth about who we are, and even where we came from. Thus, the story of Rahab is not conveniently glossed over; it is included, because Jesus did not come into this world for people who "have it all together," but for a people who have been ravaged by sin and its consuming consequences. And yes, astoundingly, there is not only one, but two women who committed prostitution in the family tree of Jesus. Who could have thought such a thing?

The next woman Matthew alludes to is Ruth. He could have simply mentioned Boaz, the honorable and upright male hero of the book of Ruth. But instead, Matthew references another Gentile woman whose story is embarrassing for the people of Israel. How so? The book of Ruth is set in the time of the book of Judges, when everyone is "doing what is right in their own eyes." Because of their spiritual drifting, God sent a famine over the land. This places the book of Ruth in the context of God's judgment upon Israel. The leading men in the book of Ruth (Elimelech, and his sons, Mahlon and Chilion) all die in the first chapter. And what is worse, they die *outside* the land, far from home and far from God. The name Bethlehem means "house of bread." But during the days of the judges, there was famine in the "house of bread" because God's judgment was upon His people. But rather than turning to the Lord, Elimelech and his sons turn away and sojourn into Moab, where they took Moabite wives, which they should not have done.

Once again, we see in Matthew's genealogy a refusal to look away from Israel's sins and struggles, but to pointedly highlight them. But Matthew also shows us something of God's adopting love, for "Ruth the Moabite," as she is called repeatedly in the book of Ruth, will end up marrying an upright man named Boaz, who not only gives her children; together they become the great grandparents of King David. Who would have guessed that this lowly, impoverished, Moabite widow would become family to the great king of Israel?

The fourth story is even more awkward. My kids would say "cringy." And Matthew does not pull his punch whatsoever. In fact, the way he highlights the story of Bathsheba makes it clear that he wants us to be keenly aware of King David's failure. Verse 6 reads, "And David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*…." The name Bathsheba is not even used! Rather, she is referred to as "the wife of Uriah."

One day, while David's armies were out fighting for him, David looked down from his castle and saw a woman bathing. The woman, Bathsheba, was the wife of one of

David's soldiers named Uriah. David called for her, took her, and slept with her. After this shameful episode, David learned that Bathsheba was pregnant and he was the father—Uriah was still off in war, fighting for David. David attempted to cover his tracks by bringing Uriah home, hoping that Uriah would sleep with his wife, and somehow think that the child was actually his. But Uriah was far more pious than David; he refused to go in and sleep beside his wife, knowing that the rest of his soldiers were still in harm's way on the battlefield. So, David returned Uriah back to the battle, intentionally sending him to the most deadly front, and sending a message to have Uriah left alone and defenseless, thus guaranteeing the death of Uriah.

David's plan worked, at least in his eyes. But God knew and God saw. God sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke David, and this child of David's infidelity would eventually die. What a sad, broken story. What a sad, broken king. Yet David would repent. God would restore him, and David and Bathsheba (now married) would have another child, Solomon, who become known as the wisest king of Israel's history.

The Birth of a Different Kind of Son

The final woman Matthew mentions is Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her story is not filled with the scars of sin and shame like the other four women, nor is she a Gentile. And there is nothing in this world purer and more innocent than the manner by which Jesus is conceived—by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary is a virgin when Jesus is born. That which was conceived within her womb came not by human touch but by power from on high.

There are, however, two things that are noteworthy about the way Mary is described. First, in the nativity story, when Joseph first learns that Mary is "with child," he sought to put her away, knowing the child was not his. He sought to do this discreetly, not wishing to harm or embarrass her, but he was told by an angel that Mary had not been unfaithful, but was chosen by God to bring the Christ into the world. Joseph would end up marrying her and raising Jesus as his own, adopted son.

That said, Matthew's language is very careful *not* to say that Joseph was the father of Jesus, but rather only calls him the "husband of Mary" (v. 16). This is Matthew's way of protecting the uniqueness of the virgin birth of Jesus. It also stages the question: What kind of son comes into the world this way, with a family such as this?

In summary, the family into which Jesus is born begins to look like something that belongs on a messy TV show. All the good guys are actually quite broken. The women listed are either guilty of great sins or greatly sinned against. In reality, there are no sinless men or sinless women. The names of each woman listed in Matthew's genealogy makes that very clear. But what should we make of the fact that Jesus comes into the world through such a broken family? The answer is found not just in the family of Jesus that comes before Him, but in the family that Jesus came to form—His Church.

The Family Jesus Came to Gather

Matthew's genealogy is not the end of story, but the beginning. Though it ends with Jesus' birth, it also raises the question of coming generations. If these people listed so far (men and women, broken and sinful, even Gentiles) are included in His past family, whose pictures will fill the frames down the rest of the hallway of history? This is where the Great Commission comes in. If we look at the bookends of the book of Matthew, the book begins with the mixed and messy origin story of how the Christ came into the world. But if we look at the end of Matthew's gospel, it reveals to us very clearly why Jesus came into the world: to gather the rest of His family—Jew and Gentile alike, even the messy ones.

The Mission of the Incarnation

Jesus is the child who was born to die. Though He Himself was sinless, He came to die for sinners. Though His family was a mess, He came to make them whole. His identity was not ultimately given by His earthly adoptive father, but by His Heavenly Father who commissioned Him to save and gather a Church by His own perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection.

The story of Jesus is the story of the Church. He was incarnate into this world as a missionary, sent from His Father to rescue His family. And the people He came to save are a long way from perfect. Yet they are not far from Him, and that is the point of the Incarnation. While we were yet sinners, while we were far away, while we were as broken and bruised as everyone in His family tree, Jesus came to live and die for us. His love closed the distance; His resurrection closed the deal. We are His, and He is ours. Thanks be to God for the Son of Man who is also the Son of God incarnate. ▪

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Formed for His Glory

Living the Life God Prepared for You

Dr. Bryce **Bartruff**

There is a saying that has stayed with me for years, spoken by a woman whose life gave her every reason to believe otherwise: "I am somebody 'cause God made me, and God don't make no junk." Who said those words? Ethel Waters—a famous singer from the previous century. Ethel was born to a thirteen-year-old girl who had been assaulted by a seventeen-year-old boy. She was raised by her grandmother in a ghetto neighborhood because her mother was a child herself and unable to raise a child, let alone take care of herself. According to Ethel, she ran wild as she had no direction or purpose in life. By any sociological measure, Ethel Waters had no particular reason to believe she mattered.

But then, Ethel discovered she had a voice. She sang. She traveled. She made eleven films. She became world-famous. And at the end of all of it, the theological conviction that grounded her life was not complicated: "I am somebody 'cause God made me, and God don't make no junk."

The world may have looked at the young Ethel and labeled her "junk," but she knew differently. She was aware she was made in the image of God and formed for His glory.

I think about Ethel Waters often when I am sitting in with the residents at the House of Refuge Sunnyslope or the Dream Center, looking at the faces of men and women who have heard the opposite message for most of their lives. Many have experienced homelessness, addiction, incarceration, broken relationships, and profound disappointment. Yet, despite the hardships they have endured, I repeatedly encounter something remarkable: hope. These men and women are seeking a new direction. They know they are not "junk." They want their lives to count. They want to become the people who can overcome their circumstances and be what God created them to be—just like Ethel Waters.

Each of their stories remind me of a truth that every Christian needs to hear. What is that truth? It is that your past does not define you. Your failures do not determine your value. Your identity is found not in what you have done but in the fact that you belong to Christ. You are a child of God. That is the truth and your identity!

Unfortunately, all of us live in a culture that has forsaken that truth. Instead, it measures value by success, appearance, education, income, or influence. But Scripture offers a radically different perspective. The Apostle John writes, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God" (1 John 3:1). The believer's worth is rooted in God's gracious love—we are His precious children

whom He wants the very best for. You do not earn His favor through achievement. In fact, failure, as painful as it is, ultimately is a good thing because God uses it refine and prepare us for how He is going to use our experience to not only grow us but then to enable us to encourage and help others.

You do not become valuable because of your accomplishments. Rather, God loves His people because He has chosen to set His unconditional love upon them. Paul reminds us, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). This truth is especially important for those whose lives have been marked by challenging times. Unfortunately, many people carry deep wounds from words spoken by parents, teachers, employers, spouses, or peers. They have been told they are worthless, hopeless, or incapable of change. But God says otherwise. Nothing could be further from the truth! The gospel declares that we are all sinners and we can be redeemed, our lives can be transformed, and as broken people we can become useful servants in the kingdom of God.

When God adopts you into His family, we become part of the royal family of God. As members of His family, we receive privileges and responsibilities. The privileges include the opportunity to speak directly with the King, sharing our challenges and victories with Him, listening to Him as He reveals His desires and works in and through our lives, and using His instruction book (the Bible) to know how to think and behave.

But, as a family member, you also have responsibilities. One of those is to serve as His ambassador. Paul writes, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). An ambassador represents the interests of his king in a foreign land. Likewise, as a Christian you represent Christ wherever God has placed you. Whether you are raising children, managing a business, repairing automobiles, teaching students, serving customers, caring for aging parents, or interacting with your spouse, you are called to reflect the character of our King which is to be kind and merciful. This understanding will transform your ordinary life as your daily responsibilities become opportunities to glorify God.

The Christian life is not merely about avoiding sin; it is about actively displaying the goodness, wisdom, and grace of God in every sphere of life. You were made by God for Him (Col. 1:16) to bring Him glory. Isaiah 43:6–7 says, "Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." First Corinthians 10:30 makes the purpose of your life clear: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

One of the most important lessons Jesus taught is found in the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14–30). This has become the theme of my life and because of its significance, I use it in several courses that I teach. In the parable, a master entrusted resources to his servants and expected them to invest those resources wisely until his return. The faithful servants who doubled the amount of money they received were commended because they developed what had been entrusted to them.

The principle Jesus shared extended far beyond money. Christians are entrusted with gifts, opportunities, abilities, relationships, experiences, time, and resources. For example, you may possess natural leadership ability. Others may have gifts of hospitality, encouragement, craftsmanship, music, administration, teaching, mercy, or generosity. God distributes these gifts according to His sovereign wisdom. The question is not whether you possess gifts, but whether you are faithfully developing and employing them for His glory.

Romans 12:3 instructs believers to think of themselves with "sober judgment." Such judgment requires honest self-examination. You must recognize both our strengths and our weaknesses. This kind of self-awareness is not pride. It is stewardship. How? Because the Christian who understands how God has uniquely equipped him is better prepared to serve both God and neighbor. When I teach about this, I ask my students to list both what God has entrusted to them and what life challenges they have faced. Many believers can testify that some of the most painful chapters of their lives became the very means God used to shape their character and expand their usefulness. The recovering addict may become uniquely equipped to minister to others trapped in addiction. The individual who has endured suffering may be able to comfort others with a depth of compassion that comes only through experience. Those who have known failure often develop humility and dependence upon God that cannot be learned any other way. James tells believers to count trials as joy because God uses them to produce maturity and steadfastness (James 1:2–4).

While Christians never celebrate suffering for its own sake, you will come to recognize that God wastes nothing. Even your hardships become instruments in the hands of a wise and loving Father. The providence of God often works in ways you do not immediately understand. As Paul assures us, "For those who love God all things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28).

Because God has given purpose to life, you should think intentionally about the future. Sadly, many people drift through life reacting to circumstances rather than pursuing a calling. Scripture presents a better way. "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps" (Prov. 16:9). Notice the balance. God's sovereignty does not eliminate human responsibility. Rather, God's sovereign rule gives confidence to make plans while trusting Him with the outcome.

Believers should set specific goals for their lives. As you prepare to do this, you should prayerfully consider questions such as how to grow spiritually, how to better serve others, and how to become more effective in your vocation. What gifts has God given you that remain underdeveloped? What opportunities has He placed before me? Such questions help you move from mere day-to-day survival to charting a path in which to develop the resources God has provided. After all, your mission in life as ambassador for God is to develop what He has given to you so that He is glorified.

Good intentions alone accomplish little. Meaningful growth requires intentional action. Whether pursuing better health, financial stability, vocational advancement, stronger family relationships, or greater spiritual maturity, progress typically occurs through small acts of consistent obedience, rather than random activity. The Christian life itself is a life of gradual transformation. We call this sanctification. God ordinarily sanctifies His people through ordinary means: prayer, worship, Scripture, fellowship, work, repentance, and perseverance through challenging times. Faithfulness in small things often prepares us for greater responsibilities.

As a believer establishing goals, however, you must remember that success is not ultimately measured by worldly achievement but by faithfulness to God. The question is not, How much have I accomplished? The question is, Have I been faithful with what God has entrusted to me?

I first ask my students to write down at least one goal for the coming year. The goal must be measurable by time and by action: the day they will begin working on their goal, a target date for when it will be completed, and what action will be accomplished. For example, if the goal is to lose thirty pounds between June 1 and December 31, progress can easily be measured. If the goal is to live in their own apartment by the end of January of next year, that too can be measured. My students are then encouraged to write immediate steps that need to be accomplished and dates for starting them.

One of my colleagues encourages residences to begin each day deciding what they will do today to help reach their goal, and to decide at the beginning of each week what actions they can take that will help them progress toward their goal. The accumulation of many small steps leads to the accomplishment of long-term goals. When your goals are established, you will have direction for life. Without goals, you will simply wander aimlessly from one thing to another and get lost along the way.

The most essential ingredient in establishing goals is prayer: asking God for guidance in this process with the realization that you are counting on His blessing allows you, as His ambassador, to watch Him work in your life. The objective is to avoid the temptation of establishing your goals and then asking God to bless your ambition. That is getting the process backwards. God knows His plan for you. It is not your role to tell God what your plan is to Him and ask Him to bless it. When you are sensitive to the leading of our Lord, you will find goals that align to His will.

Ambitious goals bring significant challenges, and God never intended His people to pursue growth in isolation. "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). That is why it is important to be in relationship with other believers, as Christian fellowship will provide you with encouragement, accountability, wisdom, and support during difficult seasons. You need brothers and sisters who will celebrate victories, speak truth when you wander, and help carry burdens when life becomes overwhelming. Likewise, you are called to provide that same encouragement to others. You need to place yourself in an environment where other people are also seeking to become all they can be for the glory of God. Proverbs 13:20 states, "Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm."

I belong to a group of Christian businesspeople who are entrepreneurs. Discouragement and setbacks are common among this crowd. During one of our sessions, the group leader asked everyone who has experienced significant failure to raise their hand. Every person in the room lifted their hand. We were all encouraged that we were not alone. The reality that others had similar experiences was an encouragement and we discussed the subject together. As it is emphasized in Proverbs 13:20, we become like the people we are around. It is up to us, therefore, to choose our friends and acquaintances wisely.

The church is not a collection of perfect people. If it was, there was no need for Jesus to come. It is a community of redeemed sinners being transformed by grace. Together, we help one

another persevere. The goals we set establishes the direction of our lives. If we believe our goals will bring glory to God that is strong motivation to persevere during difficult times.

One of my closest friends suffered from Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease—a deadly disease that causes significant memory loss and ultimately dementia and loss of voluntary function. It is sad and long process to watch someone go from a functioning human being to a shell of what they formerly were. He was once a missionary with a heart for God and a passion to serve his Lord. Once he learned of the disease and that there was no cure, he stated repeatedly, "God is not finished with me yet." His desire was to be a glory to God, even through this difficult illness. He was steadfast in his commitment to be all he could be and do all he could to glorify God—even during the hardest of times. His goal, though not specifically measurable by time and by action, was heartfelt: to be an encouragement to others and to serve his Lord. God is still using him today because our memory of him encompasses his conviction that God could use him for His glory, regardless of the circumstances.

God has formed us for His glory. He has redeemed us through Christ, gifted us for service, and called us to faithful stewardship. Your task is not to dwell on past failures or become discouraged by present challenges. Rather, you are to fix your eyes upon Christ and faithfully develop and use what gifts He has entrusted to you. When you do, you will discover that true flourishing is not found in self-fulfillment but in joyful obedience to the God who made you, redeemed you, and is even now conforming you to the image of His Son.

Soli Deo Gloria. ▪

Dr. Bryce Bartruff

Bryce has taught on personal finance for over 20 years. He has served as an office-bearer at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and Highlands Church in Scottsdale, AZ, and currently serves as Board Treasurer for the Sterns Missionary Fund. A prolific author, Bryce is the founder of Marketplace Ministry, designed to help Christians thrive in the workplace. Past works include "God, Your Money, and You" (Crosslink), "A Cheerful Giver" (Reformed Fellowship), and "I Want Your Heart" (Reformed Fellowship).

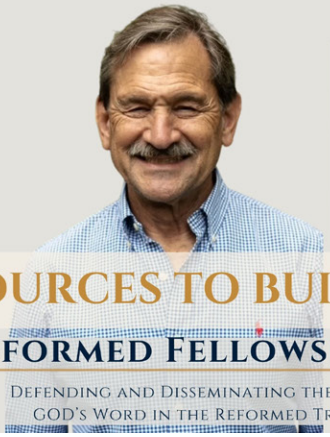
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THROUGH STORM TO REST

A Meditation on Genesis 8:1–22

Rev. Peter **Holtvlüwer**

Meditation text: Genesis 8:1–22
Suggested reading: 1 Peter 4:12–19

When life is tough and only getting tougher, how do you keep going? When weeks of suffering turn into months and you are increasingly burdened in body, mind, or soul—or perhaps in all three—where can you find hope? How can you be sure that one day this trouble will pass?

That's the kind of predicament Noah was in during the flood, one of the greatest afflictions any man and his family has had to endure. Think of it: all neighbors wiped out. No land animals outside the ark. No *land* outside the ark. Aside from the sea creatures below the waves, Noah's family and the array of animals with them were the only beings left alive. Yes, they were temporarily safe in the ark, but what good was that boat if there was no earth—no place to dock it and come out? It would only be a matter of time before food and fresh water would run out, man and beast would go berserk, and the ark would become a floating tomb. How did Noah find assurance in that bleak and forlorn watery world? By anchoring his faith in the steadfast covenant promise of the Lord.

A Long Affliction

Scripture reveals that the waters "prevailed upon the earth 150 days" (Gen. 7:24). In today's world, to be at sea for even thirty days without coming to land is rare, but Noah and company were adrift in a rudderless barge on a sea without any other boats or humans anywhere for 150 days. Everything they knew was gone and they could have no sense of where they were; there were literally no landmarks to be seen.

And let's not forget that creation itself was in a massive upheaval. The springs of water deep in the earth had burst forth and the rains from the heavens above pounded down for the first forty days and nights (6:11). In fact, the water didn't stop pouring forth from those sources until the Lord shut them down *after* those 150 days (8:2). That means that, for 150 days, the sky would have been perpetually gloomy with clouds and rain, with cross winds howling all the day, while the waters below the ark would have been churning with powerful currents and massive swells, constantly

pitching the ark high and low. Light was restricted to some kind of window near the roof of the ark (8:6), so there those eight people sat in a heaving vessel with all those animals, shrouded in hazy shadows most of the day and darkness through the night, week after week, month after month—was this ever going to end?

Can you relate to Noah and his family? Have you been sailing along smoothly in life when suddenly winds and waves rise up to batter you? Maybe your health fell apart, a close relationship unraveled, your job dried up, or other things you thought were sound and solid in your life broke apart under pressure. In short order, nothing around you feels normal or secure anymore and you pray: Lord, when will you put an end to this storm?

Shadow of Christ

Can you see in Noah's sufferings a foreshadowing of Christ's sufferings? Many saints in the Old Covenant experienced this same pattern: they entered glory through a process of suffering. They were redeemed not *from* pain and trouble but *through* them. Think of Abraham who wandered as a stranger all his life in a land that was promised to him. Or consider Moses who first lived in exile and later had to regularly endure the scorn and rebellion of his own people. And then there's David, who faithfully served King Saul only to become hated by him and hunted down like a wild beast.

All of these saints trusted in the Lord and had a taste of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Shortly after birth, Jesus had to flee His land under threat and later grew up in the most despised area of Israel. When He preached the gospel, the crowds were amazed but few placed their trust in Him as Messiah, and the leaders hated Him. The longer He ministered, the more the opposition grew until they arrested Him, beat Him, scourged Him, and finally nailed Him to a cross. Christ suffered and died in our place as the only atoning sacrifice for our sins—and that's why suffering has ever been the path God's people walk! First hardship, then glory!

And that's how you and I get through our trials—by realizing that our suffering is actually a sharing in Christ's sufferings. Noah was *in* Christ by being *in* the ark—and that's why Noah suffered. As believers united to Christ, we also experience trials and tribulations as Peter teaches: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12–13; see Phil. 3:10–11). Adversity is hard and often takes a lot out of us, but God's promise is that after the suffering *there will be glory*! After the flood of wrath there will be a beautiful new day of sunshine and joy under the shalom of our God—that's what Noah was hanging on to, and in our grim days that's what we must hang on to as well.

Noah had heard God say, "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you" (6:18). Every one of those 150 stormy days, Noah must have thought about those words, for what else did Noah have to hope in? Before a single drop of rain had fallen, Noah had entered the ark because of God's Word, and every day in the tumultuous tempest he leaned upon God's trusted word of promise: I will keep you alive—all of you!

Turning Point

The beginning of chapter 8 is where the tide of God's judgment begins to turn: "But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark" (v. 1) *God remembered*. We shouldn't think that God had forgotten; the Almighty is incapable of suffering a memory lapse. Rather, in the Bible God's "remembering" is always about actively recalling the terms of His covenant—either the threats of judgment or, as in our text, the promises of salvation—and acting on them.

And that action immediately follows, "And God made a wind blow over the earth and the waters subsided" (v. 1). Verse 2 tells us that the rains stopped altogether and the springs of the deep were closed and then, with this new wind blowing, things begin to dry up! The word for "wind" in verse 1 is the same word for "Spirit" as found in Genesis 1:2. Moses is drawing a parallel. In the beginning, the Spirit or "Wind" of God hovered over the waters of the earth in preparation for the further acts of creation, and now God's Spirit goes to work again over those same waters, blowing a wind to evaporate and ultimately separate water from land. The gushing waters from earth and sky have stopped. The raging storm has faded away. Anxious hearts begin to settle.

Soon the spark of hope in Noah's heart is fanned into flame for that most welcome gale causes water levels to start receding. The water won't be completely dried up for another 220 days,[1] but after steady progress we read that "the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat" (8:4). Can you imagine the feeling for Noah and his family? They weren't floating around anymore! There is even a play on words here for the name Noah literally means "rest." At last, through Noah God grants His people a measure of rest. In a little more than two months, God causes the "tops of the mountains" to appear (8:4b). Try and picture it: from out of the waters,

land appears—just like in the first creation (see Gen. 1:9). Creation is being re-birthed and God's covenant promise is coming true!

Promise Kept

That's also what Noah's use of birds shows—the very first land animals created by God (Gen. 1:22). Birds would be among the first animals that could live on an earth being dried out, so Noah sends out a raven as a simple test. Remember, Noah cannot see down outside the ark, so he sends out one of the hardiest scavenger birds to be his eyes: can a raven survive outside the ark?

The raven, we read, flies to and fro (8:7). Apparently, it flies around near the ark but it doesn't have to be taken back inside. That means it can find things to eat and survive, but can't yet find a place to fly off to and be on its own. After seven days, Noah tries the same test but this time with a dove, a more domesticated bird that prefers to nest at lower altitudes. It's a common bird living among human communities. Can it find a home? The first try yields nothing. The second try, it returns with an olive leaf, showing that trees were beginning to bud again at lower altitudes—and with the third try, the dove does not come back. She has found a place to rest in the renewed creation and then Noah knows: God has kept His covenant promise! Before long we read: "So Noah went out, and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives with him. Every beast, every creeping thing, and every bird, everything that moves on the earth, went out by families from the ark" (8:18–19). Despite the judgment of worldwide catastrophe, the promise of God's salvation comes true.

When dark days are upon you, don't let discouragement drag you down—wait upon the Lord and trust His covenant promise. Like Noah, we don't know how long the adversity will last, but like Noah we may believe that God will remember His word. If God remembered to protect the dogs, cats, chickens, grasshoppers and all the other creatures with Noah on the ark—if He cared for them all through the flood and tempest and brought them onto the new earth with Noah and his family—how much more will He not care for you, His daughters and sons whom He bought with the precious blood of His Son? Your God will keep His promise to bring you through troubles into a renewed earth, because you are in Christ! ▪

1 The total number of days Noah and company spent on the ark was 370. He entered the art in his 600th year (2nd month, 17th day, according to Gen. 7:11) and stepped off the ark in his 601st year (2nd month, 27th day, according to Gen. 8:14). By Hebrew reckoning of that era, each month was 30 days and each year a total of 12 months (360 days).

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REFORMED FELLOWSHIP, INC.

2026 MEMBERSHIP MEETING

November 12, 2026 at 7:00p at Bethany URC in Wyoming, MI

AGENDA

1. Opening Devotions
2. Reports on the State of Reformed Fellowship Inc.
3. Count of Proxy, In-Person, & Online Votes
4. Ratification of Previously-Elected Board Members (three-year term)
   a. Rev. Doug Barnes: Re-Appointed to Third Term
   b. Mr. Marvin Mingerink III: Re-Appointed to Second Term
5. Ratification of Newly-Elected Board members (three-year term)
   a. Mr. Allan James (Bethel URC)
   b. Mr. Brandon Seaver (Hillcrest CRC)
   c. Mr. Mark Van Solkema (Dutton URC)
6. Additional Business Items
7. Webinar Presentation
8. Closing Matters
9. Closing Prayer

Rethinking Evangelism



Mrs. Elisabeth **Bloechl**

The Dreaded Word: Evangelism

FOR MANY OF US, just hearing the word overwhelms us with guilt and fear: guilt that we are not evangelizing enough, and fear to try. I want to propose that part of the reason we respond this way is that we have a narrow and inaccurate understanding of evangelism. We often think of it exclusively as telling someone what they must do to be saved—some version of Peter's sermon (Acts 2), or Paul's witness before Agrippa (Acts 26). However, that is only one aspect of evangelism. Hearing a presentation of the gospel is only one part of the process of the Holy Spirit calling a person to Himself. In this article, I want to consider the many other aspects of evangelism (or, rather, what we might call "pre-evangelism")[1] that are often overlooked, making us ineffective and inept in our attempts to evangelize.

First, let's consider what evangelism is. Evangelism, in its most basic sense, is sharing the good news of the gospel. It is through the Holy Spirit working repentance in our hearts as we hear this good news that we are saved (John 3). This is done primarily through preaching. Paul expounds this in Romans 10.

> How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!"… So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:14–15, 17).

Paul reiterates the necessity of preaching for proclaiming the gospel and working repentance in 1 Corinthians 1:21: "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." Evangelism, then, is closely linked to the preaching of the gospel. Paul even goes so far as to exclaim woe upon himself if he does not—as a minister of God's Word—preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16). The call of the pastor is the call to be an evangelist. It is to be a proclaimer of the gospel—both in the pulpit and out of it.

What About Me?

Where does this leave the laymen? If one of the primary means of evangelism is through the preached Word, does the rest of the church get an easy pass? If preaching were the *only* element of evangelism, the answer would be yes. However, while preaching the gospel is a vital piece in evangelism, it is not

the only piece. To demonstrate this, let's look at the activity of the early church.

The members of the early church were meeting in various congregants' houses, sharing meals together, and living as "masks of God"[2] throughout their lives. Those who were slaves were to work hard for their master, wives were to submit to their unbelieving husbands, all were to honor the emperor (1 Pet. 2:18, 3:1, 2:13–14). Each member of the church was to use their gifts to serve others, especially those in the household of faith (1 Pet. 4:10, Gal. 6:10). Why? That the watching world might see the light of these believers and want to walk in that light (Matt. 5:16, John 13:35). This was true in the Old Testament, too. The nation of Israel was to be a sweet aroma to the surrounding nations, attracting them to join their ranks (1 Kings 8:41–43, Isa. 56:7).

If this is the intended result, this light was not held exclusively behind the closed doors of the church or only among fellow believers. Paul makes this clear. After asking the Colossian church to pray that *he* would have opportunity to preach the gospel, Paul calls *them* to walk in wisdom *toward* outsiders. Dr. Eric Watkins points out that Paul is charging the Colossians not to walk past, around, away from unbelievers but toward them.[3] So, the wife of the unbelieving husband is to move toward her husband in love, service, and submission—not ignore him or consider him a hinderance. The slave of the harsh master is not to berate his master behind his back or avoid him whenever possible, but to work doubly hard and with cheerful zeal in service of his master (ultimately, the Lord). Following Jesus' example, Christians were to befriend drunkards and gluttons, sexually immoral and thieves (Matt. 11:19). In our dog-devouring world, this kind of living is not normal. It will elicit attention and questions. When those questions come, Peter tells us to be ready to give a cogent and kind explanation for why we act as we do (1 Pet. 3:15).

God uses the preached word as the primary means of evangelism, but He often readies the soil of impenitent hearts through regular Christians living in love *toward* unbelievers, through Christians who are ready and willing to provide an answer to the unbelievers' questions and difficulties.

Rethinking Evangelism

When we understand that a natural and organic means of moving toward evangelism is moving toward outsiders, we see how regular church goers can take part in welcoming others to Christ. I want to propose a mental test for considering ways God is calling you to walk toward outsiders. Don't worry, it is not graded and only consists of three questions.

First, ask yourself, What are my gifts? Am I good at organizing? How is my cooking? Do I enjoy hosting? What kind of things do I gravitate to in my free time (e.g., what are my hobbies?)?

Second, ask yourself who God has placed in your life. Are you working an office job five days a week? Are you a stay-at-home mom who takes lots of walks in the neighborhood? Do you have a large family to feed, necessitating frequent trips to the grocery store?

Third—and here is where you can get creative and have fun—how can I use my gifts to serve, love, and reach out to the people God has placed in my life? How can I wed my gifts with the opportunities already available?

Doing this requires some thought and consideration. We have to do some digging to figure out what our gifts are, including maybe asking friends. Then we need to pray for opportunities—and be willing to set aside our own comforts to take them.

A few ideas to start the juice dripping.

You are a stay-at-home mom who walks a lot with her kids and loves meeting new people. Stop and chat with neighbors you pass on your walks. Pay attention to celebrations (birthdays or anniversaries) and trials (leaky roof or a lost job). Find a way to celebrate with or support those you meet. A simple birthday card, a meal to help them through a lean month. If the opportunity presents itself, invite them to church or ask if you can pray with them.

You work in an office with people who drive you crazy. When you get home you knit to unwind. Consider knitting things for those particularly trying co-workers—praying for them (and yourself) as you do. Maybe even ask them if they need prayer for anything. Then follow up.

You work as a truck driver—alone eight hours a day. How can you move toward outsiders? If possible, make it a point to stop at the same gas station or restaurant on your routes. Get to know the employees. Pray for them while in the truck.

You are a healthcare worker who deals with illness, injury, death, and all of the emotions that go with these. If your schedule allows, can you take extra time to talk to the patients and their loved ones? Express an interest in their lives, finding ways to help them feel more comfortable. Maybe you like making homemade cards. Could you give to those spending extended time at the hospital?

Or maybe you are a teacher. Do you notice the kid everyone seems to avoid? Can you find ways to give him extra encouragement? Do you notice when a student is struggling with a subject or in some other way? Can you take extra time to listen to her or offer her extra assistance?

It is vital that you don't read the list of questions and of suggestions as a rule book for evangelism. Jesus did not have one place or one narrow method of evangelizing. He taught and preached on hillsides, in boats, in crowded houses. He shared the good news of new life in Himself in clandestine moonlight meetings, when stopping at a well at high noon, and in the synagogue on the Sabbath. We see the apostles following suite. They talk of Christ at the seashore, while walking through a city, during a gale, before a king, and from a prison cell.

And while our aim is for those with whom we interact to hear the gospel message, God does not require all of us to deliver that message. We are to be ready to give an answer for the hope within us (something which requires that we live as a Christian before a watching world) and to direct others to Christ so that they see something different in us that makes them curious. This can look like inviting someone to church or asking if they want to chat with your pastor. Or opening up your home as a meeting place for a Bible study that someone else leads. Or simply being kind to a tired barista.

The Foundation of Evangelism

We must understand why and how we reach out to anyone. We must not think that any sort of evangelism—be it preaching, hospitality, or praying with a co-worker—will save us or curry us favor with God. Our salvation is entirely a matter of grace. Our works, even works of evangelism, don't commend us to God. We don't evangelize because we believe that by it we will save ourselves or others. The foundation for our evangelizing is the gospel.

Consider the account of the woman at the well found in John 4. When the woman realized who Jesus was and what He knew (about her) and that, incredibly, He loved her, what did she do? She immediately went and told her neighbors about Jesus. She was like a young woman who had just gotten engaged to her dream man who she thought was way out of her league, telling everyone she knows about it, flashing her ring around, and bringing him up in every conversation. The more the gospel penetrates our hearts, the more we will want to move toward outsiders in love. We realize that we were that outsider, the one running from God, even as He persistently pursued us with heaven's hounds. But now we have been brought into union with the living God through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So, if you are finding yourself reticent to move toward the outsider, or crabby at the thought of using your gifts to serve others, pray for an increase in your knowledge of how deeply the Father has loved you through His Son. Pray for a heart so full of love, that you cannot help but pour out that love onto others. And pray for a heart full of peace, knowing that God Himself is with you wherever you go—whether it be to the neighbor next door or the intimidating boss down the hall. So let us pray and go. ▪

1 By "pre-evangelism" I am not referring to Francis Schaeffer's concept of conversation that leads up to an opportunity to present the gospel, but as developing relationships that naturally allow for deeper conversations because of the trust and love you have established.

2 Gene Edward Veith, "Masks of God," *Modern Reformation*, May 2, 2007, https://www.modernreformation.org/resources/articles/masks-of-god).

3 Eric Watkins, "Walking in Wisdom Toward Outsiders," MidAmerica Reformed Seminary, October 22, 2025, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WNYaTcBWIs.

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Hospitality at l'Abri

Lessons from Francis and Edith Schaeffer





Mrs. Annemarieke **Ryskamp**

THIS PAST SUMMER THREE OF US LADIES IN CHURCH organized a "Bible study in the Park" about the theme of hospitality. We used the book *You're Welcome Here* by Nancy DeMoss Wolgemuth,[1] which is a well-done, personalized study that makes you aware of the areas of hospitality that you are doing well in or can improve. It is biblically thorough and encouraging and I highly recommend it.

You could say that hospitality really is part of God's character, so when a mission work is dedicated to it and built on it, He is very much involved. This can be clearly seen from the origin and far reaching blessings of the l'Abri work that was started by Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer and his wife Edith. They dedicated their life's work to hospitality and there is much to learn from it.[2]

As the l'Abri work has played an important role in my life, I would like to talk about the hospitality and ministry of l'Abri, how it effected me, and how it helps us think about hospitality to others.

The Importance of Hospitality

Even without quoting the numerous examples and passages from the Bible (that are all mentioned in the study book mentioned above), it is clear that hospitality is an important issue for God, as it is an expression of His love for us to be with us, to communicate with us, and to eat with us. We can return some love by being hospitable ourselves.

Just a couple highlights show how hospitality starts with God wanting to live among His people, walking with them in the Garden, then dwelling in the tabernacle and temple and calling them to sacrifice to Him. (As an infinite God, He doesn't need to eat earthly food, yet invites sacrifice as a means of communion with Him.) When Jesus came as God in the flesh, He had meals with different kinds of people. He even makes us remember Him with bread and wine until He will serve us as the bridegroom and will make sure that our cup overflows (Ps. 23).

No wonder that an important (though not the only) expression of hospitality is sharing food with someone. And important when sharing food are both the setting where your guests can feel comfortable and enjoy the food with you, and the spiritual aspect of sharing your faith in Jesus, which should be a reason for doing it in the first place. In a good Christian community, like the first believers in Acts 4, food and goods are shared so that nobody is in need. At the same time, "with great power the apostles

were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all" (Acts 4:33). As we commit what we have and what we do to the Lord, we find Him blessing us both now and in the age to come.

L'Abri (labri.org)

Soon after World War II, American couple Francis and Edith Schaeffer and their three little children were sent by their church to be missionaries in Switzerland. They were putting down roots in a cute mountain village until they received an edict from the government of their canton (autonomous district) that for religious reasons they had to leave the canton within six weeks. It could only be appealed if they would find a house in a different canton and made arrangements to live in that house. In her book *L'Abri,* Edith Schaeffer describes vividly how they were looking for God's leading in hopes that God would lead them to a chalet that they would be able to afford to rent.[3] In the very last days of those weeks, they were led to buy a nice chalet called Les Mélèzes, and they were provided with the exact amount of good faith money that they had to put down. It showed them how personal God is and how much He is in the details, too.

The word *l'abri* is French for shelter. Edith explained, "It is a spiritual shelter for any in need of spiritual help—especially those seeking the answers to the basic philosophical problems with which all who care about finding a meaning or purpose in life have to struggle." They started it in 1958, but even before that they had guests almost all the time.

While Edith was in charge of the hospitality side of the l'Abri work, Francis would give lectures, preach on Sundays and answer the many questions of the guests. Many guests were students who, in the late 1950s and 1960s, were traveling the world as backpackers, looking for answers to their questions about faith, religion, philosophy, arts, and culture.

Francis was born in Germantown, PA, in 1912 and died in 1984. He was such an expert in both apologetics and discerning the trends in modern art and culture, that he is still quoted for his remarkable foresight. He wrote many famous books, like *The God Who Is There* (1968), *Escape from Reason* (1968), *True Spirituality* (1971), *A Christian Manifesto* (1981), etc. With the help of his son, Franky, they made a whole film series around Schaeffer's book *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (1976). This series is still as current as when it first came out.

The l'Abri work was built on hospitality. Their chalet had a bus stop right at their place, which connected to trains all over Europe. Over time, they developed a routine where every guest had to study for half the day (which meant listening to tapes with lectures or sermons) and helping out the other half of the day (with cooking, cleaning, yard work, etc). Questions could be asked during the meals and discussions would last late into the night.

Over the years the work grew to several more chalets. First the Schaeffer's children and then others started l'Abris in different countries. Now there are numerous l'Abris all over the world.[4] Their website (labri.org) gives all of their information and now contains many of the lectures, too.

My Story

Through God's leading, the Schaeffers met and befriended the Dutch couple Dr. and Mrs. Rookmaker in 1949. Prof. Rookmaaker taught art history, a major interest of Dr. Schaeffer, so the two men had a lot to talk about. In 1970, the Rookmaakers started a l'Abri in the Netherlands, in a beautiful mansion in the Betuwe, where the great rivers flow and the fruit orchards thrive on fertile soil. It is still used in the summer months for conferences or longer stays.

In the spring of 1984, I was recently baptized in a Bible-believing church that took me two years to find, and I was trying to delay my graduation from Utrecht University as long as possible because there were no jobs. (Being a student felt better than becoming a welfare case!) The pastor of my new church, Rev. W.G. Rietkerk, had been involved with l'Abri for many years and now felt called to start a "city l'Abri" that would have all of the hospitality and the study room, but not the overnight facilities of a l'Abri house. He approached me to ask if I could set up the study room starting in the fall.

After I realized that this is what a "calling" looks like, I started to work seriously hard on my thesis in order to graduate in the fall. The government benefit that I received during my two years fulltime at l'Abri turned into a l'Abri benefit. That's how God works.

When I started in the beautiful canal house in historic downtown Utrecht, I was shown two huge cardboard boxes filled with cassette tapes and about six old tape players that were all broken. The broken players were the easy part, because my little brother loved to repair such things, so he kept fixing them to keep them going. The hundreds of tapes were something else. I had to listen to each one of them in order to see if the quality was good enough, catalog them, and send copies to people who had ordered certain lectures. Wim Rietkerk made me attend the Swiss and English l'Abris as a guest and read all the books that Schaeffer and Rookmaaker and others had written. This developed my Christian worldview, the education I had not received in my non-churched home

or secular schools. It was altogether wonderful and necessary and God knew it.

We Don't All Have The Same Calling

The Rietkerk family lived upstairs in the house and on occasion I "babysat" their teenage daughter who was still in school then, but now runs the Dutch l'Abri with her American husband. I was involved in everything, from prayer days to the summers in the big country house. I learned what it took to cook for a large group following the example of Greta Rietkerk who could make delicious soup for lunch from any leftovers (not to mention how she, being German, could bake the best *torte* for coffee time!).

I participated in prayer times and witnessed how God provides when you trust Him to do so. They never raised funds, but everything was always provided, including family vacations. We see this in Luke 12:24 where Jesus says: "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds." Everybody in l'Abri has had that very experience, taking God at His word.

After two years, the cataloging was done; I was still single and I didn't see a permanent place for myself in the l'Abri work. So Wim Rietkerk let me go with a prayer for other work, which was answered the very next day!

In all this, I have learned firsthand that my hospitality is just a pale reflection of God's own wonderfully great hospitality towards me. When I commit my feeble attempts to Him and trust Him in everything, He is happy to overload me with blessings and grace, even where my unique circumstances dffere from those of the Schaeffers or the Rietkerks.

We don't all have a calling like starting a l'Abri, but Hebrews 13:1–2 says, "Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Remember Abraham, who experienced just that (Gen. 18). When you are hospitable, you will enjoy His blessing, whether your house is tidy or a mess, whether you're good at baking or not, even whether you enjoy it or not! (Though we are still called to do it without grumbling, according to 1 Peter 4:9). Whether you feel like hospitality is your calling or not, always remember: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). If you wish to show thankfulness in obedience to God's Word and love for Jesus Himself who is preparing a room for you in heaven, showing hospitality to others is a most fitting way to do so.

The most important lesson to learn is that despite the many blessings that come with true hospitality, the greatest gift is this: when you offer hospitality to God's people and strangers, you are offering hospitality to Jesus Himself: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matt. 25:34–36). Far from a legalism or works-righteousness that focuses on ourselves under the guise of providing for others, true hospitality is a gospel-worked response to the abundant grace and love shown to us by Jesus our Lord.

To quote from the studybook I mentioned in the introduction: "To Jesus, your hospitality is personal. When you open your home to your Christian brothers and sisters, you're ultimately serving Him. One of the greatest rewards of hospitality is to know that in serving others, you have had the privilege of serving Jesus. That's remarkable on its own, but Scripture promises that God loves to bless His children." ▪

1 https://www.reviveourhearts.com/store/product/youre-welcome-here-embracing-the-heart-of-hospitality/

2 For background, see Colin Duriez, *Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life* (Crossway, 2008); Bruce A. Little, ed., *Francis Schaeffer: A Mind and Heart for God* (P&R, 2010).

3 Edith Schaeffer, *L'ABRI,* New Expanded Edition (Crossway, 1992).

4 https://labri.org/locations/

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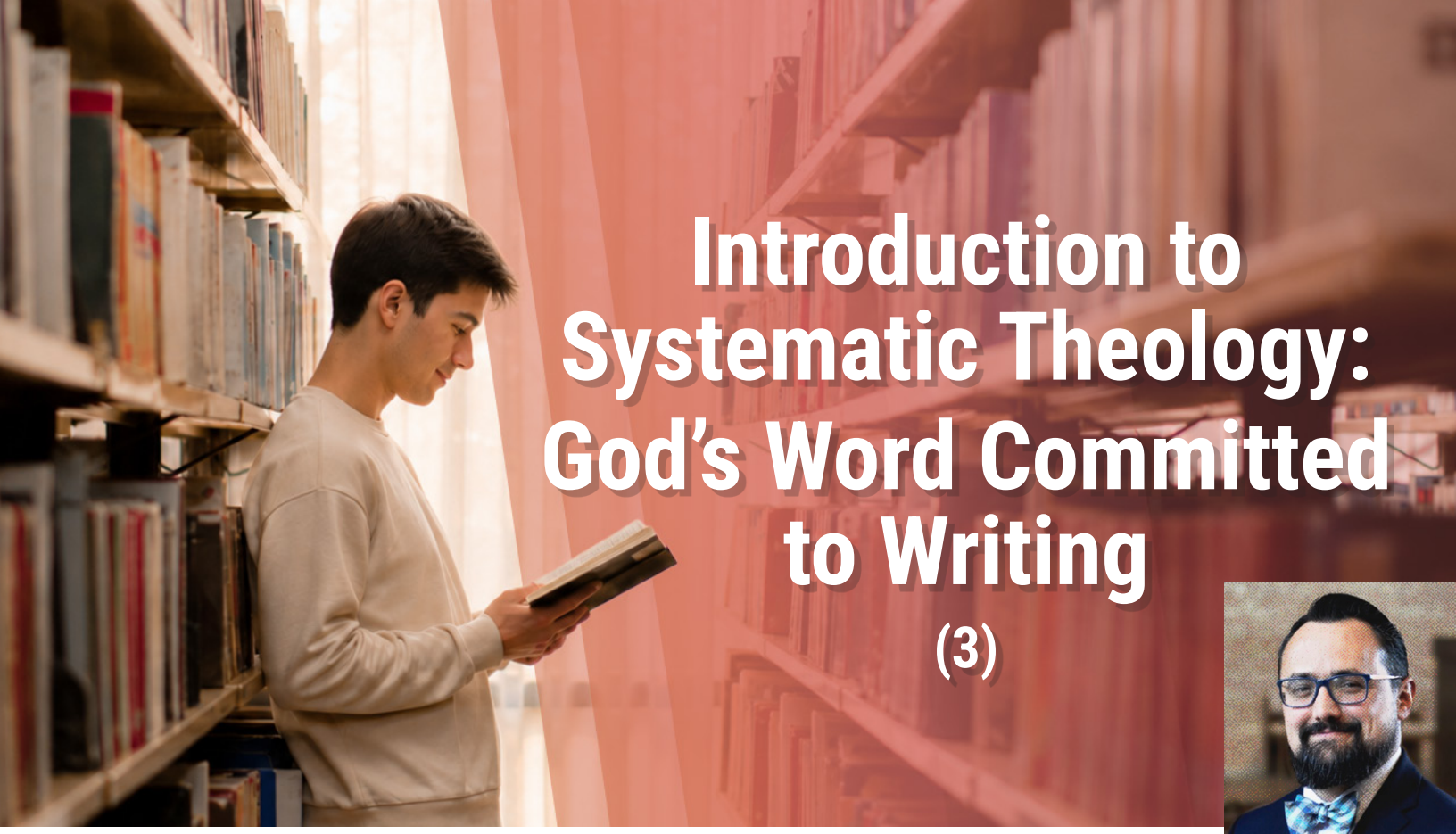
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Introduction to Systematic Theology: God's Word Committed to Writing (3)

Rev. Dr. Daniel **Schrock**

If we are going to know God at all, then we need Him to take the step of disclosing Himself. In His goodness, He has done this in two ways. First, He showcases who He is "in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20). Theologians refer to this as natural or general revelation. This form of God's self-disclosure is only sufficient to leave man "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20); it cannot show us what we need in order to be saved. Yet, secondly, God in His mercy has given us another mode in which we can know Him. Through a complex of redemptive words and deeds throughout history, He makes Himself known to us in a way that rescues us from the ruin and misery of our fallenness. Theologians refer to this as special revelation.

Special revelation has had a long history—a history which has involved a great variety of ways and means by which God made Himself known (see Heb. 1:1–2). Nevertheless, throughout that history there is one particular mode of special revelation that has held a place of prominence for God's people: written Scripture.

To understand the place Scripture occupies in the Christian life and in Christian theology, then, we need to understand what Scripture is and the attributes that belong to it. By His own initiative God commits His Word to writing and does so in such a way that anchors the history of His salvation to that Word.

As the discipline of systematic theology seeks to trace out God's revelation of Himself as an organized and coherent whole, it looks to Scripture as the "sole first principle" of theology. But we should note that to say that Scripture is the sole first principle of theology is not simply to say that Scripture is where theology *starts*. No, it means that Scripture is the *ultimate norm* and the *singular source* of the content of systematic theology.

This means that systematic theology can never get "beyond the Bible," at least if by that we mean that the theologian comes to know things about God that are not contained in the Bible—even in seed form. Systematic theology does not stop at quoting the exact words of Scripture; it also seeks to spell out the "good and necessary consequences" of Scripture (WCF 1.6). But these are never anything more than the good and necessary consequences of

Scripture. They are what the Bible says, albeit implicitly. Without the written text of God's Word there is no possibility of a true theology. This is what is entailed in the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura.*

In this final article on prolegomena to systematic theology, we will explore what Scripture is in its origin and attributes.

The Divine Origin of Scripture

God's Word Committed to Writing

Special revelation is a broader category than Scripture. It includes examples in biblical history of oral prophecy, theophany, and miracle. However, from at least the Mosaic period onward, God's redemptive revelation of Himself comes with an impulse towards writing down God's word (i.e., inscripturation). The Lord takes this step Himself. God was not content to let His covenant be known only by the oral traditions of His people passed on through memory, but He commits His covenant words to writing by inscribing them on stone tablets with His own hand (Exod. 24:12; Deut. 5:22, 9:10–11). That written Word becomes the touchstone of the covenant life of God's people (Deut. 31:24–26). Israel's existence is to be connected to the written Torah (Isa. 8:20). God Himself makes His written Word the centerpiece of His people's relationship to Him.

Yet the Torah itself anticipates an expansion of God's communication with His people. Moses was to be the *foundational* prophet, but not the *last* prophet (Deut. 18:15–22). Later prophets communicated God's Word as it came to them in oracles, dreams, visions, and signs from the Lord. Yet even the ministry of the prophets who followed Moses began to lean towards the inscripturation of God's Word (Jer. 36:1–2; Isa. 30:8).

It's important to remember, however, that the prophets did not write down only commands and oracles. They also record narratives of God's dealings with His people: prophetic historiography, something we find already in the Torah. The first five books of the Bible contain a great deal of history. But that history writing continued as redemptive history unfolded. And it is significant that the composers of historical books are identified as prophets (1 Chron. 29:29). When God commits His Word to writing, He does so in a way that makes known not only His redemptive words but also His redemptive deeds.

The Written Word in the New Covenant

When the major turning of the ages comes with the Word made flesh, the incarnation itself is indexed to God's written Word. Jesus presents His own ministry as being "subject to" and "in fulfillment of" the Scriptures (Matt. 5:17–18). Paul understands the fundamental events of the gospel to have occurred "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–5). God's written Word is therefore the anchor not only of the Old Covenant, but also the New.

It is wholly unsurprising, then, that when the apostolic witness to that gospel begins to spread out from Jerusalem to the utter most parts of the world (Acts 1:8), the apostles and prophets of the New Testament (Eph. 3:4–5) not only proclaim that Word orally but also write it down (2 Thess. 2:15; Rev. 21:5). And their writings are understood to be in the same category as "the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:15–16). Though the apostolic witness is regulated by the written Word of God that preceded it in significant ways, once committed to writing it doesn't possess *less* authority, nor is it different in kind from the Old Covenant Scriptures.

The Inspiration of Scripture

All the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament alike, have come forth from a unique activity of the Third Person of the Trinity. The revelation provided in Scripture does not emerge from the human will, but rather "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). Theologians call this divine activity "inspiration." The term designates how God "breathes out" the text of His written Word (1 Tim. 3:16).

Certainly, the humanity of Scripture is essential to what the Bible is. God used chosen men inspired by His Holy Spirit. The Bible was truly written by men. God does not negate the human personality of the apostles and prophets as He speaks through them. All the fingerprints of their human personalities can be seen in what they prophecy, proclaim, and write. The Holy Spirit did not mechanically override the distinct human personalities of the prophets and apostles in the act of inspiration; He worked organically through their personalities with all their characteristics and capacities to deliver God's Word to God's people.

But even though the prophetic Word of God is delivered by the mouths and pens of human men, it is still *God's* Word. He places His Word in their mouths (Deut. 18:18). Scripture's character as a divine Word stands in first order of importance over its human form. In fact, there is no human authorship of the Bible without the divine authorship of the Bible.

The Bible is not simply God adopting some previously spoken human words as His own. And the Bible does not contain *some* words of God, as though we need to pick through it to figure out which words are His and which are not. It does not become the Word of God through some second event. The Bible *is* the Word of God, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The Attributes of Scripture

Authority

Since Scripture is God's Word, it must bear God's authority. It could not do otherwise. The ear is the primary organ of faith (Rom. 10:14). Everything about the biblical faith and biblical ethic starts with first listening to the voice of God. Biblical faith is not, "Figure out what works best for you," "Engage in your own independent reasoning to determine what is right and wrong," or "Do whatever you think will make you happy." No, biblical faith starts with this rudimentary command, "Hear. Listen" (Deut. 6:4). Faith is responsive to the authority of God's Word. And the authority of God's Word is foundational for our entire life as it is lived in love and devotion to Him.

Our relationship with God is not—and never will be—a relationship between equals (Rom. 9:20). Everyone must begin the Christian life like a child and then walk the entire course of that Christian life like a child until they enter the kingdom and glory of God (Matt. 18:3–4; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17; 1 Pet. 2:2). Like children, we look to the authority of the Word of our Father who is in heaven. But we do that knowing that His Word is good. It is gracious. It is the singular hope of fallen man.

God's Word cannot and will not appeal to any other purportedly "higher" standard to establish its authority for its demands upon our faith (1 John 5:9). Neither the witness of the church nor the arguments of human reason can stand above God's own voice attesting to His own authority. If someone will not listen to Scripture for its own authority, no human testimony, however miraculous or reasonable, will persuade them (Luke 16:29–31). God has placed His name and His Word above all things (Ps. 138:2). Scripture authenticates itself, but it does not do that without the work of the Holy Spirit. The Third Person of the Godhead speaks in Scripture (Heb. 3:7–8) as it is living and active (Heb. 4:12). Those who do receive God's Word in faith do so because the Spirit attends that Word in power (1 Thess. 1:4–5; 2 Cor. 3:14–18).

Necessity

Scripture is also necessary. This is not so because God cannot reveal Himself in other ways; as we have seen above, He can and did communicate in a variety of ways. Thus, Reformed theology has insisted that the necessity of Scripture is "hypothetical." What it means is that it is not an absolute necessity, but a necessity that arises out of what God Himself has chosen to do. He has elected to commit His Word to writing and to direct our faith to that written Word (Deut. 31:9–13).

But, of course, God has His reasons for this. Preeminent among them is the way that the written Word preserves revelation for God's people who come in later generations (Ps. 102:18; Rom. 15:4). Even though the Church of Rome believes itself to be the custodian of the "unwritten Word" of God contained in tradition, it still has intuitively written down the decisions of ecumenical councils and the decrees of popes. Rome tacitly pays homage to the necessity of the written Word, even as it denies it. Scripture is necessary and it is such in no small part to the fact that the triune God has chosen it to be the instrument through which His people might know Him and fellowship with Him (1 John 1:1–4).

Sufficiency

God's written Word is also sufficient. Scripture needs no supplement of either continuing revelations or an "unwritten Word" of church tradition. This does not mean that Scripture contains every special revelation that was given by God (John 21:25; 1 Cor. 11:33–34). It does mean, however, that all that is necessary for the Christian faith and the Christian life is contained in Scripture. It is sufficient for the church to grow up into salvation.

Certainly, the history of redemptive revelation meant that there was a time in which more words from God were to be expected. However, the progress of redemptive history comes with a progress in redemptive revelation that brings the sufficiency of Scripture into its final climax in the last days inaugurated by Christ (Heb. 1:1–4).

God gives His final word through the apostles and prophets who make known the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:3–5). He lays His church upon the foundation of their Word (Eph. 2:20). But once a foundation is laid, one does not expect it to be augmented but only built upon. No more words from God are needed. As the hymn asks, "What more can He say than to you He has said?" What the man of God needs to be complete is Scripture and nothing else (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

For Systematic Theology then, this means that Scripture is its sole first principle. That is, it is the only norm and source for all true theological knowledge and for all that man must confess for salvation and to live in obedience unto God. The whole body of the objective material truths that theology confesses and theological ethics practices is given sufficiently and completely in Scripture. It contains the whole counsel of God, needing no supplement for its objective material truths from church tradition, human philosophy, or new revelations from the Spirit.

(article continues at the top of page 38)



Identity Assigned, Not Invented

A Reformed Response to the Crisis of Identity in the Philippines

Mr. Phicol **James**

2nd place winner in the
REFORMED FELLOWSHIP ESSAY CONTEST
Seminary Category

In recent decades, Filipino Christians have been increasingly shaped by two competing visions of human identity. One teaches that identity is assigned from God as part of His created order. The other insists that identity must be discovered within the self and expressed through personal authenticity. Through social media, global education, entertainment, and political discourse, Western ideas of expressive individualism have rapidly entered the Philippines, reshaping how many people understand sexuality, gender, and personal freedom. What was once treated as a moral question is now treated as a question of selfhood itself.

This shift is especially visible in the Philippines, where Christian moral teaching and strong family structures have historically shaped public life. Outright International's 2025 report notes that while the Philippines is among the most accepting Asian countries toward LGBTIQ persons, the cultural embrace of Western concepts of self-identity has introduced new ethical, relational, and theological challenges for families, churches, and counselors alike.[1]

At the heart of this cultural shift lies a deeper theological crisis. Modern society increasingly teaches that identity is something each individual must discover, construct, and express from within. The modern self is no longer seen as a gift from God but shaped through inward desire, personal authenticity, and social affirmation. This way of thinking now shapes how sexuality and identity are understood globally, including in historically Christian societies such as the Philippines.

The historic Reformed faith offers a radically different vision of the human person. Scripture teaches that identity is not self-created but assigned from the Creator and renewed through redemption in Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 1) begins not with self-expression, but with belonging: "I am not my own, but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." In an age obsessed with self-definition, the gospel announces the liberating truth that human beings do not need to invent themselves because they already belong to Christ.

The church in the Philippines, therefore, faces a profound challenge.

As individualism reshapes cultural assumptions about sexuality and identity, Christians must recover a biblical and confessional vision of what it means to be human. Only by recovering a biblical and confessional doctrine of humanity can the church in the Philippines respond faithfully to the modern crisis of identity with both truth and compassion.

Creation and the Imago Dei

The modern identity crisis cannot be understood merely through psychology or sociology. Scripture presents sexuality and identity not merely as biological or social categories, but as deeply spiritual and relational realities. From creation to redemption, the Bible portrays human beings as God's image-bearers, whose purpose, dignity, and ultimate fulfillment are found in their relationship with Him.

However, many today struggle with questions of identity without operating within this biblical framework. Carl Trueman argues that modern culture has embraced "expressive individualism," the belief that personal identity is discovered within the self and validated through outward expression. This cultural shift helps explain why biblical truth is often misunderstood or resisted: what Scripture frames as truth and life-giving guidance is often perceived as oppressive when identity is defined apart from God. Recognizing this tension underscores the need to return to God's original design.[2] By examining the creation account, we see that human sexuality and identity are not self-determined but grounded in the relational, covenantal, and redemptive purposes of God.

Created Male and Female

From creation to redemption, the Bible portrays human beings as God's image-bearers (Gen. 1:26–28; 2:7, 18–25). In Genesis 1, God creates humanity in His image, male and female, giving them dominion over creation and blessing them to be fruitful. The Westminster Confession of Faith (4.2) summarizes this biblical truth by declaring that God created humanity "male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls."

Human identity is not self-created but divinely assigned. Men and women do not invent identity; rather, they receive it from their creator. Genesis 2 emphasizes relational design: Adam and Eve are made for companionship, covenant, and stewardship, showing that human identity and sexuality are rooted in God's intentional plan rather than self-determination. The distinction between male and female is not accidental or socially constructed, but part of God's intentional design for humanity.[3]

Sexuality, therefore, is more than a physical attribute; it is a theological reality that points to communion, covenant, and creativity. As John Piper emphasizes, the male-female design is a symphony of relational and sexual harmony intended to glorify God.[4] Wayne Grudem similarly notes that the image of God encompasses not only moral and rational capacities but also relational and bodily dimensions, including sexuality. These struggles are not merely psychological or social, but profoundly theological; they touch the core of God's design for human flourishing.[5]

Sexuality finds its proper expression within the covenant of marriage. Genesis 2:24 declares that man and woman are united as "one flesh," a union designed for companionship, procreation, and faithful covenantal commitment. The goodness of sexuality is affirmed in Genesis 1:31, where God declares His creation "very good." Within God's intended boundaries, sexuality is a gift that reflects divine creativity and love, not a source of shame. The human body participates in God's purposes (Ps. 139:13–14; 1 Cor. 6:19–20), demonstrating that sexual expression, when aligned with God's design, is life-giving, relationally enriching, and morally ordered.[6]

Finally, human identity is derived rather than self-defined. God's act of naming creation in Genesis 2 signals that identity is determined by divine order rather than subjective perception. This principle directly challenges modern ideologies that prioritize self-determined identity over God-ordained design. This affirms that true worth and purpose are rooted in being created and known by God, providing both a foundation for pastoral care and a corrective lens through which individuals can see themselves as God intended.[7] Yet Scripture does not leave humanity in Eden; the modern crisis of identity cannot be understood apart from the fall. Human desires, affections, and self-perceptions are now distorted by sin. The Belgic Confession explains that humanity "corrupted his whole nature" through rebellion against God (Article 14). This corruption extends not only to outward behavior but also to the inner life, affecting how people understand their bodies, desires, and identity itself. This doctrine of human depravity reshapes modern views of sexuality and identity. While culture treats inward feelings as morally authoritative, Scripture teaches that fallen humanity needs redemption and renewal in Christ, not self-construction.

The False Promise of Self-Definition

Understanding human sexuality and identity requires attention not only to Scripture but also to the cultural and social contexts in which individuals live and interact. In Asia, and particularly in the Philippines, family expectations, religious traditions, and increasing exposure to Western ideas of self-determined identity create

tensions that can distort how people see themselves in light of God's design. Like all humanity, Asians are image-bearers of God, too, whose true identity and worth are found in Christ; yet cultural pressures often lead to confusion and relational strain. These pressures reveal how deeply modern culture shapes the way people understand identity, sexuality, and personal freedom.

Globalization and the Modern Self

While globalization reshapes identity from the outside, the family remains the strongest internal force shaping how individuals understand themselves. In Asia, and particularly in the Philippines, exposure to Western media, education, and digital platforms has introduced ideas of sexual autonomy, LGBTQ+ rights, and self-determined identity that were previously uncommon in the region. Erick Laurent, in 2005, observed that Asian societies, once rooted in communal identity and family harmony, are now increasingly influenced by Western frameworks that define individuals through fixed sexual and gender categories.[8] Awareness and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations have increased, particularly among younger and urban populations. While these developments provide individuals with greater access to information and alternative perspectives, they also generate tension between Western individualism and traditional collectivist values, which emphasize family cohesion, social harmony, and adherence to communal moral standards.[9]

Within this tension, the family emerges as the central anchor for identity formation, often mediating how individuals respond to these external cultural pressures. This cultural shift highlights the need to ground identity and sexual ethics in Scripture.

Family, Honor, and Identity

The family continues to serve as the primary social and moral institution in Filipino society, exerting profound influence over individual identity, decision-making, and relational life. Familial expectations strongly shape how individuals understand their roles, express their sexuality, and make personal choices. In many cases, there is significant cultural pressure to uphold family honor and conform to parents' moral and religious values.[10]

Such expectations can create internal conflict for persons who struggle to reconcile personal questions about sexuality or identity with the desires of their family. From a Christian perspective, it is essential to recognize that while God calls individuals to honor their parents and live in relational harmony, their ultimate identity and worth are rooted in Christ, who is the image-bearer of God. Church must therefore address the tension between familial expectations and obedience to God's design, guiding Christians toward a gospel-centered understanding of self that brings peace, clarity, and relational integrity.

Christianity in a Changing Culture

Religious beliefs, particularly those rooted in Catholicism and broader Christian traditions, continue to exert a significant influence on sexual ethics and gender norms in the Philippines. Teachings on chastity, marital fidelity, and the complementary nature of male and female roles shape societal expectations and guide individual behavior. While these principles provide moral clarity and relational stability, they can also generate tension for individuals exposed to modern ideas of sexual autonomy and fluid gender identities.[11]

Believers may experience guilt, confusion, or relational strain when their personal experiences or questions appear to conflict with religious expectations. However, faith serves as a critical lens for moral reasoning and identity formation. Christian leaders are called to help individuals understand that their ultimate worth and sexual identity are grounded in God's design, not solely in cultural norms or personal feelings, while gently navigating the complexities that arise from the intersection of traditional religious convictions and contemporary societal pressures.

Digital Culture and the Formation of Desire

Social media, education, and peer networks have become powerful forces in shaping how individuals understand sexuality and gender in contemporary Philippine society, underscoring the need for truth that grounds identity in Christ rather than shifting social narratives. Through global connectivity, social media platforms expose users to diverse and often conflicting narratives about sexual identity, autonomy, and self-expression. These online spaces can serve as avenues for awareness, allowing individuals to find information, community, and affirmation that may not be available within their immediate social or religious environments. Likewise, educational institutions increasingly promote inclusivity and acceptance of various sexual orientations and gender identities, influencing young people's perspectives on morality and identity formation. Peer relationships also play a significant role, as acceptance or rejection within social groups can profoundly impact a person's self-concept and emotional well-being.[12]

These developments have created profound challenges for Christians in the Philippines. As social media

normalizes expressive individualism, many believers struggle to uphold biblical convictions in a culture that increasingly prizes personal authenticity over divine authority. The result is growing separation between historic Christian teaching and modern cultural values. When identity is shaped more by social affirmation than by God's revelation, moral confusion and spiritual disorientation inevitably follow.[13]

Identity Across a Divided Society

Differences in socioeconomic status and geographic location significantly affect how Filipinos perceive and engage with issues of gender and sexuality. Urban communities, particularly in major cities such as Manila, Cebu, and Davao, are generally more exposed to global media, educational campaigns, and advocacy movements promoting inclusivity and sexual diversity. Access to the internet (social media is widely available), higher education, and social organizations allow individuals in these settings to encounter a broader range of perspectives and resources related to identity and sexual expression. As a result, acceptance of non-traditional gender roles and sexual orientations tends to be higher in urban areas.[14]

In contrast, rural communities often maintain more traditional and conservative values rooted in family, religion, and communal expectations. Limited access to diverse information sources, combined with stronger social cohesion, contributes to slower shifts in attitudes toward sexuality and gender identity. Individuals in these regions may face greater social stigma or isolation when expressing views or experiences that differ from established norms. Additionally, socioeconomic factors influence access to professional counseling or mental health services. Those in lower-income or remote areas frequently lack both trained counselors and faith-based support systems capable of addressing questions of sexuality in a balanced and informed manner, which can exacerbate minority stress and mental health disparities, both in the general population and within LGBTQ+ communities.[15] These social differences reveal how deeply modern identity formation is shaped by environment and access to cultural influence. Yet, whether in urban centers or rural provinces, Christians face the same fundamental question: will identity be grounded in the self or in the Creator?

Why the Church Must Speak with Truth and Compassion

The church cannot remain silent amid the modern crisis of identity. Christians in the Philippines increasingly find themselves caught between historic biblical convictions and cultural pressures shaped by globalization, media, and expressive individualism. Yet the church must respond neither with fear nor compromise, but with theological clarity, pastoral wisdom, and Christlike compassion. A distinctly Biblical vision of humanity enables the church to speak truthfully about sexuality and identity while extending the hope of the gospel to those struggling in a confused age.

Identity in Christ

Truth must be firmly grounded in the truth that human identity is rooted in the imago Dei.[16] Individuals find their ultimate worth and self-understanding not in social affirmation or cultural acceptance, but in Christ, who restores and redeems human identity. Leaders should affirm the goodness of God's design, emphasizing the complementarity of male and female and the proper expression of sexuality within the covenant of marriage.[17]

A gospel-centered approach emphasizes grace, redemption, and Christ-centered transformation, acknowledging that all individuals experience brokenness and struggle with sin. Identity is not determined by personal feelings, social approval, or cultural trends, but is found in Christ, who restores and defines human worth. Grounding identity in God's design brings clarity and stability amid the competing messages of Western individualism, social media, and shifting societal norms. By embracing the truth that purpose and self-understanding flow from the Creator rather than from self-determination, believers can develop a resilient, Christ-centered sense of self that navigates cultural pressures with both hope and integrity.[18]

Honoring Family Without Losing Truth

Building on the cultural challenges discussed in Part II, navigating family and cultural expectations requires a delicate balance of honoring relational and communal values while remaining faithful to biblical truth. Ministers can guide individuals to respect parents and elders, acknowledging their role in shaping moral and social norms, without allowing familial pressure to define identity or compromise obedience to God. Techniques such as empathetic listening, clear communication, and boundary-setting can help reduce relational tension and foster dialogue that is both respectful and truthful. This approach addresses the tension created by familial expectations to uphold honor and maintain traditional values, as well as the differences between urban and rural social norms that shape acceptance and exposure to diverse perspectives. By pointing struggling people to Christ as the ultimate authority and source of identity, the body

of Christ can help them reconcile personal questions about sexuality and selfhood with family and societal expectations, cultivating peace, integrity, and gospel-centered relational wisdom.[19]

The Church and Moral Clarity

Many members experience tension between deeply held religious convictions and the cultural narratives surrounding sexual identity. Feelings of guilt, confusion, or internal conflict often arise when personal experiences appear to clash with the moral frameworks taught by Catholicism or other Christian traditions. In addition, as churches increasingly navigate modern social expectations and adopt more ambiguous stances, believers can feel uncertain about what constitutes faithful obedience to God. These pressures are compounded by a broader cultural context in which identity is frequently defined apart from divine design, leaving Christians to navigate the space between social affirmation and biblical truth.[20]

Steering these tensions requires careful reflection on Scripture, for example, Romans 12:2 calls believers not to conform to the patterns of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind, demonstrating that identity and moral discernment are ultimately grounded in God's truth rather than cultural trends. At the same time, the pastoral/counselor dimension of care acknowledges the real emotional and relational struggles that arise, offering both conviction and compassion to those seeking to live faithfully in a complex cultural landscape.

Forming Christians in a Digital Age

Exposure to social media, educational content, and peer networks significantly shapes how individuals perceive themselves and understand sexuality. For many, constant exposure to competing ideologies can create confusion, moral dissonance, and relational strain, particularly when messages conflict with deeply held Christian convictions.[21] These influences are not uniform, as urban and more affluent communities often provide greater access to diverse perspectives and supportive networks, while rural or lower-income areas may limit exposure and resources, intensifying feelings of isolation.[22]

Directing these pressures requires discernment rooted in Scripture, allowing people to measure cultural narratives against God's revealed truth. Reflection on biblical teaching, participation in faith-centered communities, and the cultivation of supportive peer relationships help individuals integrate their identity with Christ's design rather than the shifting standards of society. By engaging critically with media and educational content while maintaining connections with spiritually grounded mentors and peers, believers can build resilience, clarity, and emotional stability, learning to live faithfully in a context where cultural definitions of self often diverge from God's intention.[23]

Truth, Compassion, and Christian Witness

Christian response in the Asian context must carefully navigate the interplay between deeply rooted communal and familial values and the unchanging truth of Scripture, helping Christians align their identity with God's design rather than prevailing cultural norms. In many Asian societies, including the Philippines, identity is strongly influenced by family honor, social expectations, and the pressure to conform to traditional moral frameworks. This cultural emphasis means that change and spiritual growth often happen gradually, requiring patient, empathetic guidance that emphasizes incremental discipleship and Christ-centered transformation. At the same time, leaders must help members engage with cultural realities, such as urban-rural differences, exposure to Western ideas through media, and peer influences, without compromising biblical fidelity. This involves affirming the importance of family and community while clearly grounding identity and moral discernment in God's design. By addressing pressures from both society and social networks, ministries can equip individuals to navigate moral and relational tensions faithfully, fostering resilience, relational harmony, and a deeper understanding of their worth and identity in Christ.

In the Philippine and broader Asian context, such culturally sensitive yet biblically anchored guidance demonstrates that the gospel can guide individuals and families toward renewal and wholeness, even amid complex cultural, social, and generational pressures. It shows that living faithfully in a rapidly changing society is not only possible but transformative, as believers learn to align their identity with God's purposes rather than shifting cultural norms.

Conclusion

In an era when identity is increasingly detached from transcendent reference points, biblical teaching offers not merely an ethical alternative but a redemptive vision of what it means to be truly human. Within Asian, especially Philippine, contexts, where globalization and cultural hybridity often produce moral disagreement, the gospel reorients both the church leaders and the individuals toward a deeper reality, the restoration of the self in communion with God. Such wisdom does not seek

to impose Western categories or cultural expectations, but to illuminate the truth that human dignity, purpose, and sexuality find coherence only in the Creator's design and the Redeemer's love. Faithful response functions as a ministry of reconciliation, entering the complexity of personal struggle, family expectations, and social transformation with the confidence that Christ's grace is sufficient to renew even the most fragmented identities. By embodying truth through compassion and compassion through truth, the biblical counselor, pastor, elder, or leader becomes an instrument through which divine wisdom confronts cultural confusion not with condemnation, but with hope. In this way, the gospel does not erase culture but sanctifies it, transforming the believers' understanding of self and relationships into a testimony of God's redemptive purpose.

The modern crisis of identity is ultimately a theological crisis. When human beings attempt to define themselves apart from God, confusion inevitably replaces clarity. The church in the Philippines must therefore recover a distinctly biblical and Reformed doctrine of humanity, one grounded not in self-expression but in creation, fall, and redemption. In a culture increasingly shaped by expressive individualism, Christians must proclaim with renewed confidence that true freedom is not found in inventing the self, but in belonging to Jesus Christ. As the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 1) reminds believers, we are "not our own," but belong body and soul to our faithful Savior. In that truth, the fractured self finds lasting identity, dignity, and peace. ▪

1 "Philippines | Outright International," accessed October 31, 2025, https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/asia/philippines.

2 Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 45–47.

3 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1986), 67–72.

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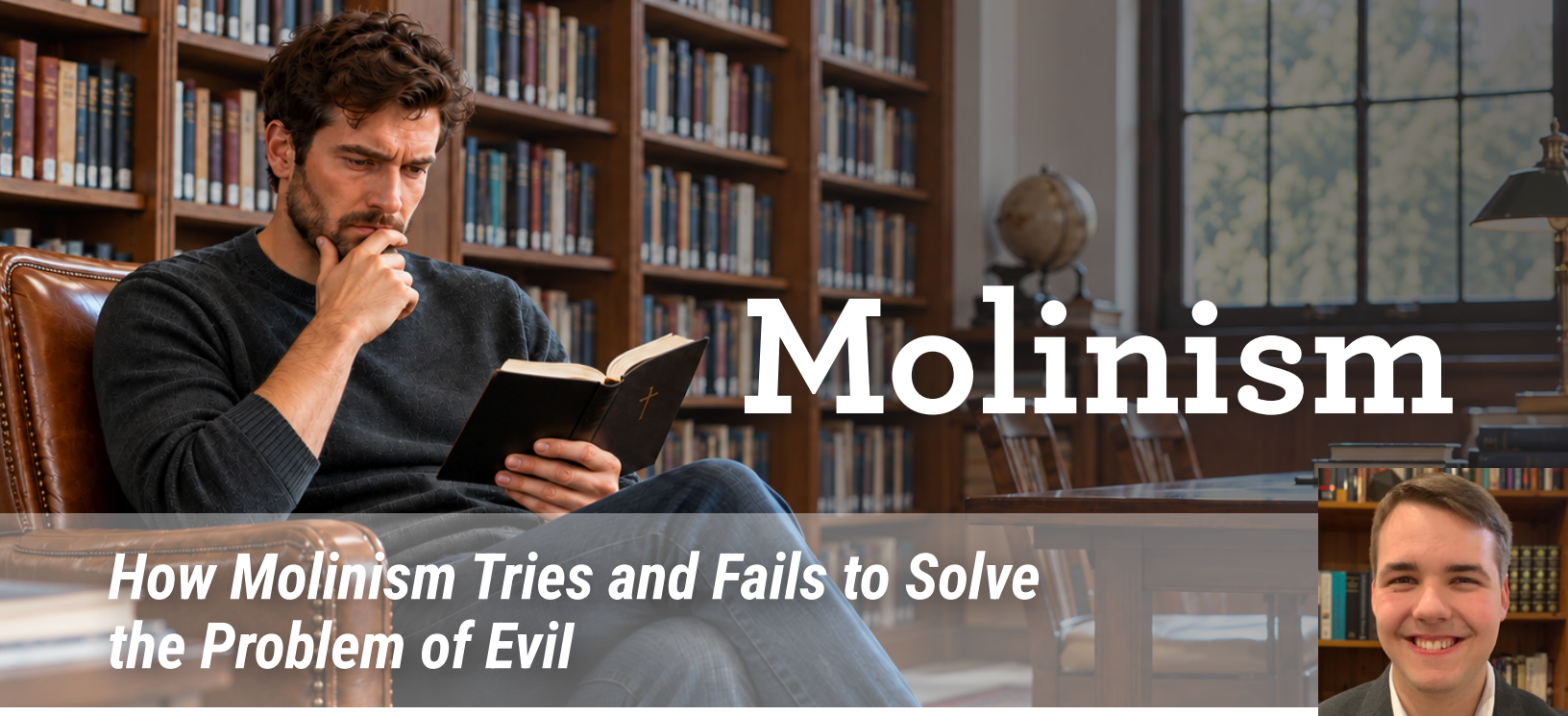
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Molinism

How Molinism Tries and Fails to Solve the Problem of Evil

Mr. Jubal **Farenhorst**

2nd place winner in the
REFORMED FELLOWSHIP ESSAY CONTEST
Undergraduate Category

TWO OF THE MOST DIFFICULT ISSUES IN BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY are the problem of evil and the question of how God's sovereignty relates to man's free will. Historically, Calvinism and Arminianism have served as the primary competing traditions answering such questions, the core tenets of which have been debated since Augustine battled the Semi-Pelagians in the fifth century AD.[1] More recently, however, another fascinating system of doctrine has gained popularity that offers a unique answer to these issues, namely Molinism. Leading Christian philosophers and apologists such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig have adopted the system, and other popular Christian thinkers such as Mike Winger have made use of its principles to reconcile divine sovereignty and human freedom.[2] Unfortunately, despite its widening appeal, I believe the system makes some claims that are not consistent with what the Bible teaches. To examine these issues, I will first explain what Molinism is and how it addresses the problem of evil, and then move to making a Reformed critique of its principles and offering a Reformed answer to the same issue.

Molinism was first proposed by the Jesuit priest Louis de Molina in the sixteenth century as an attempt to reconcile Augustine's strong view of God's sovereignty and the Roman Catholic emphasis on man's free will. In the system that bears his name, before God created, He saw every possible world that He could make. He saw every variety of person and every possible decision they would make in any conceivable circumstance at any given time. Knowing every possibility, God then brought into existence the best possible world He could. In Molinism, the knowledge God has of what His free creatures would choose in any given circumstance is a category of His *middle knowledge*.[3] Middle knowledge is knowledge that God possesses of things that are contingent (possible to be but not necessary), and independent of Himself (because they depend on the choices of free creatures).[4] In this system, then, man is free since all of his choices are made by himself alone,[5] and God is sovereign insofar as He determines which possible world to bring into existence. On this foundation Molinism builds its theology.

Before addressing how Molinism deals with the problem of evil, we must be clear what exactly the

problem is that Molinism is seeking to address. It is not trying to solve the deep emotional anxiety caused by the immense suffering mankind experiences in this world. Rather, Molinism is attempting to offer a solution to what is called "the logical problem of evil," which can be summarized in this way: (I) If God exists and is all-good, then He would want to prevent as much evil as He can. (II) If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, then He is able to prevent all evil. (III) There is evil. Therefore, God must either not exist, or not be all-good, all-knowing, or all-powerful, because the existence of both evil and of a good God able to prevent all evil are incompatible.

To answer this dilemma, Molinists posit that God is unable to prevent all evil, but in a very particular way. Recall that God knows every possible world that He can create, and that God, who is all-good and all-powerful and all-knowing, created the best possible world He could. If an atheist were to ask a Molinist, "Why is there so much evil in the world if the one God created is the best?", he would reply that this is not the best possible world, only the most favourable world *that God could create* given human freedom. That is, to solve the logical problem of evil, Molinists suggest that the creatures God could create have the problem that, if created and allowed to be free, they *will* sin at some point and so usher corruption into creation.[6] If every possible person suffers from the inevitability of their sinning, which Alvin Plantinga calls "transworld depravity," then it follows that God cannot prevent evil from entering creation if He wants free creatures. Therefore, God cannot prevent evil in a world with morally free agents because those agents would sin no matter what God does. If God wants such creatures, then evil is an unfortunate but necessary consequence.[7]

Now, in saying that God could not create a world both with free creatures and no evil, the Molinist does not think they are denying that God is all-powerful or that He is sovereign. In their view, because the actions of free agents are just that—free—they are outside of God's control by definition. Even so, it is still within God's power and will whether or not to create free creatures, and thus He is still the Almighty and Sovereign One, albeit in a more limited sense.[8]

Despite its explanatory power and increasing popularity, I believe that Molinism's principles contradict the Word of God on at least two points.

First, in Molinism, God's sovereignty is limited by human freedom. But in the words of R.C. Sproul, "If God's sovereignty is restricted by man's freedom, then God is not sovereign; man is sovereign."[9] Sproul elaborates: "God is free. I am free. If my freedom ever runs up against God's freedom, I lose. His freedom restricts mine; my freedom does not restrict His."[10] If God ever decrees that something will or will not come to pass and I will the opposite, God is free to intervene either by removing my will from the equation in some way (Num. 23:11–12; Dan. 4:30–33), or by so influencing my will that I choose otherwise (Exod. 4:21; Ezra 1:1–2). In this way man is free, but God is more free. Contrary to Molinism, His sovereignty cannot be limited by our free choices.

Second, in the Molinist solution to the problem of evil, when man is first created, he is already in a fallen state such that he is unable to keep from sin. Classically, Augustine distilled four states of man from the Scriptures, the first two of which describe how man is both able to sin and able to keep from sin before the fall, but not able to abstain from sin after the fall.[11] In Molinism, however, God can only create fallen human beings who are inherently unable to keep from sinning regardless of the fall. This implies that 'free will' and 'committing evil' are inseparably related: the second follows necessarily from the first. But this raises some serious questions about God's own free will, and how God will keep man from sin even in Heaven. Quite simply, contrary to what Molinism teaches, one can be free and without ever sinning, and God is perfectly able to keep man from committing evil by fully sanctifying him. While I think there are more errors in Molinism, I believe these two are sufficient to be wary of its principles from a Biblical perspective.

When we consider the Bible's teaching on sovereignty, freedom, and evil we are driven to the conclusion that God is not only able to prevent all evil without destroying creaturely freedom,[12] but that God is providentially in control even of the sinful actions of His morally responsible creatures. As the Westminster boldly states, "[God's providence extends] even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men… yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin."[13] But if Molinism as a theology fails and thus cannot solve the problem of evil, it raises the question: If God's sovereignty is not limited by human freedom, and if God could have prevented Adam's fall, then why is there evil? The Reformed solution to this challenging issue is that the all-goodness of God does not mean that He will unilaterally prevent all the evil He can. God could have prevented man from ever sinning, but for whatever reason He desired the existence of evil. In the words of R.C. Sproul, "Because God ordained that evil should exist, I know that in some sense it is good that there

is evil. I am not saying that evil *is good* but only that God *deemed it good* to allow evil."[14] To show how this is possible, the story of Joseph is helpful.

In a pivotal era of redemptive history (Gen. 37–50), God brought Joseph from being the favorite son of his father Jacob to being sold as a slave by his own brothers. From there, God carried Joseph through slavery and imprisonment to the court of Pharaoh, where, in God's providence, he earned favor with the ruler of Egypt and was appointed as prime minister of the land. As prime minister, Joseph was able to harvest and store vast amounts of grain for an impending seven-year famine, which enabled him to save many from starvation. At the end of the story Joseph's brothers were reunited with him, and they were terrified. Joseph was now in a position of great power and could have easily taken vengeance on them for selling him into slavery so many years ago. Joseph met their fears with these words: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive." (Gen. 50:20). Joseph's brothers "meant" to do evil of their own free will by selling Joseph into slavery, and yet in that same action they were fulfilling God's plan to save many people through Joseph. What this story teaches us is that man has purposes and God has purposes, and that God uses the intentions of man, whether good or evil, to accomplish His own divine will.[15]

So why is there evil? Scripture does not reveal every reason, but God's Word does make clear that through evil God's justice will be displayed in punishing the wicked and His mercy shown forth in saving His elect (Rom. 9:19–24). While every particular instance of sin and evil, even horrible evils, are often left a mystery, those who are in Christ can trust God knowing that all things are working together for God's glory and for our good (Rom. 8:28). The clearest demonstration of God's using evil for His own good purposes is found in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God. It was the most wicked act in history, and yet it was simultaneously God's means to accomplish the salvation of His people. Furthermore, while evil remains for a time, God has promised that He will remove it in its entirety from the world when Christ returns (Rev. 20:10, 14–15; 21:4), bringing justice to the unjust and fully sanctifying His elect in Christ. Again, we do not know everything regarding evil's existence, but we know that God willed that it would exist for a time, and that He will be glorified through it.

Overall, Molinism is an interesting system of doctrine that uses middle knowledge and possible worlds to reconcile divine sovereignty and human freedom and to solve the logical problem of evil. However, I believe that Molinism fails to account for what the Bible teaches on these matters insofar as, in the final analysis, it makes man more sovereign than God and limits His power over sin and evil more than Scripture would allow. While I do not consider Molinism to be a salvific issue, it is something to be very cautious of as it might seem to plausibly address some of the most difficult subjects in Biblical Christianity. Despite this, I believe that the Reformed position offers a better understanding of these harder issues and is much more Biblically grounded. ▪

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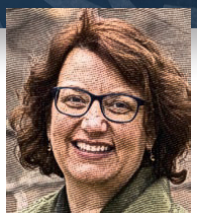
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A BRIEF REPORT

75th ANNIVERSARY GALA



Mrs. Hope **Staal**

THIS YEAR, REFORMED FELLOWSHIP CELEBRATES A wonderful milestone: 75 years of faithful ministry, by God's grace. A gala evening in September with authors, speakers, and musicians was a reminder of God's blessings poured out in rich abundance.

The theme verse chosen by the Reformed Fellowship board for this year of celebration is taken from Psalm 68:11, "The LORD gave the word; great was the company of those who proclaimed it." Indeed, it is part of the privilege of our publishing ministry to see how great is the company of those faithfully proclaiming the Word of God. We partner with authors, missionaries, and seminarians; pastors, office-bearers, and laymen; parents, grandparents, and teachers – and many more around the globe! – and we are blessed day by day with the mutual encouragement of these interactions. In them we enjoy sweet fellowship and God reminds us, as He did Elijah, that He has reserved those for Himself who have not bowed the knee to the Baals of this world.

On September 26, we had an extraordinary opportunity to experience such encouragement. Reformed Fellowship board and staff members were joined by guests whose schedules and geographical locations allowed them to participate in an anniversary gala. Our esteemed authors were invited to a special pre-gala afternoon tea reception which also served as book launch for our newest title, "Roots Renewed: Perspectives on the URCNA (After Thirty Years)." Dr. Cornelis Venema, editor of this wonderful collection of essays, signed a number of book copies at this launch. Attendees browsed a historical timeline exhibit with displays ranging from the very first issue of the Reformed Fellowship magazine in 1951 (then called the "Torch & Trumpet"), on to the first hand-cranked copies of Bible studies, through to a preview galley print of Donna Kelderman's upcoming children's devotional "Light For My Path", releasing in November of this year.

Historic copies of the magazine seemed especially of interest, given the context provided by Dr. Venema's dinnertime talk. Titled "A Tale of Two Minds and Two Magazines," Dr. Venema's speech traced the early beginnings of the Reformed Fellowship and Reformed Journal publications, respectively, with their opposing—even competing—minds. Rich with historical context, enlightening quotes, and Dr. Venema's trademark humor, the "first half" so-called of the prepared material filled all the time allotted. We hope Dr. Venema will convert the entirety of his lecture into article form for the benefit of those readers of *The Outlook* who were unable to attend, as well as those in attendance who desired to hear the "second half!"

Having shared table fellowship and a stimulating lecture, fresh orchard donuts and hot cider encouraged browsing and fellowship before moving into the auditorium for the later part of the evening. The Hope Heralds Male Choir under the direction of Mr. Dan VanDyke, accompanied by Mrs. Karen Daling, filled the room to the rafters with glorious sound. Dear brothers from a variety of local churches spoke encouraging words from their own experiences of Reformed Fellowship's publications, and offered prayers of thanksgiving to God for His faithfulness, pleading for further blessing for the future. Enthusiastic audience singing accompanied each prayer. What a blessing! In that place we enjoyed many of the most wonderful aspects of "Reformed fellowship", as we prayed and harmonized together in praise of our great God. Soli Deo gloria! ▪

Mrs. Hope Staal

holds degrees in music and library science and is Reformed Fellowship's General Manager & Executive Editor. A longtime librarian, Hope has also freelanced as a choral director, vocal coach, and writing teacher and is a richly blessed wife & homeschooling mom.



Current, former, and newly elected members of the RFI board in attendance



Linda Blauw, Nancy Venema, Dr. Cornel Venema (keynote speaker), Richard Blauw, Henry Gysen (former RFI General Manager), and Annette Gysen (copy editor of "Roots Renewed")



Rev. Casey Freswick



Dr. Joel Beeke



Rev. Tyler Wagenmaker



Rev. Breno Macedo



Rev. Eric Van Der Molen



Mr. Chuck Terpstra



Table fellowship

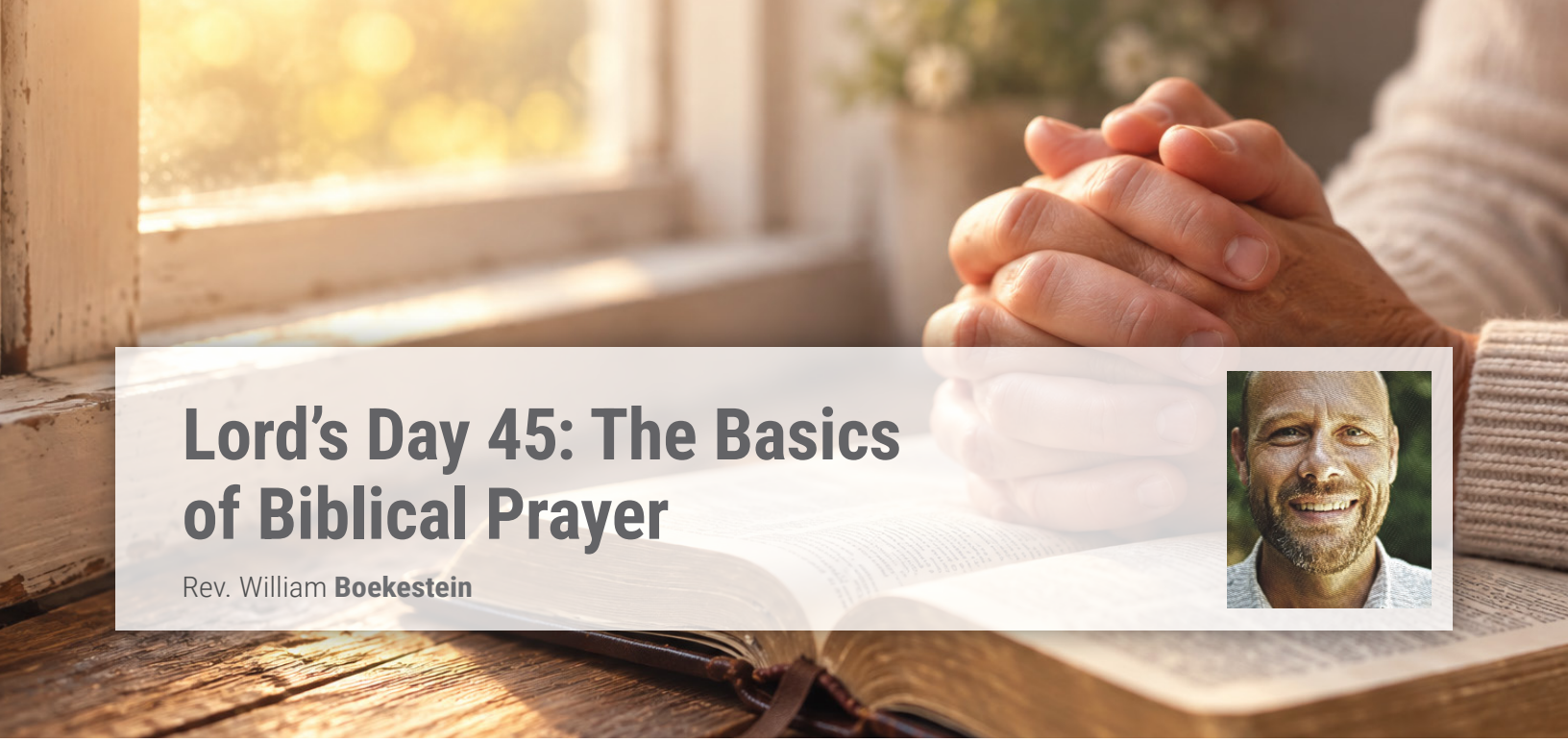


RFI staff in attendance: Mindy Toonstra, Kara Huizinga, Hope Staal, Ashley Hoekman, Emily Postma, Grace Barnes



Hope Heralds Male Chorus

Visit our website for more photos!



Lord's Day 45: The Basics of Biblical Prayer

Rev. William **Boekestein**

116 Q. *Why do Christians need to pray?*

A. Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us. And also because God will give his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who continually and with heartfelt longing ask God for these gifts and thank him for them.

117 Q. *How does God want us to pray so that he will listen to us?*

A. First, we must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, who has revealed himself to us in his Word, asking for everything he has commanded us to ask of him. Second, we must fully recognize our need and misery, so that we humble ourselves in God's majestic presence. Third, we must rest on this unshakable foundation: even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer because of Christ our Lord, as he has promised us in his Word.

118 Q. *What has God commanded us to ask of him?*

A. Everything we need, spiritually and physically, as embraced in the prayer Christ our Lord himself taught us.

119 Q. *What is this prayer?*

A. Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

When Jesus's disciples asked for a lesson on prayer (Luke 11:1), we can't hear their tone of voice or discern their spiritual temper. But we can imagine them asking out of frustration. Other spiritual leaders prayed for show on street corners (Matt. 6:5–8). Their own prayers weren't so impressive. So maybe Jesus's answer was simpler than they expected. He gave them a basic prayer structure and taught them to be sincere and persistent in bringing to God what matters most (Luke 11:8).

Three questions can help us learn from Jesus the basics of biblical prayer.

Why Must We Pray?

First, prayer is the most important part of our required thankfulness. Prayer is the heart's sincere and grateful reflex to God's lavish grace. And it's required. We must "offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving" and "call upon [him] in the day of trouble" (Ps. 50:14). The key to a healthy prayer life is to believe that prayer is required but pray as if it wasn't. You've probably seen a parent force her child to say

"thank you" for a gift he didn't want. Forced thanks is embarrassing. It is far better when a child is so excited by a gift that gratitude comes naturally. Our prayer lives are similar. Prayer is required, but don't let it become a chore, like scrubbing toilets or taking out the trash. As with giving, God doesn't want us praying "reluctantly or under compulsion" but cheerfully, as if we didn't have to (2 Cor. 9:7).

Second, prayer is a means of grace. "Strictly speaking, only the Word and the sacraments can be regarded as means of grace, that is, as objective channels" to which Christ "ordinarily binds Himself in the communication of his grace."[1] But prayer, though a subjective response to grace, is certainly an "outward means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of his mediation."[2] God gives grace to those who ask (Matt. 7:7; James 1:5). Like a good parent who is eager to help a frustrated child, God will "give his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who continually and with heartfelt longing" ask for these gifts. God says to us, "Call to Me, and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know" (Jer. 33:3 NKJ).

How Must We Pray?

What is the proper heart posture of those whose prayers God hears?

Pray honestly.

Honesty concerns both personal sincerity and objective correctness. "We must pray from the heart to no one other than the one true God, who has revealed himself to us in his Word, asking for everything he has commanded us to ask of him." Calling on God in truth (Ps. 145:18) is saying what we mean and meaning what we say. Pretentious and showy prayer is utterly inappropriate. And the content of our prayers must be correct. "If we ask anything according to his will he hears us" (1 John 5:14).

Pray humbly.

"We must fully recognize our need and misery, so that we humble ourselves in God's majestic presence." Fully competent, self-made people have no need to pray. If they do pray, their prayers are spoiled by a sense of deserving. God says, "[T]his is the one to whom I will look; he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2). In the face of God's majesty, we are dust (Ps. 103:14). Humble people pray to God, saying, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you" (2 Chron. 20:12).

Pray hopefully.

"We must rest on this unshakable foundation: even though we do not deserve it, God will surely listen to our prayer." Why? "Because of Christ our Lord as he has promised in his Word." Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). We can petition God with confidence because at the throne of grace our sympathetic High Priest intercedes for us in our time of need (Heb. 4:14–16).

What Must We Pray?

We should pray for "everything we need, spiritually and physically." This means "[w]e ought to pray in some way at every occasion."[3] But, as may be our tendency, we must not forget spiritual needs. Paul's prayers emphasized the spiritual. He teaches us to pray for believers to know God's will and walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him. We should pray for fruitfulness in good works. We should ask God to strengthen His children for endurance and patience with joy, and give thanks that He has delivered us from Satan and brought us into His kingdom (Col. 1:9–14).

For praying like this, the Lord's Prayer is a gift to the church in two important ways. "The Lord's Prayer is not only for direction, as a pattern, according to which we are to make other prayers; but may also be used as a prayer."[4] Prewritten prayers that we read or memorize are valid expressions of believers' hearts. But as reading good books makes for good writing, so learning from the Lord's Prayer can produce improved praying. Biblical prayers will follow Jesus's template and adore the triune God, worshiping the holiness of His great name, praising His eternal authority, power, and glory. We confess our sins, admitting that we have accrued an unpayable debt against His majesty. But we also thank God for His grace and providence; when we consider His kindness, we realize that we really could pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17–18)! And we make supplications. In fact, six of the eight clauses of the Lord's Prayer are petitions or requests. Jesus says, "Pray then like this" (Matt. 6:9).

If we have fallen into the rut of offering unfeeling, self-centered, impractical prayers that lack confidence and joy, let's ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us how to pray." And let's learn from Him as we study His prayer that has guided a hundred generations of Christian disciples. ▪

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* This article is part of a series, "Our Life's Comfort," which was first published at corechristianity.com on November 10, 2022: https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/the-basics-of-biblical-prayer-lords-day-45.

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4 Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 187.

Rev. William Boekestein

is the pastor of Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, MI. He has written several books and numerous articles. He and his wife, Amy, have four children.



Lord's Day 46: Pray to Your Father in Heaven

Rev. William **Boekestein**

120 Q. *Why has Christ commanded us to address God as "our Father"?*

A. To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer what should be basic to our prayer—a childlike reverence and trust that through Christ God has become our Father, and will much less refuse to give us what we ask in faith than will our parents refuse us the things of this life.

121 Q. *Why the words "who is in heaven"?*

A. These words teach us not to think of God's heavenly majesty in an earthly way,and to expect from his almighty power everything needed for body and soul.

Is there a right way to begin a prayer? To ask it differently, is there a proper way to think about God when we pray? According to Jesus there is. When the disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), Jesus didn't just teach them a prayer, He taught them how to pray. The beginning of His prayer is a lesson on how to approach God.

Jesus's lesson on the right way to start a prayer could be summarized by two words: reverent familiarity. Familiarity is closeness, even intimacy. Reverence is respect, even awe. And we need both.

Familiarity in Prayer

Why does familiarity matter?

"Child-like reverence and trust" are "basic to our prayer." Young children suppose that their parents can do no wrong. Children trust their parents in matters vastly beyond their understanding. Adoring, trusting children can teach believers how to approach God. But God's Son is the perfect model of childlike reverence and trust. Jesus revered His "Holy Father" (John 17:11). He also trusted Him. He knew God loved Him (John 10:17) so He honored His will even when it was scary (Matt. 26:39). In contrast to the Old Testament's rare description of God as Father, Jesus taught His disciples to know God as their personal, loving, providing Father. His Father was their Father (John 20:17).

How is familiarity possible?

Jesus doesn't want us to *imagine* God as a father whom we must revere and trust. He wants us to *know* that by faith He *is* our Father. "Through Christ God has become our Father." Jesus's atonement and the Spirit's personal renewing work make sinners into sons. In every prayer of Jesus in the Gospels, He addresses God as "Father"—with one exception, when He cried from the cross as He was being rejected by God to make us accepted by Him.[1] The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead also dwells in those who trust in Him (Rom. 8:11; Luke 11:13). As adopted sons and daughters we, with Jesus, can cry

out to God, "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). We are joint-heirs with Christ and have full legal rights to seek personal help from the God who made heaven and earth.

As our Father, God is much more trustworthy than any earthly parent. Because God cares about us, we can pray with confidence no matter what it is we have to tell Him. We don't have to use special words to make God interested in our prayers; He's absolutely interested already! He knows what we need even before we ask. It's infinitely more likely for a woman to forget her nursing child than for God to forget His children (Isa. 49:15). He has sworn Himself to our care: "I will lift My hand in an oath to care for my people" (Isa. 49:22 NKJ). God "will much less refuse to give us what we ask in faith than will our parents refuse us the things of this life." God takes His fatherhood more seriously than any human father does. When I return from a trip, my wife sometimes reminds me, "Time to start doing dad things again." God never has to be told this.

"Father" is a term of endearment, closeness, and approachability. We need it. To truly pray we must know that we're not appealing to a stranger, much less to an enemy. God is not far from us or inaccessible to us. "We are not bowing before a tyrannical despot or distant deity."[2] He is our Father.

But lest we grow wrongly familiar with God, Jesus reminds us that He is in heaven.

Reverence in Prayer

God's heavenliness raises our thoughts of God.

Our Father is not tyrannical or distant. But He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. "'Am I a God near at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord" (Jer. 23:23–24). We should "not think of God's heavenly majesty in an earthly way." In our communion with God, we must never forget that He is a consuming fire, deserving "reverence and awe" (Heb. 13:29). We must remember that our loving, gracious Father is a violent warrior (Ps. 68:1–6). He isn't domesticated, but He is good. And that is just the God we need.

God's heavenliness reminds us of His almighty power.

It's all very well to have an approachable, loving father. But if he is a poor, old, sick man, he will be of little help. God isn't like that. God is both our Father and the Lord of heaven and earth. God is rich. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps. 50:10). He has more than abundant resources to meet our needs. Because of His "heavenly majesty," we can have confidence that His riches and power are advantages to us. He created all things and rules over all things from heaven. Everything is at His disposal, and He bestows "his riches on all who call on him" (Rom. 10:12). Nothing stops God's plan to restore the eternal fortunes of His children. God is so great that He can even use tribulations, persecution, and famine to demonstrate His love to His children (Rom. 8:35).

Of course, God could easily care for us without prayer. But God teaches us to pray so that when our prayers are answered, He will get the credit. By hearing our prayers, "he may the better prove his love toward us."[3]

At the "very beginning of our prayer," we need to approach God as children of a good Father. The introduction to the Lord's Prayer does at least three things. First, it frames the relationship between ourselves and God—for believers, He truly is our Father in heaven. Second, it teaches us to approach him in a way consistent with the relationship—with a reverent familiarity. Believers must not approach God casually; He is holy. We must not approach Him cautiously; He is our Father. Third, it reminds us of what we can expect from God. And it is impossible to expect too much. We can always count on Him to do what is best for us.

Prayer is not a kind of mental journaling. When we pray, we're not just giving words to our worries and our desires. We are approaching the throne of the "God that made the world and all things therein" (Acts 17:24; KJV), who is also our Father. ▪

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* This article is part of a series, "Our Life's Comfort," which was first published at corechristianity.com on November 17, 2022: https://corechristianity.com/resources/articles/pray-to-your-father-in-heaven-lords-day-46-.

1 Fred Klooster, *Our Only Comfort,* 2.1075.

2 Kevin DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century. Catechism* (Chicago: Moody, 2010), 216.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes,* 3.20.3.

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(continuing article "Introduction to Systematic Theology" from page 22)

Clarity

Lastly, Scripture is clear. In affirming this, we need to make careful qualifications. The clarity of Scripture does not mean that there are not portions of Scripture that are difficult to understand. Peter frankly tells us that there are such difficulties in the Bible (2 Pet. 3:15–16). Nor does the clarity of Scripture mean that we have no need of "a due use of the ordinary means" to understand it (WCF 1.7). We need to attend diligently to Scripture with our minds (Heb. 2:1). We need to benefit from the preaching, teaching, commentary, and theological reflection of other Christians (Neh. 8:8; Acts 8:30–31). And of course, we need to pray (Ps. 119:18) and to meditate upon Scripture (Ps. 1:1–2). All this is necessary for believers. But none of this makes Scripture clear. Rather, it makes us more receptive to the objective clarity which resides in God's Word.

Scripture is a lamp and lamps bear their own light (Ps. 119:105; 2 Pet. 1:19). The Bible shows its essential content clearly. God writes out His Word "very plainly" for His people (Deut. 27:8). This clarity of Scripture is a clarity that is for everyone, not only the learned, but the unlearned. It is publicly available to all who would read it. In the core of what it says, it is not "too hard for us" (Deut. 30:11–14). It is so objectively clear that it even judges the unbelief of those who reject it (John 5:45–47). As Calvin observes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 4:3, "The sum is this—that the blindness of unbelievers detracts nothing from the clearness of the gospel; for the sun is not less resplendent that the blind do not perceive his light."[1]

This clarity is critical to the purpose of Scripture. God's light has come to us in Christ as He is full of grace and truth that we might have fellowship with God as His children (John 1:1–18). The light that shines from the written Word of God gives us "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:3–6). The clarity of Scripture is a vital feature of how God uses it to draw us into a fellowship with Him which consists of a knowledge that is the sum total of eternal life (John 17:3). As Mark Thompson succinctly puts it, "God has something to say and He is very good at saying it."[2] In saying it to us daily in His Word committed to writing, He gives us Himself in the fullness of salvation accomplished in Christ and applied to us by the Spirit. ▪

1. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), 20:192.
2. Mark Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word* (Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 170.

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