

CONTENTS

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016 • Vol. 24, No. 6

THE BANNER OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH

Publication Number (ISSN 10726357)

The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth is published bimonthly by the Heritage Reformed denomination, 540 Crescent Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503. Typeset at Grand Rapids, Michigan (Gardner Graphics); printed at Grand Rapids, Michigan (Grandville Printing).

Subscription price for six issues per year: \$25.00 in the United States. \$30.00 in Canada, payable in U.S. funds. To foreign countries \$35.00 (surface mail) or \$65.00 (air mail), payable in U.S. funds. Rates listed are for one year subscriptions.

Dr. Joel R. Beeke, Editor
2965 Leonard Street NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525
(616) 977-0599; fax (616) 285-3246
e-mail: joel.beeke@prts.edu

Dr. Robert D. Johnson, Assistant Editor
Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven, Assistant Editor
Rev. David VanBrugge, Assistant Editor

Office of Publication
540 Crescent Street NE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503-3402
(616) 977-4304; fax (616) 285-3246
e-mail: bsgrt@hncr.org

Copy for the *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* is due the 5th of the month prior to publication. All copy (including announcements, obituaries, anniversary notices, and ads) should be sent to the editor. All announcements submitted for publication should be typed, and are subject to editorial policy. Communications relating to subscriptions should be addressed to the subscription manager. Change of address should be forwarded to the subscription manager one month in advance of moving date. Please provide both new and old address.

PERIODICAL Postage is Paid at Grand Rapids, Michigan.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to "The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth," 540 Crescent Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

For a list of printed Reformed literature, write: Reformation Heritage Books, 2965 Leonard Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525, or visit our on-line bookstore at www.heritagebooks.org; 616-977-0889.

For free sermons write: Inheritance Publishers, P.O. Box 1334, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49501.

For free sermons and radio messages of HRC ministers write: The Gospel Trumpet, 540 Crescent Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503.

For tract distribution write: Banner of Truth Tract Mission, 540 Crescent Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503. For distribution of tapes (sermons, lectures, classes, etc.) write: "The Tape Room," 540 Crescent Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503.

For material related to theological training write: Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 2965 Leonard Street NE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49525; 616-977-0599; www.puritanseminary.org; henk.kleyn@prts.edu.

For HRC mission and evangelistic work, contact Glad Tidings, Jane Korevaar at jane.korevaar@gmail.com.

In all publications, the Heritage Reformed denomination aims to remain true to inerrant Scripture and its Reformed heritage as expounded in the Reformed doctrinal standards: the Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Canons of Dordt (1618-1619), and the Westminster Standards of the 1640s (the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms).

For additional information on HRC ministries, please visit our website at www.heritagereformed.com.

MEDITATIONS

- Praise God All Peoples! | *Rev. Don Overbeek* 227
Melody by the Angels | *Rev. Marty Slingerland* 228
A Timely Confession and Prayer | *Rev. Michael Fintelman* 229

EDITORIAL | *Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

- John Owen (1616-1683) 230

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLE STUDY | *Dr. Michael Barrett*

- Dry Bones: From Death to Life 232

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLE STUDY | *Dr. Gerald Bilkes*

- Studies in John (15): Abide in My Love 234

SPECIAL THEME: READING

- Reading with Discernment | *Tim Challies* 236
Reading Your Bible | *Dr. Michael Barrett* 238
Reading Theology | *Rev. Terreth Klaver* 240
Reading for Leisure and Learning | *Rebecca VanDoodewaard* 242
Classic English Literature: Its Role in Christian
Education | *Dr. Daniel Sweetman* 244
The History of Literacy | *Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven* 246
Cultivating a Child's Lifestyle of Reading from a Parent's
Perspective | *Ellen Greendyk* 248
Why Read Biographies? | *Dr. Nathan Eshelman* 250

DOCTRINAL CHRISTIANITY | *George Lawson*

- Faith in Christ (16) 252

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY | *Dr. David Murray*

- Can You Be Happy in Every Circumstance? 253

BOOK TALK | *Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

- 254

QUESTIONS ANSWERED FOR TEENS | *James W. Beeke*

- Cruel Words 256
Responding to Cruel Words or Actions 256

MEDITATION FOR CHILDREN | *Mary Beeke*

- In Everything Give Thanks 257

BIBLE QUIZ FOR CHILDREN | *Elina VanderZwaag*

- 258

STORY FOR CHILDREN | *Andrea Scholten*

- 259

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

- 260

CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW | *John Goudzwaard*

- 262

CORNER FOR TEENS | *Rev. David VanBrugge*

- Christian Philosophy? (5) 263

POEM | Thanks to God for My Redeemer | *August L. Storm*

- 264

READING AND INCARNATION

We trust you will enjoy this issue that contains eight articles on the special theme and blessing of sanctified reading. In all our reading, let us never forget that the best subject in all the world to read about is the incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. We wish you and your loved ones every blessing in Christ Jesus as we commemorate His incarnation in these weeks. May we and our children stand in awe of the Incarnation as the world's greatest mystery, confessing with Martin Luther, "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding." Believe, bow, and worship the born King of Bethlehem who came where we are to bring us to be with Him where He is.

*Psalm 65***Praise God All Peoples!**

Thanksgiving is a call for all of us to praise God. This is obviously not isolated to a certain day or a time of year; it is a universal obligation of everyone, every day of their lives. God's blessings reach all people, and no one can live their lives exempt from needing and receiving what He delights to give.

Someone once said thanksgiving is so rare among people that the best place to look for it would be in a dictionary. What is more difficult than to give due recognition to the God of our existence? As George Herbert is said to have prayed, "Our Father, Thou hast given us so much. Do please give us one more thing—a grateful heart!" Is that your heart's desire as well?

Psalm 65 is a beautiful song of praise written by David. We are not given the specific occasion when he wrote it, but it could be as he waited for an opportunity to offer God their praises after finding themselves in a time of difficulty. David declares the excellency of God specifically toward His people dwelling in Zion but also in His dealings with the far reaches of the earth. In these far reaches of the earth where God's physical blessings flow, there remains the urgent need for people to be brought into a saving knowledge of the "God of our salvation" (v. 5). We need our Thanksgiving Day to feed a heart and life that reaches out toward those far from the Savior God. The vast number of people God has already reached with physical mercies need to be reached with the gospel of salvation as well. The pronoun "Thou" occurs 9 times in verses 9–11, telling us that God has already confronted people with Himself. This outward display is found in the changing of the seasons (v. 9), in the use of means such as watering (v. 10) and in the resulting display of "the year of thy goodness" (v. 11). Paul echoes David in Acts 14:17: "Nevertheless he left not himself without witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." Thanksgiving should be not merely understanding what we have received, but realizing that we received all of it out of the goodness of God. We can approach people not to begin something but to carry forward, by God's grace, what has been started, so that a life of blessing becomes a life of gratitude.

Thanksgiving is also a call to act in faith as we reach others. Believing that we could be of use to others and especially that God would bless the efforts for people's eternal good is against our nature. There is nothing more difficult than the life of true faith because it goes contrary to us at every point. Yet, the very impossibilities of nature—the stubborn, resolute mountains and the stormy, raging seas—all tell of the power of God. We see it in the tenderness of the earth in soaking up gentle, enriching rains, and the helpless nature of thin, weak, susceptible grain springing through the soil. We could throw our hands up in despair when it comes to nature, and yet good things happen. We have fertile ground! We have crops! We have seeds to store for future crops! If the impossibilities of nature are overcome by God in goodness, cannot we be certain that the impossibilities of salvation be overcome by God's grace? It is the call of believers to not miss the lessons of the physical world: God can be trusted with our lives!

Thanksgiving presents us with the glorious result of all meaningful labor—the ingathering. A renewed world will sound forth the praise of God in every way. All nature will serve the glory and praise of its Creator, but also all nations will be brought in as the flock of God, as the wheat harvest brought into safety and storage (v. 13). The book of Revelation gives the wonderful picture of this. The redeemed out of all nations, kindreds, people, and tongues stand before the throne and before the Lamb. "Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshiped God, saying, Amen: blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honor, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen" (Rev. 7:10–12).

Enjoy your gatherings this Thanksgiving, but let them motivate you to seek the gathering in of others, using either your hospitality or simply your thankful heart to reflect the God who crowns lives (v. 11) with His goodness now and eternally.

Rev. Don Overbeek is pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation in Bradford, Ontario.

Melody by the Angels

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth
peace, good will toward men.*
— LUKE 2:14

I once met with an inmate who did not really know the real meaning of Christmas, so I had the privilege of sharing it with him. This fellow then shared with me that he would be released before Christmas. That meant that he would not only be able to celebrate Christmas on the outside, but this time he would be able to do so understanding what Christmas is really about: the birth of the Savior. Will we do the same? What will our focus be on this Christmas? There is real reason to celebrate every Christmas, as there was when it actually happened!

“Glory to God in the highest...”

After the Messiah was finally born, one angel with the shining glory of the Lord appeared to some shepherds and announced the good tidings of great joy (vv. 7–12). After that, there was suddenly no longer only one angel, but a multitude—hundreds, perhaps thousands (v. 13). And they were singing! They sang praise to God, but the lyrics were a message for the shepherds, and for us.

“Glory to God.” Glory to the One who is worthy to be praised for all His wonderful works. His works are countless: creation, providence, and redemption. The Scriptures, especially the Psalms, are filled with praise to God and with exhortations to utter praise.

The angels added to this the phrase, “in the highest.” Some say that this phrase refers to the degree of praise; God is to be praised with the highest degree of praise for the gift of His Son. However, the phrase can also be understood in contrast to the earth, which is mentioned in the next phrase. And so, “in the highest” can then mean “in the heavens.” Glory to God in the heavens for Jesus. The angels found the reality of Jesus’s birth amazing and praise-worthy. They were exceedingly happy for the people of earth. God was making a way for sinners to be made right with God again.

“...and on earth peace...”

This is an intriguing phrase in this day and age. If we reflect on world history since the birth of Christ, we find many instances where peace was lacking—and it still is lacking today. There is a crisis of family where there is no peace between spouses, between siblings, between parents and children. There is also the ever increasing and pathetic problem of terrorism. How can there ever be peace on earth?

God didn’t send His Son merely to bring outward peace on earth, although believers are to live peacefully outwardly. He sent His Son to bring a peace far more important than that: eternal peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. What glad tidings this is! Christ was born for the purpose of guaranteeing that gift of peace for all who repent and put their trust in Him. He was born in order to accomplish the prophesied redemption as a Substitute for sinners. He truly is the Prince of Peace!

“...good will toward men”

This good will is God’s good will, His good pleasure, His good favor, His good delight. This good will is the cause of the divine plan of redemption, the consequent birth of Christ, and the subsequent peace with God on earth. Christ was born in order to make sinners the recipients of the good will of God, rather than of His just wrath. What good news of comfort and joy! This is news to make angels sing.

Rev. Marty Slingerland is a Heritage Reformed minister who serves as a prison pastor with the Redemption Prison Ministry in British Columbia.

A Timely Confession and Prayer

*Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations....
So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our
hearts unto wisdom (Psalm 90:1, 12).*

One of the things that gives us significance as human beings is that we are able to tell and gauge time. The ancient world had sundials; we have clocks that tick off seconds, minutes, and hours, and calendars that track days, months, and years.

Moses writes Psalm 90 with the passage of time as his theme. We spend our years as a “tale that is told” (v. 9); our brief life is like a story that is concluded with the words, “The End.” As we near another year’s end, we are reminded that as this year will soon be finished, so our lives will one day be concluded.

Moses confessed with humble gratitude, “LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations” (v. 1). The eternal God of the covenant was the starting and ending point for Moses. He realizes that he was destined to pass away, but the LORD was his eternal, unchanging Rock. As we reflect on another year being concluded, may our comfort be found in the LORD, whose mercies are from everlasting to everlasting (Ps. 103:17).

Moses also confesses that the Lord Himself had been his “dwelling place”—his home, his place of security, the place where he found refuge. He didn’t flee to man or the stuff of life. He found refuge in the Lord Himself—His very person, His divine being. In this past year, has the Lord Himself been your dwelling place? Can you say that you only feel “at home” when you are with your Lord?

Moses fondly remembers that this was true in “all generations,” so in all periods of time. Maybe he was thinking of the times when Israel wandered in the desert. During all their story, their covenant-keeping Lord had preserved them and was a wall of safety around them. So also the Lord has been for us in this past year! May we be given grace to confess this with humble gratitude.

As Moses continues to pray to God, he confesses that the Lord is so eternal and timeless that a thousand years is to God as one brief moment is to us (v. 4). Therefore, he prays, “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom” (v. 12). Moses desired that everyone’s heart would gain wisdom. He knew “wisdom...is from above” (James. 3:17). We desperately need this wisdom as well. Wisdom that can only be found in the greater Moses, Jesus Christ, “who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). This wisdom is not just a knowledge in the mind, but a matter of the heart, trusting in Jesus Christ who is Wisdom par excellence.

How do we get such wisdom? The answer can be found in Moses’ prayer: “So teach us to number our days” in order that we may gain this heart of wisdom. In order for us to have wisdom, we first have to understand that we are not to calibrate our soul by our own calendars. We need to learn the brevity of life in light of God’s eternity. A thousand years in God’s sight are like our brief yesterdays and a momentary three-hour night watch. Moses wanted the right biblical perspective on eternal matters; he desired to be truly wise. This divine wisdom is only realized in our heart when we stand under the shadow of the majesty of God. To be truly wise in heart we need to taste of the briefness of this life in light of God’s eternal presence. I pray that we might also know this in our hearts in the transition of years. Then we will be able to joyously echo the refrain of this song, “O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil [difficulty]. Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children. And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us” (vv. 14–17).

Rev. Michael Fintelman is pastor of the Heritage Reformed Church of Plymouth, Wisconsin.

John Owen (1616–1683)

Born four centuries ago, the great Puritan John Owen (1616–1683) has been called the “prince of the English divines,” “the leading figure among the Congregationalist divines,” “a genius with learning second only to Calvin’s,” and “indisputably the leading proponent of high Calvinism in England in the late seventeenth century.” In this brief article, I wish to provide an overview of his life on the special occasion of the four-hundredth anniversary of his birth.

John Owen was born in Stadham (Stadhampton), near Oxford. He was the second son of Henry Owen, the local Puritan vicar. The young Owen showed godly and scholarly tendencies at an early age. He entered Queen’s College, Oxford at the age of twelve and studied the classics, mathematics, philosophy, theology, Hebrew, and rabbinical writings. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1632 and a Master of Arts in 1635. Throughout his teen years, Owen studied eighteen to twenty hours per day.

Pressured to accept Archbishop Laud’s new statutes, Owen left Oxford in 1637. He became a private chaplain and tutor, first for Sir William Dormer of Ascot, then for John Lord Lovelace at Hurley, Berkshire. He worked for Lovelace until 1643. Those years of chaplaincy afforded him much time for study, which God richly blessed. At the age of twenty-six, Owen began a forty-one year writing span that produced more than eighty works. Many of those would become classics and be greatly used by God.

Though he embraced Puritan convictions from his youth, Owen lacked personal assurance of faith until God directed him in 1642 to a church service at St. Mary Aldermanbury, London. He expected to hear Edmund Calamy preach, but a substitute was in the pulpit. Owen’s friend urged him to leave with him to hear a more famous minister some distance away, but Owen decided to stay. The substitute preacher chose as his text, “Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?” God used that sermon to bring Owen to assurance of faith. Later, Owen tried in vain to learn the identity of the preacher.

In 1643, Owen published *A Display of Arminianism*, a vigorous exposition of classic Calvinism that refuted the Arminians by examining the doctrines of predestination, original sin, irresistible grace, the extent of the atonement, and the role of the human will in salvation. This book earned Owen nearly instant recognition as well as a preferment to the living of Fordham, a pastoral charge in Essex. His ministry was well received in Fordham, and many people came from outlying districts to hear him. He also excelled in catechizing his parishioners and wrote two catechism books, one for children and one for adults.

At Fordham, Owen took the Solemn League and Covenant. There, too, he took Mary Rooke as his bride. Of the eleven children born to them, only a daughter survived into adulthood. After an unhappy marriage to a Welshman, the daughter returned to live with her parents. She died of consumption shortly afterwards.

When the sequestered incumbent of Fordham died, the rights of presentation reverted to the patron who dispossessed Owen and appointed Richard Pulley instead. Owen became vicar of the distinguished pulpit of St. Peter’s, Coggeshall (1646), where his predecessor, Obadiah Sedgwick, had ministered to nearly two thousand souls. At Coggeshall, through John Cotton’s *Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644) and other political influences, Owen openly converted from Presbyterianism to Congregationalism. He wrote about that in *Eshcol; or Rules of Direction for the Walking of the Saints in Fellowship*. He also began remodeling his church on congregational principles.

Owen’s fame spread rapidly in the late 1640s through his preaching and writings, gradually earning him a reputation as a leading Independent theologian. While he was still in his early thirties, more than a thousand people came to hear his weekly sermons; yet Owen often grieved that he saw little fruit upon his labors. He once said that he would trade all his learning for John Bunyan’s gift for plain preaching. Clearly, he underestimated his own gifts.

Owen was asked to preach before Parliament on several occasions, including the day following the execution of King Charles I. The sermon he preached before Parliament on Hebrews 12:27 greatly impressed Oliver Cromwell. The next day, Cromwell persuaded Owen to accompany him as chaplain to Ireland to regulate the affairs of Trinity College in Dublin. Owen traveled with 12,000 psalm-singing Puritan soldiers who descended upon Ireland. Though he spent most of his time at Trinity College reorganizing it along Puritan lines, he also did considerable preaching. He ministered to the troops during the terrible massacre at Drogheda. That dreadful event so stirred his soul that, upon his return to England after a seven-month stay, Owen urged Parliament to show mercy to the Irish.

In 1650, Owen was appointed as an official preacher to the state. The position provided lodgings in Whitehall. The duties consisted primarily of preaching on Friday afternoons in Whitehall Chapel and offering daily prayers at the meetings of the Council of State. That summer, Owen accompanied Cromwell on his Scottish expedition. He assisted Cromwell in trying to convince Scottish leaders and people of the rightness of cutting off the monarchy.

The 1650s were Owen's most productive years. In 1651, he became dean of Christ Church College, Oxford, and eighteen months later was made vice-chancellor of Oxford University, under the chancellorship of Cromwell. He replaced Daniel Greenwood who, being a Presbyterian, was not considered to be sufficiently supportive of the government. Owen presided at most university meetings, served as administrator, and restrained worldly students from excesses. Through his lectures in theology, he promoted Reformed theology and Puritan piety. He set up several boards to regulate the religious life of the university. Undergraduates were required to repeat Sunday sermons to "some person of known ability and piety." They were to have private evening prayers with their tutors, and every home where students lodged was to offer frequent preaching.

Owen himself preached regularly at Christ Church in Oxford and on alternate Sundays with Thomas Goodwin at St. Mary's. Those sermons were the seeds of later treatises on mortification and temptation. Owen was a good manager; under his leadership, the university's treasury increased dramatically, salaries of the faculty were restored, students improved in their studies, and the faithful discipline of wayward students was maintained. Owen's godly leadership brought peace, security, and spiritual growth to the university during the difficult recovery from the chaotic civil war years.

In 1653, Owen was granted a Doctor of Divinity degree by the university. According to his own testimony, this was against his wishes. Throughout the 1650s, Owen was frequently called to London by Cromwell to settle a variety of disputes and to participate in various attempts at church settlement.

Owen published numerous books in the 1650s, including major works on the perseverance of the saints, Christ's satisfaction, mortification of sin, communion with the Trinity, schism, temptation, and the authority of Scripture. In 1658, Owen helped write *The Savoy Declaration*. He was probably the primary author of its lengthy preface.

Owen lost favor with Cromwell in the Protector's last year when he opposed Cromwell's becoming king. Owen's stature diminished further when Cromwell resigned from the chancellorship and his son Richard was appointed to succeed him. Under Richard Cromwell's leadership, Owen and his group soon lost their ecclesiastical positions to Presbyterian divines. Within two months, Richard Cromwell had replaced Owen as vice-chancellor with John Conant, Presbyterian rector of Exeter College. The Sunday afternoon sermons of Owen and Goodwin at St. Mary's Church were abolished soon after that.

In 1660, Owen was replaced as Dean of Christ Church by Edward Reynolds. Owen apparently then retired to his small estate at Stadhampton, where he continued to preach despite the Great Ejection of 1662. He lived there in relative

seclusion. Every position of influence had been taken from him. He was offered a bishopric as well as a call to John Cotton's church in Boston, Massachusetts, but he declined both.

In 1665, Owen was indicted at Oxford for holding religious conventicles in his home. He escaped without imprisonment. Like many other Puritan pastors, he returned to London to preach after the Plague and the Great Fire. He started a small congregation, engaged in ongoing theological battles against the Arminians, and wrote several anonymous tracts on behalf of religious liberty as well as numerous edifying treatises for the spiritual growth of believers. His *Indwelling Sin, Exposition of Psalm 130*, and the first volume of his massive commentary on Hebrews were written during this period.

In 1673, Owen's congregation in London merged with a group that Joseph Caryl had served as pastor. David Clarkson and other Puritans assisted him. He devoted much time to helping Independent ministers such as Robert Asty and John Bunyan, offering them financial assistance as well as spiritual advice. This earned him the title of "prince and metropolitan of Independency."

In 1674, Owen published *Pneumatologia*, a classic on the work of the Holy Spirit. Two years later, his wife died. Within eighteen months, he married Dorothy, the widow of Thomas D'Oyley of Chislehampton near Stadham.

Owen suffered much from asthma and gallstones in his last years, both of which often kept him from preaching. He kept writing, however, producing major works on justification, spiritual-mindedness, and the glory of Christ. The day before his death, Owen wrote to a friend, "I am going to Him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love—which is the whole ground of my consolation.... I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm; but whilst the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond; the promise stands invincible, that He will never leave us, nor forsake us."

On August 24, 1683, William Payne, a Puritan minister of Saffron Waldon, arrived to tell Owen just before he died that the first sheets of *Meditations on the Glory of Christ* had passed through the press. With uplifted eyes and hands, Owen replied, "I am glad to hear it; but, oh brother Payne, the long wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world."

Owen was buried in Bunhill Fields beside many of his Puritan companions. His grave can still be visited today.

Dr. Joel R. Beeke is president and professor of Systematic Theology and Homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, and a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

DRY BONES: From Death to Life

Ezekiel 37:1-10

The mysterious and often strange visions of Ezekiel make the prophecy difficult to understand. But those who take the time and effort to grapple with the book always are benefited; after all, it is inspired by God and thus profitable for instruction. Ezekiel provides insight into the nature of God that is almost without parallel in the Scripture. Unfortunately, far too many have bemused themselves with Ezekiel and have concocted interpretations more strange than the visions themselves, including spaceships and extra-terrestrial beings as part of his opening vision of the four-faced living creatures and wheels within wheels by the River Chebar. Undeniably, the Lord showed Ezekiel some strange sights and instructed him to do some odd things such as building models of the city (ch. 4), lying on his left and right sides for 430 successive days (ch. 4), or cutting and disposing of his hair in various ways (ch. 5). But every vision or symbolic act was packed with spiritual lessons.

I want to draw attention to perhaps the strangest of all the visions and instructions God gave to the prophet: his vision of the valley of dry bones and the command to preach to them (ch. 37). Interpreters argue about the time of fulfillment and what it may or may not mean in terms of a national conversion of Israel. But as is so often the case, arguments of this nature obscure the principal message for every day, that is, the message of everlasting gospel.

The Scripture is absolutely clear that no one enters the kingdom of God without being born again (John 3). The first birth that determines race and nationality is never sufficient for citizenship in the kingdom of God, so regardless of whatever national implications this vision may suggest, the primary message is the gospel with application for all sinners in every age and of every race. The dead must be brought to life by supernatural, divine intervention, or there is no hope. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is a picture of spiritual conversion and transformation. It pictures the power of the gospel to bring life to death; by grace and divine power, believers who were dead sinners are made alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:5). What Paul declared in express theological proposition, Ezekiel proclaimed with prophetic symbol. They both preached that the gospel is a message of life from death and that God is the solution to the sinner's need. Ezekiel pictures this message with two main points.

SINNERS ARE SPIRITUALLY DEAD

Verses 1–3 picture a horrific scene. The vision begins with

the Spirit of the Lord transporting Ezekiel to a “valley which was full of bones.” Two thoughts are on the surface. First, *death is a desperate condition*. The picture of death could not be more vivid; it was a sight of silent desolation. Not even a corpse was in sight. All the prophet could see was a scattering of dry bones, picked clean by vultures and bleached by the sun. It was a scene of utter deadness not even giving the appearance of a formed skeleton—skulls here and there with ribs, leg bones, and arm bones strewn around the valley. The scene was an obvious picture of the absence of life: inactivity, insensitivity, inability to act or react to external stimuli. It is a picture of lifeless hopelessness.

The spiritual lesson is obvious as well. The valley of the dry, scattered bones pictures sin-deadened humanity as it appears before God. In Pauline terms, man in his natural state is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). Being dead in sin suggests that sin is both the cause of death and the sphere of corruption. But certainly death is a graphic image to describe how desperately hopeless man's condition is. Life flows from the Lord who is the fountain of life, and sin separates man from Him (Isa. 59:1) and therefore from life itself. Separated from God, man cannot live. The effect of that spiritual death is spiritual coldness, blindness, and insensitivity. Just as dry bones are oblivious to the sphere of life, so sinners are oblivious to spiritual life. This is why Paul would say, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Second, *death presents a hopeless prospect*. At least for now, prior to Resurrection Day, death is irreversible. That is why the Lord's question to Ezekiel seems so out of the bounds of logic: “Son of man, can these bones live?” All the prophet could see were bleached and brittle bones, a scene of total and helpless inability. The prospect of life was absurd, out of the question. These bones were beyond recovery and certainly if left alone in their present condition had no prospect of life. Human reason would have to respond with a resounding “No!” Dead is dead. Yet the prophet's response to God's question is equally astounding: “O Lord GOD, thou knowest” (37:3). What an answer this was! Ezekiel knew God well enough not to restrict Him to human limitations. The prophet knew that what was humanly impossible was not divinely impossible. Ezekiel's response was an affirmation of faith and marked the transition from miserable despair to

hope. Ezekiel's declaration that God knows parallels Paul's amazing "but God" statement in Ephesians 2:4–5: "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)...." The only hope for dead sinners is the Lord.

GOD IMPARTS SPIRITUAL LIFE

The second principal point of the vision focuses on the means and the end of God's grace to dry bones. It is a message of hope. The gospel is good news: God imparts spiritual life to dead sinners. Verses 4–10 underscore two key thoughts about how God gives life to the lifeless.

First, the application of the gospel is *preceded by evangelism*. God commanded Ezekiel, "Prophesy upon these bones" (v. 4). This odd scene of the prophet preaching to scattered bones is a vivid illustration of Paul's explanation of how the gospel works: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17) and then the question "how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). Again, human reason would say preaching to dead people is a futile exercise since they are incapable of any response. It is wonderfully true that all of salvation is of the Lord, and part of that all is that He has defined the means to accomplish the end. God's command to call dead sinners to life is His declared will, and declaring the gospel is the privileged duty of His servants.

Ezekiel is not left to himself to determine what to preach. God had instructed him at the commencement of his ministry that all he had to do was to proclaim, "Thus saith the Lord GOD" (2:4). And now to this lifeless congregation, he proclaims the good news of what God will do in imparting life. God is the source and restorer of life (vv. 5–6). All the "I wills" make it clear that God is the initiator and agent of life. The message to dead sinners is that God alone can save, or there can be no salvation.

As Ezekiel begins to preach, things begin to happen (vv. 7–8). The bones begin to shake; they fit themselves together; flesh, muscle and skin appears. It appears that his preaching is having amazing effects. Yet notwithstanding the more attractive appearance of the congregation, they

were still nothing but lifeless corpses. This is sobering for the messenger of the gospel to realize that preaching is capable of outward reforms, of making someone look better on the outside, but preaching cannot generate life. Life comes from God alone. On the other hand, it is encouraging to realize that the results of preaching are the prerogative of God. The evangelist is to evangelize and leave the results to God.

This leads to the second key thought that life is *accomplished by the Spirit* (vv. 9–10). Preachers can issue the general call of the gospel, but only God's Spirit can apply the grace of life with the effectual and irresistible call. The Holy Spirit enables conversion (faith and repentance) by the implantation of the principle of life in the spiritual corpse. To make the point, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind. The word "wind" is the word "spirit," and pictures the necessary involvement and work of the Spirit of God to breathe life into dead sinners. Just as the first Adam was just a lifeless form until the special divine breath brought him to life, so every saved sinner is alive by virtue of that regenerating breath of the Spirit of God. This is the new birth that Jesus expounded to Nicodemus in John 3. The blowing of the wind is invisible and mysterious, but it is always known by its effects. So it is with the Holy Spirit's work in salvation. By the blowing of the divine Breath, the dead live. When the Holy Spirit breathes life, there is and must be life.

Salvation of dead sinners is a miraculous and irresistible work of creation. Verse 10 explicitly pictures the successful transformation. What were brittle bones became a great and powerful army, evidencing the vigor of life. So the vision of the valley of dry bones gives hope to the dead that there is a way to life. Sinners need not despair that they cannot do enough to earn life because they cannot. But what man cannot do for himself, God has done. That is grace. That is good news. Saints should rejoice that they live because of life-giving grace and should pray earnestly that the Spirit of God would so blow in the valley of dry bones to transform it to a valley of life.

Dr. Michael P. V. Barrett is Academic Dean and professor of Old Testament at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and an ordained minister in the Heritage Reformed denomination.



Abide in My Love

Many things changed for Jesus' disciples when He departed to His Father, but His people would stay connected with Him no matter what. They would be able to know His love and joy; they wouldn't need to draw meaning from the world for they had now become strangers to it. In fact, the world would persecute them like it persecuted Christ. But God, the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit, would be more than enough for His disciples. His love and care had become more than sufficient for their lives.

As He comforted His disciples, Christ gave all this instruction to them through the familiar picture of a vine and branches.

CONNECTION

Perhaps sparked by the recent Lord's Supper, where there had been the "fruit of the vine" (Matt. 26:29), or the vineyards along the path to the Garden of Gethsemane, in chapter 15, Christ began His next parable with "I am the vine" (v. 1). He uses this plant analogy to explain His relationship with His followers. And like all His parables, He brought His message close to the daily lives of His disciples.

The disciples needed clarity on how they should relate to the world after Christ would return to His Father. The world had not received Christ and it will not receive the disciples either; their lives on earth would not be easy. They would often feel like strangers on earth. Later, the witness of Christ's followers would win many over by the work of the Holy Spirit, yet many would hate the message the disciples would bring. The love that the disciples needed for this task would come from the Father and would shine through the people of God. Only by receiving His love and care would the disciples be able to do the work they were called to do.

Chapter 15 is connected to chapter 14. In chapter 14, a central metaphor was "dwelling" or "abiding" (same word in Greek; vv. 2, 23). In chapter 15, Christ's chief instruction to His people is precisely "to abide" in Him. They will be living closely connected to Him. This idea of abiding occurs ten times in verses 4–10. In order to elaborate on this concept of abiding in Him, Christ used the picture of a vine and its branches.

In the Mediterranean world of that day and still today, the fig tree, the olive tree, and the vine were widely planted. The vine was known to be the most difficult plant to tend. Pruning the vines was done carefully and intentionally to both protect the vine and help it to produce fruit. So this was a familiar picture for John's original readers. In this metaphor of the vine, the Father prunes His children so that they will be fruitful in the Spirit, bearing fruit of faith and of good works. This pruning may seem harsh, but the Father is a skilled Gardener who knows what He is doing. When God

prunes, He does this to make His people grow in faith. This might mean that God makes us go through difficult circumstances or on painful roads. Though His pruning might hurt, it's always for the good of those who love Christ (Rom. 8:28).

The unity of the whole church of God, and specifically their union with Christ, is fundamental. All of God's church is connected to each other and to the Vine, and all fruit grows from the Vine's vitality. Christ states the principle this way: "Without me ye can do nothing" (v. 5). God's people need to draw life, love, and strength from Him, just like a branch does from a vine. As soon as the branch gets disconnected from the vine, it dies; likewise, the True Vine is the main-spring of every blessing and fruit in the lives of God's people. They are not vines themselves or branches of some institution or organization. They belong to Christ, and in Him lies their identity and calling. He is their source of life.

FRUITFULNESS

As He taught His disciples, Christ was quick to refer to the whole Trinity. Christ explicitly points to the Father: "My Father is the husbandman" (15:1). The Father oversees all fruit-bearing. It's His vine. He cares for it, maintains it, and the fruits it bears will be for His glory (see 15:8). And although the Spirit isn't mentioned directly in this passage, from the surrounding chapters it is clear that He is sent by both the Father and the Son to work grace in believers (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). This grace evidences itself as the believers bear fruit—the fruit of the Spirit, who teaches and strengthens.

Judas has just left the assembly. Christ explains this: "Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away" (v. 2). Christ is not teaching that believers can lose their salvation; but it is possible that someone can be *seemingly* or *externally* united to Christ, but not *savingly* or *genuinely* united to Christ. The absence of fruit on such a branch proves that the vitality of Christ is not present in it. Those branches seem like they belong, but they never draw strength from the vine and therefore will not grow nor be fruitful. The Father, the perfect Husbandman, sunders even the external connection with Christ, casting such a nominal Christian into the fire. "If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (v. 6). What remains is a genuine disciple, a true church, which will be fruitful, beautiful, and an honor to the owner of the vine, the Father.

Notice that Christ did not command them to bear fruit but to abide in Him, which will yield fruit. In verses 7–9, Christ expanded on what it means to abide in Him. He is not simply referring to some static connection, for that would not fit the picture of a vine and branches. Between a vine

and its branches is a constant flow of sap. What flows from Christ to His people? Christ mentions His commandments and other words, which build a connection from His side to His people (vv. 7, 9). What then flows from Christ's people back to Him? Christ speaks here of prayers ("ye shall ask what ye will" [v. 7]). In short, the connection between Christ and His people is maintained by words from Him to them, and by true faith from them to Him. To abide in Him means living an interconnected life of fellowship with God by true faith.

Abiding in Christ also involves His people receiving love from Him, and then showing it to others in accordance with His commandments (vv. 9–13). The love Christ was speaking of is a self-sacrificing love (v. 13). It implies forgiving love, serving love, and love to God and others. This reminds us that just as the vine is not there for its own sake, so certainly neither are the branches. The vine bestows its energies and vitality on the branches, and the branches in turn receive this vitality for the sake of fruit-bearing. By this, the branches honor and glorify the vine. And the more strength is drawn from the vine, the richer the grapes will be, the better in taste, the more beneficial.

FRIENDSHIP

Just as Christ was sent by the Father, so Christ's people are sent by Christ. They have a mission in the world; they have not selected it themselves, but they have been selected for it. "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you" (v. 16). This important task comes with a great promise.

This privilege that is given to all God's disciples is not just something of service; it's one of friendship. It's astounding to hear what Christ calls His disciples: "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (v. 14). They are not just servants, but friends. As Christ explained, "the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: But I have called you friends: for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known to you" (v. 15). This has a couple of implications:

First, *friends know each other intimately*. "For all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you" (v. 15). It is not a relationship of secrecy, but one of openness. God reveals to us all we need to know for our relationship with Christ. It's not a feeling in the dark; it's knowing God and knowing what He is all about.

Second, *friends tap into the same supplies*. "Whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you" (v. 16). God's people have a relationship of kindness and not of fear with the Father through Christ His Son. It is a humble boldness in which they may come to God's throne, asking Him like we would ask a friend.

Third, *there is a love between all the friends*. The disciples do not only love Christ; they love each other. Christ calls them to this: "These things I command you that ye love one another" (v. 17). The vine is the family tree of Christ, and we have a responsibility toward all the other branches. Showing love for God means loving His children, too: His family. Serving them as Christ had shown in the previous chapter, willing to sacrifice when needed.

Fourth, *friends share enemies*. Christ explains: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you" (v. 18). A loyalty to Christ breaks any loyalty to the world. We cannot love the part of the world that hates Christ and love Him at the same time; that would be like treason! Instead, we must stand in the world as representatives of the King.

Fifth, *friends stand up for each other*. The disciples would bear witness of Christ because they had been with Him for a long time (v. 27). It is the mind of Christ that people will see Him in them, and nothing less. It's by their fruit that people will see who they are connected to. As God's representatives on earth, they should live to glorify Him, make Him known, and show that the connection with Him is necessary for eternal life.

What an indispensable privilege it is to abide in Christ. God draws sinners to Himself out of infinite love. I ask you: Has it become your heart's desire to bear fruit to the glory of the divine Husbandman? You may feel like God prunes you harshly, and maybe you feel like you will never recover from it. Maybe you even feel like the Father has cut you off. But the Father is a gentle Gardener who makes everything serve His glory and His people's growth; a Gardener so gentle that He calls His people His friends. How much love comes from this vine! His lovingkindness truly is better than life (Ps. 63:3).

QUESTIONS:

1. Look back at chapter 14. What is "abiding in Christ," and how does this relate to "dwelling" in chapter 14?
2. What fruit do we bear when we live close to Christ? Compare your answers with Galatians 5:22–23. What does it mean when God "prunes"? Can you name examples of ways God prunes His people so that they will bear more fruit?
3. How do we know whether we belong to the vine or whether we are the branches that don't bear fruit? How can branches grow in spiritual maturity?
4. How is abiding in Christ connected to joy (v. 11)?
5. What does verse 19 teach us about the way we relate to the world? How should Christians be in this world, and what consequences does this have?

Dr. Gerald M. Bilkes is Professor of Old and New Testament at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the Free Reformed churches of North America.

Reading with Discernment

You have probably heard a minister use this illustration before: You don't learn how to become an expert in counterfeit currency by studying counterfeit currency; instead, you study the real thing. Once you know the defining characteristics of real money, anything that is fake will leap out in comparison. And then, of course, the preacher drives home an application about the importance of spiritual discernment. It's an effective illustration. But is it true, or is it just the kind of story that preachers like to pass along?

A few years ago, I determined I would find out and filed a request with the Bank of Canada to meet with one of their experts on currency. We sat down together and she gave me a compressed version of the training their experts undergo. Just as I had been told by a host of preachers, the training involves learning all of the marks of genuine currency. Here in Canada, genuine bills have a variety of security features that are difficult to duplicate on anything but the most advanced printing machines: microprinting, watermarks, holograms, areas that are see-through, and areas that become visible only when held up to a source of light. She demonstrated these characteristics for a few minutes, then handed me a stack of currency that had been withdrawn from circulation. She told me that some of it was authentic and some of it was counterfeit and my task was to sort it into two piles: genuine and fake. Even with only that little bit of training I was quickly and easily able to tell the difference. By knowing what was real, I was able to identify what was false. The preacher's illustration is effective because it is true!

Why does the Bank of Canada teach with this method? Because when it comes to our money, the real thing holds to a fixed standard while the counterfeit is always changing. Counterfeiters are always trying new tricks, always trying new ideas and new materials. Some of their fakes are excellent reproductions, some are ridiculous. All of them at least vaguely imitate the real thing. But the Canadian \$20 or \$50 bill is created according to a fixed standard. Each one is identical. Each one is perfect. Each one looks authentic because it *is* authentic.

I have been asked to write about reading with discernment and I begin with this illustration because it highlights two important matters. First, it highlights that there are good books and bad books, books that are true and books that are false, books that portray Christianity as it really

is and books that portray a counterfeit form of it. Second, it highlights that the way to discern the two is to know what is good and true and to know it to such a degree that anything fake and false immediately stands out in stark, ugly contrast.

GOOD BOOKS, BAD BOOKS

I am convinced that we are living in a golden age of Christian publishing. We have multitudes of excellent, biblical new books pouring out of publishers every year. Not only that, but publishers are helping us rediscover the best of years gone by, bringing renewed attention to the church fathers, the Reformers, the Puritans, and representatives of every other age. It has never been easier to access the absolute best of what God's people have written in the past 2,000 years. We of all people are most blessed. We of all people have no excuse not to fill our minds and hearts with what is true.

But all of this good has not come without plenty of bad. Just as there are publishers committed to printing only what is good and true and lovely, there are publishers who are motivated by money or whose theological standards are woefully inadequate. There are non-Christian publishers who care little for theological nuance or correctness. For every good book, it seems like there are ten or twenty that are poor or even flat-out awful.

There are good books. There are bad books. We need to know the difference.

HOW TO TELL GOOD BOOKS FROM BAD BOOKS

With so many books to choose from, and with so many of them so troubling, how can Christians tell the difference? How can we read with discernment? This is where our illustration helps. The way to read with discernment is to know what is true, to so arm yourself with truth that error stands out in contrast.

This means that we must first be people of the Bible, the only book that is wholly, entirely trustworthy in its every sentence, word, and syllable. God who is true has given us truth in His Word. We cannot be discerning without it. We discern everyone and everything by it. To be a discerning reader, you must first know this Word. So

read it privately, read it with family, read it with friends, hear it preached, and fill yourself with it.

And as a man or woman of the Word, consider asking these four questions of any book:

Who wrote the book?

Familiarize yourself with trustworthy authors. If you don't know the authors you can trust, ask friends or pastors for their recommendations. Begin with those authors, learn who they appreciate and who they recommend, and begin to diversify in that way. The more you read, the more your confidence will grow.

Who published the book?

As you familiarize yourself with Christian authors you will also familiarize yourself with Christian publishers. There are many publishers who are fully committed to publishing only books that are consistent with God's Word. Learn who these publishers are and begin to explore their works.

Who endorsed the book?

Endorsements are a means for one trusted figure to add his or her recommendation to a book. As your

list of trusted authors grows, you can look for their names on the back cover or inside the front cover of new books. Read the books your trusted authors recommend.

Who reviewed the book?

As you find your list of trusted authors, also find some book reviewers you find especially trustworthy. While anyone can be a book reviewer today thanks to the Internet, a large quantity of reviews on Amazon is no replacement for one quality review from a trusted reviewer. Find some preferred reviewers and allow them to guide you to new books and authors.

Ask these questions of books as you grow in your discernment and as you grow in your confidence that you can discern good books from bad ones, helpful ones from harmful ones. Allow trusted people to direct you to excellent resources. And look forward to the benefit to your life, your faith, your soul.

Tim Challies serves as a pastor at Grace Fellowship Church in Toronto, Ontario. He is a book reviewer for WORLD magazine, co-founder of Cruciform Press, has written five books, and is a blogger at www.challies.com.



Reading Your Bible

Texting and emails are a part of life; messages are written and read immediately. Communication is as quick as thumbs or fingers can function, sometimes even quicker than thought. At the risk of dating myself, I remember a day—not all that long ago—when composing a message was not as convenient and consequently receiving the message was always in one way or another of special interest. When I was in college, there was an on-campus delivery system that my now wife and I would use to send “love notes” to one another. I recall sacrificing some good study time to write a note to her, and I couldn’t wait until her note was slipped under my dormitory door. I pretty much knew what it was going to say, but I really enjoyed reading it. I think she enjoyed reading mine as well, at least that is what she affirmed the next day. She even kept the ones I wrote her in a shoebox to read again. We loved reading each other’s letters because we loved each other.

Now here is my transition to point. In His gracious love, God has written to us and what He has written is kept for us in the Bible. Every word of Scripture has been divinely breathed out, revealing the mind and will of God. Therefore, there is no more important message to read than the Bible. It reveals everything we are to believe and what we are to do. If we love Him in response to His first loving us, we ought to be eager to read and relish every word. Like David, His beloved, we should regard the Bible as a treasure to be desired like fine gold and as a dessert to the soul sweeter than honey (Ps. 19:10). In reading the Bible, you should keep these principles in mind.

READ WITH PRESUPPOSITIONS

When we approach the Bible with faith, we do so with a set of beliefs that we take for granted to be true. The mindset of a believer every time he opens the Bible must be the conviction that whatever the Bible says is true. We cannot trust our reason to determine what is true or false, right or wrong. By faith we believe in the inspiration of the Bible, and therefore we affirm its authority, infallibility, sufficiency, and effectiveness from cover to cover.

By *authority*, we mean that it is the absolute standard of truth (matters of faith) and the absolute rule for living (matters of practice). The Westminster Larger Catechism summarizes well: “The holy scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience” (3).

By *infallibility*, we mean that the Bible is free from error. Truth is absolute, and all truth has its ultimate source in God, who is Truth and the Revealer of truth. Infallibility extends to every statement of Scripture, including matters of history and science as well as matters of theology. The Bible, therefore, is the standard by which all matters of theology, history, and science are to be judged.

By *sufficiency*, we mean that the Bible is all we need to direct us in how to know God and please Him. It is all we need to direct us safely through life and to the life to come. According to His infinite wisdom and good purpose, God has revealed all that we need for the welfare of our souls. There is no need for humanly defined philosophy, psychology, opinion, or experience to supplement the Bible. It may sound trite, but it is true: if God said it, that settles it.

By *effectiveness*, we mean that there is an inherent power in God’s Word to accomplish what it says. The Lord Himself declared, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). The Word of God is the hammer that in judgment breaks rocks in pieces (Jer. 23:29); it is the means of grace whereby God communicates the gospel that saves all who believe (Rom. 10:17).

The bottom line is that every time we open the Scripture, we must do so with awe generated by the certain knowledge the Bible is not an ordinary book but the very word of the eternal God, whose veracity is beyond question or doubt. Although time has passed since the word was written and circumstances have changed, truth is timeless and changeless.

READ WITH A PLAN

Once we have established the proper presuppositions and mindset about the Scripture, we must develop the proper procedures for reading the Bible. The goal of reading is understanding what God meant when He said what He said. Certainly what God means is infinitely more important than how we may feel about what He said. Here is a basic procedure that should help us discover the message God intends.

1) *Begin every session of Bible study with prayer.* As the psalmist prayed for God to open his eyes to behold the wondrous things of the law, so must we pray (Ps. 119:18). We must pray that the Holy Spirit will teach us truth. The

Lord Jesus promised His disciples that the Spirit of truth would guide them into all truth (John 16:13). In 1 Corinthians 2, the apostle Paul refers to the great truths of the gospel as those things God has revealed to us by His Spirit (2:10). He then says concerning these truths that they are what the Holy Spirit teaches by “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (2:13). This could be rendered literally “expounding spiritual [truths] to spiritual [men].” This statement highlights two essential points. First, it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to illumine and instruct believers in the things of God. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate and consummate teacher of every believer. Second, we must have regenerated hearts before we can understand anything God says. Understanding God’s Word depends in great measure on knowing Him. It is the Spirit of God that regenerates sinners, turning them into spiritual men and thereby introducing them to the knowledge of God; He leads saints into a more intimate knowledge of God through the Word.

2) *Spend time in the Bible.* Too frequently, Christians tend to read small portions of the Bible and spend more time reading about the Bible than reading the Bible. While there is nothing wrong with reading commentaries or devotional books, there is no substitute for reading the Bible itself. Needless to say, proper understanding of the Bible depends on reading the Bible. Familiarity with the source always aids in accurate interpretation. My wife and I can understand each other’s idiosyncrasies and subtleties of speech because we have listened to each other for years. Because we are together so much, we almost intuitively know what the other means. So it ought to be with God’s Word. The more we read, the less strange the language is. The more we read, the more we understand. Read your Bible.

3) *Pay attention to the context.* Taking something out of context is one of the most common errors of interpretation. We all know what it’s like to come into the middle of a conversation and jump to the wrong conclusion because we have heard only part of what was said. To ignore the context is to jeopardize the authority of the message or at least make it suspicious. By context, we simply mean the location or environment in which the text occurs. It certainly includes the immediately surrounding verses, but it extends also to the larger context of the entire book and then ultimately to the whole context of divine revelation. It is like looking at a target, with the bull’s eye in the center and the various rings extending from the center. The bull’s eye is contained within the entire ring structure and has no significance as a bull’s eye independent from the other rings. Obviously, to hit the bull’s eye you must stay within all the rings. This consideration of the larger context is often called the analogy

of Scripture, which simply means that Scripture must be interpreted in the light of Scripture. The Bible is its own best commentary. Paying attention to context involves reading and knowing the content of the Bible. Read your Bible.

4) *Meditate on what you read.* The blessed man is he whose “delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:2). This word *meditate* has the idea of being consumed or preoccupied with something. According to that biblical definition, there is precious little meditation in the average Christian’s life. Far too frequently, Christians read the Bible without thinking. The eyes fall mechanically over the ink for a designated number of pages without the mind’s comprehending a thing. Devotions sadly consist of little more than a few verses before leaving home at the beginning of a busy day or a few verses before going to bed after a busy day. The amount of blessing we receive from the Bible and the degree to which we understand the Bible will be in proportion to how much time we meditate on what we have read. Very simply, meditating is thinking. Many Christians get nothing from the Bible not because they are ignorant but because they are thoughtless. Take the time to pray and think over the open Bible.

READ ON PURPOSE

In reading any book, it is wise to identify the main theme and purpose. The overriding purpose of the Bible is to guide men to a proper relationship with God. God’s gracious salvation is the only way to experience that relationship, and that salvation is only in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. It follows that the revelation of Christ is the grand and predominant theme of Scripture. So as you read the Bible, read intentionally looking for Christ. In the Pentateuch, look for Him as the perfect Priest to stand between God and men and as the perfect sacrifice for sin. The Historical Books draw attention to the perfect King, who would come to rule His people and subdue His enemies. The Prophets anticipate the perfect Prophet, who represents and reveals the only true and living God. The Poetical Books show that Christ is the great theme of worship and praise. The Gospels, with the narratives concerning Christ’s earthly ministry, introduce the performance of His saving work, the historical foundation of the gospel. Acts records the initial proclamation and dissemination of the message of His saving work. The Epistles explain and expound the nature of His person and work and the implications for personal and church life. The Revelation assures the consummation of all the glorious truths of His person and work. Never read your Bible without reference to Christ.

Reading Theology

When you read the title of this article, “Reading Theology,” one of two responses likely came to mind: either “Wow! Yes! Theology!” or “Oh, no! Theology!” These two different responses are tied to what people associate with theology. If you associate theology with learning about God, understanding how He works salvation, and discovering how to live our lives following Him, you likely think of reading theology as an edifying thing. If you associate theology with difficult reading, verbal wrangling, and no profit, then you likely find reading theology a drag and not very beneficial. In reality, reading theology, though challenging at times, can be a blessed and encouraging experience for every child of God. Are you unsure if reading theology can be worthwhile for you? Consider the following three reasons to try.

First, reading theology can be rewarding because of why we should want to read it. We should read theology for what it is and what it does with the Spirit’s blessing. Theology, despite many technical and important discussions, is essentially studying and learning about God from what He has revealed about Himself to us. If God had not chosen to reveal Himself to us, we would never be able to study Him or know Him. But to our extreme enrichment, He has revealed Himself to us in creation (general revelation) and in the Bible (special revelation). General revelation only reveals so much to us of God, namely, “His eternal power and godhead” (Rom. 1:20). Further, even though God clearly and efficaciously reveals Himself in creation, because of the effects of sin, we will not rightly receive His revelation as “we hold the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Theologians have studied “natural theology” (God as revealed in general revelation) with caution and care, aware of the limitations of what God has chosen to reveal through nature and the effects of sin, and primarily focused on “supernatural theology,” the study of what He has revealed about Himself through special revelation.

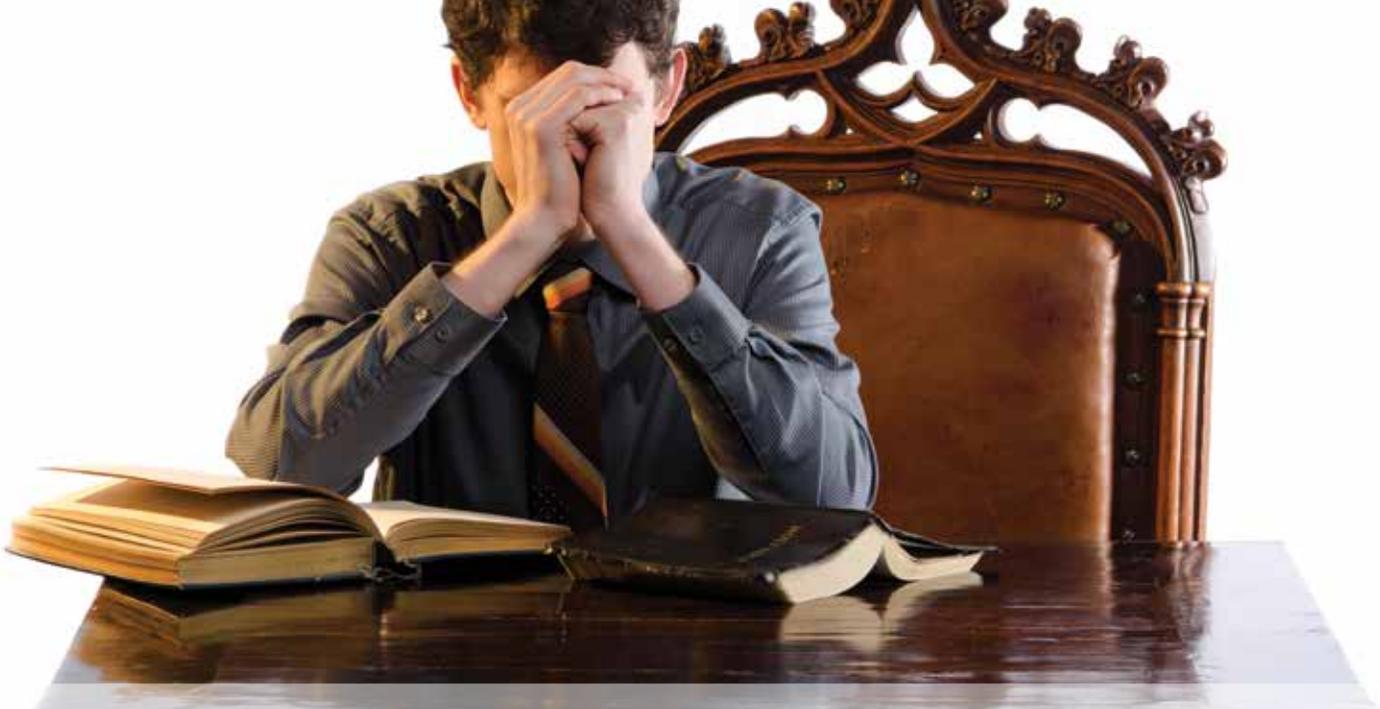
The greatness of God more than justifies reading theology; indeed, counting anything else to be more worthy of study would be idolatry. But theology should also be read for what it does when it is blessed by the Spirit. The Spirit can enable us to know and understand God better. Our Lord Jesus said that knowing God is eternal life in John 17:3: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

For a child of God, there is no greater joy than knowing his Lord and Savior better and better. Nothing delights the hearts of a bride and a groom more than knowing one another and becoming increasingly familiar with each other; so believers, the bride of Christ, delight increasingly in their Bridegroom the more they know Him (Eph. 5:32).

If you are already a reader of theology, do you read it in order to know your Lord and Savior better? If you read theology for another reason than to get to know God more, you are not reading it as you should. Indeed, you are robbing yourself of the blessedness and encouragement that comes from knowing God and His glory better and better. If you have always thought of theology simply as a trial—as something to be avoided—and something intellectual rather than truly spiritual, have you stopped to consider that you can personally get to know God better through reading theology? If you focus on studying Him, learning of Him, and knowing more about Him, you will find it a very strengthening and uplifting pursuit.

Second, reading theology can be blessed and encouraging because of how you read it. As you begin to read theology, read in self-conscious dependence on God. Consider these three things to help you be self-consciously dependent on God in your theological reading.

- Read theology prayerfully. When we pray before we study the Word, we confess our weakness. We look to Him and Him alone to find our increase in understanding. Pray particularly for the Holy Spirit to open your understanding, to draw you closer to God as you seek to learn, and that you will be encouraged to serve Him more faithfully in light of what the Spirit will teach you (Ps. 119:18, Isa. 6:8).
- Read theology with an open Bible. The test of theological truth is not whether those truths are in harmony with the order of creation or observations about the functioning of the world or our own reasoning, but whether they are based on what God Himself has said infallibly in His inspired Word.
- Read theology humbly. Hold your own conclusions tentatively. Seek further confirmation prayerfully from the Scriptures and consider what other godly men, dead and living, have taught on the matter (Prov. 22:8, Jer. 6:16, Prov. 11:14). A very helpful



way to do this is to share what you have been learning with a pastor or a friend who likes to study theology as well.

Second, in addition to reading theology in dependence on God, read theology in a way that best fits your gifts, abilities, and interests. Every child of God should delight to learn of his Lord and Savior, but not every child of God is a strong reader. Even if a child of God is a strong reader, he may struggle to grasp the concepts of theology, which can appear to be disconnected from the tasks and details of daily life. So if you struggle to read theology, where should you start?

Try beginning by reading books that treat particular doctrines of interest to you simply and clearly. Do you want to learn more about predestination? Start with R.C. Sproul's book *Chosen by God*. Do you desire to learn more about the person and work of Jesus Christ? Read Mark Jones's *Knowing Christ*. Try getting an overview of all of theology at once, presented in a written conversation between a believer and an unbeliever with no real church background, in John Gerstner's *Theology in Dialogue*.

Today you can "read" theology without reading in the traditional sense at all. Perhaps you are a more visual person and you prefer charts, diagrams, and pictures to words and paragraphs. If so, consider looking at Tim Challies's *Visual Theology*. Do you get more out of listening than reading? There are many good Reformed and Presbyterian podcasts, sermons, lectures, audio books, and conferences you can listen to anywhere and anytime over the Internet.

Start reading theology according to your interests and gifts, but however you do it, start. It is a tremendous means for getting to know the Lord better. It will be a blessing and encouragement for the rest of your life, no matter what you are called to do, to know Him more and more.

Third, reading theology is a blessing and encouragement because of the changes it makes in the lives of believers. Some people struggle with seeing a practical application of theology to everyday life. This is often due to thinking of theology wrongly. We would be believing the devil's lie if we held that theology is not important for a Christian. On the contrary, theology is a very applicable science, if not the most applicable one. Other sciences only discover new information about their objects of study and make no real internal change in the researchers; theology is different. Theology, when done aright and blessed by the Spirit, changes the researcher. Theology changes the very way we think.

Consider the following examples. The more you learn about God's sovereignty, the more comfort you have as you realize that all things are in His hand and all will work together for good (Rom. 8:28). The more one knows that God is eternal and unchangeable, the more he understands how impossible it is for a sinner who turns to Him to go lost (Mal. 3:6). The more one studies the glorious person and work of Christ in His natures and offices, the more he sees His beauty and adores Him for His greatness (Song 10:5, Eph. 3:8, Rom. 11:33–36). As we know God better, we find blessing and encouragement for all aspects of our lives.

So study theology. By it, with the Spirit's blessing, you will know God more fully and more intimately. You will be enjoying life eternal (John 17:3). You will find direction for your life and future (Deut. 29:29). And you will have the delight of your heart (Ps. 37:4). You will be truly blessed and encouraged.

Rev. Terreth Klaver is pastor of Heritage Reformed Church in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada. He and his wife, Martha, have been blessed with four children.

Reading for Leisure and Learning

John Stott said that “the secret of holy living lies in the mind.” Books help us steward our minds: what we know and understand drives and directs how we feel and what we do. Reading is a potentially powerful tool for personal growth and blessing when it is done intentionally and biblically, but the reverse is also true. Reading is only a good thing for us, only a biblically legitimate pastime, if we are reading good things, things that align with Scripture. Because what we read will inform our theology and intellect and character, we need to think very carefully about what we read.

Some reading is not fun. There is nothing about reading my insurance policy that I enjoy, but I need to do it in order to learn what coverage I have. Some students read the textbook simply because they must in order to pass an exam, but they don’t enjoy it. We all have things that we need to read in order to live and work. Because we live in a Genesis 3 world, some reading is done by the sweat of our brows—about as much fun as dealing with thorns and thistles.

We often look at reading for leisure as fun, but not useful. We just “need to check out” or “escape for a bit.” But as we read, our goal should not only be to enjoy a good story, but also to cultivate our tastes in biblical directions and to think critically about what we read. We tend to create a false dichotomy: things we read for learning must be solid and helpful but we can’t expect to have fun reading stuff like that.

Everything we read, including everything we read for leisure, teaches us something. The question is not whether we are learning from what we are reading; the question is, What is the book teaching us? The “Christian” romance novel teaches something just as surely as Calvin’s *Institutes* do. This does not mean that our leisure time must be filled with massive, theological works. There is a legitimate need to read something easy and entertaining now and then as part of resting from our labor and enjoying God’s gifts. Since we are always learning, we need to choose leisure reading that teaches us useful, biblically compatible things. Books are like friends—we must pick them carefully, then enjoy them!

This may sound like it narrows our options significantly. It does. Satan loves to make piety look narrow and difficult and pharisaical. But, like Adam and Eve staying away from the forbidden fruit, steering clear of written junk will spare us from wasted time and wasted minds. So out of the millions of books out there, how can we choose? How can we spend our precious spare time reading something that will teach while it refreshes us? What sort of book will that be? God gives us standards; He also gives us freedom and great variety, reflecting His own lavish creativity.

Everything we read should be written well. Some authors misuse and abuse language, and teach readers to do the same. I don’t only mean that they are using bad words, but that they are simplistic, have poor grammar and syntax, and little beauty. Choose something that is beautifully written, where the use of language is lovely. We should also be reading books where the story goes somewhere intellectually or emotionally. Look for books that have characters who challenge you with their courage, love, and thinking, or perhaps don’t have these things at the beginning of the book, but do by the end. We have limited time to read; let’s not waste it with poor quality language, plot, or character. Beyond reading quality, though, we should be reading broadly. Just as God has given us a huge variety of foods for our eyes, noses, and mouths to enjoy, so He has blessed us with many genres and styles that are enjoyable and stretch us. Here are a few categories that you might want to explore.

Poetry

There is something about poetry that is a little different: it puts things in a slightly unfamiliar way so that we can see the beauty or sadness or humor in the ordinary: “Lose something every day. Accept the fluster/of lost door keys, the hour badly spent./The art of losing isn’t hard to master.”

Biography

Biography introduces us to people who have shaped the world in which we live. Christian biographies should be on your reading list; non-Christian ones should, too. People like Louis Pasteur, Margaret Thatcher, kings, doctors, explorers, artists—God made each and used each. We can enjoy the personalities and contributions of folks who have lived before us.

Nature and Science

Solomon sets an example for us of being a student of botany, zoology, and more. Read science books. They don’t have to be huge and technical; they can be downright fun. Some of the things I have learned from reading science books have made me enjoy trips to Meijer Gardens, the pediatrician, the beach, and restaurants even more, as I (an English and history person!) understand and see a little bit more of God’s incredible orchestration of all the parts and interactions. Believe it or not, reading some fun science in your spare time will make the rest of your time a little more amazing.

The Arts

This includes painting, sculpture, architecture, and music. Explore the creative arts! This allows you to not only enjoy beauty, but to open venues for your own, God-given creativity. Studying the arts allows us to see God's own creativity more clearly, too. Maggie Paton, missionary John Paton's wife, said that if the only result of drawing lessons were that you could appreciate the colors and lines of creation better, then they were worth it. When you read about landscape painting, you cannot glorify God less when you look at creation. When you understand music better, you can praise in song more skillfully. Protestantism had a strong tradition of excellence in the creative arts that the Reformed community allowed to be hijacked a long time ago. Let's not deprive ourselves or our families of this cultural heritage, or stunt contribution to it. The arts belong to God; do not live as though they were outside the Christian sphere.

History

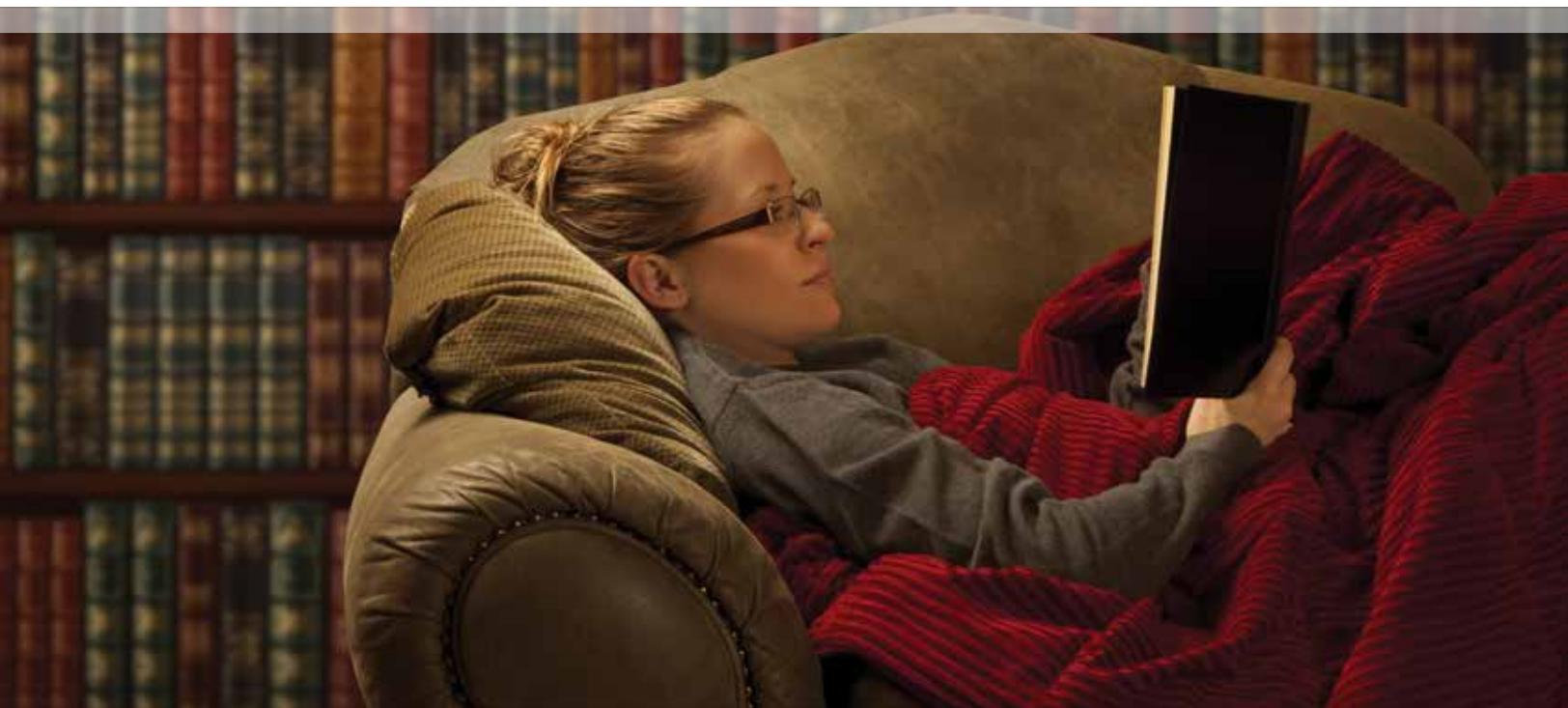
If history is God's unveiling of His plan for humanity, then we should understand it. Histories of Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, Australia and the South Pacific, histories of exploration, politics, the church—all build us up in present interest and future usefulness. A person who understands the themes of Western and Eastern history as they see the causes and outcomes of national events is prepared to serve well as a citizen and church member because he is better able to understand God's work in this world, the greatness of the church, and his humble place within that. History gives us a perspective on the world and ourselves. There are so many different kinds of history, there really is something for everyone. Whether you love running a business and find the history of borrowing and lending interesting, or if you enjoy cooking and can delve into a history of food, there is amazing variety.

Novels

A good novel accurately reflects what life is like and gives us a storyline that helps us retain and understand it. A good novel shows what life does to people's relationships and characters, warning and encouraging us by example, even as it entertains. Bad novels lie about human nature and the consequences of sin, but good ones can be handbooks to understanding people and social situations. So often, novels have helped me understand what people are thinking or where a conversation is heading. Novels not only help us understand people; they help us understand ourselves as we see our own strengths and weaknesses played out in front of us.

And most importantly, we should be reading the Bible. Nothing else will be inerrant, infallible, and holy. Nothing else is the Word of God. So, of course, we should be reading it! Obviously, Scripture is always for learning, but we need to view it more and more as something we are able to do, something we free ourselves to instead of bind ourselves to do. Reading the Bible enables us to evaluate and utilize everything else that we read. The Spirit shapes our minds by the mold of revealed truth. Knowledge of the Lord lies at the epicenter of the New Testament era. The mind is vital (1 Cor. 14), and it is Scripture that guides reconciliation between our mind and God's mind (Rom. 1:28 to 8:5–8). Reading the Bible helps us think God's thoughts after Him, and whether we are working or playing, that's always a wonderful perspective to hold.

Rebecca VanDoodewaard is married to PRTS professor, Dr. Bill VanDoodewaard. She is a mother and teacher of their four children and has authored *Uprooted: A Guide for Homesick Christians* and *Your Future Other Half: It Matters Whom You Marry*.



Classic English Literature

Its Role in Christian Education

Many subjects taught in Christian schools are also taught in secular public schools, including classic English literature. There are some who question the value of having such a class in a Christian school, and there are also those who advocate the inclusion of secular novels to help better prepare our students for the “real” world. Even though Christian education’s primary focus is and must remain on the students’ soul welfare, classic English literature serves an important role in the overall education of our students.

Literature involves the artful use of language, which is truly a unique gift of God. Language is the foundation of literature; its written and spoken form is our primary means of communication. Scripture teaches that what we say, more often than not, reveals what lies within; likewise, literature conveys the thoughts of a person in the written form. While literature can refer to any form of the written word, in this context we are speaking about the writings from authors whose works have withstood the test of time. When we speak of classic English literature, we are referring to English literature from as early as the fifteenth century and into the nineteenth century. Authors like Chaucer, Donne, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Milton, DeFoe, Coleridge, Dickens, and the like usually come to mind. Classic English literature has literary value and artistic merit, portrays the human experience, and has a universal appeal.

Authors often use literature to reflect the beliefs, culture, and issues of the time period in which they are writing. Reading classic literature cultivates an awareness of these issues, and students can learn much more than just the content of the literary works; they also learn about the historical context, the author’s background, the issues of the day, and in many cases develop a deeper cultural appreciation for both the time period and the literature itself. Additionally, examining and analyzing these works fosters critical thinking, increases vocabulary, and helps improve writing skills. And literature can be used to enhance the students’ moral consciousness.

While it is true that not all classic English literature is Christian, even secular literature has value because it

also contains truth about the human experience. As such, literature will inevitably portray both the good and the evil that exists. Since evil is a component of sinful human nature, we need to recognize it as a reflection of depravity. It is necessary for our students to have the skills to be able to evaluate literature in the light of Scripture; this will enable them to read critically and with caution, and to “prove all things [and to] hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). In this way, the ability to discern between good and evil can be improved through the reading of literature. Eventually, our children will be choosing their own literature, and, furthermore, they will be exposed to a great amount of secular literature not of their choosing should they continue to higher education; so it is incumbent upon us as educators to lay the foundation of being able to determine the merit of a work based on biblical principles.

Probably most of us have read John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and we recognize the value this allegory has in portraying the spiritual experience of a Christian. Samuel Coleridge writes about this work, “I know of no book, the Bible excepted, as above all comparison, which I, according to my judgment and experience, could so safely recommend as teaching and enforcing the whole saving truth according to the mind that was in Christ Jesus, as the *Pilgrim’s Progress*.” Clearly both of these authors recognize that spirituality is first and foremost when it comes to literature.

But what about authors who are only nominal Christians at best, or perhaps not even that? For example, what is to be gained from reading Shakespeare? One benefit is that his works portray both history and human depravity in a very realistic way. His works provide an excellent forum for discussion as we can examine the consequences of human greed and corruption in the light of Scripture. Many of his plays are based on historical fact, so often students are simultaneously learning about actual historical events as well. Additionally, Shakespeare’s works are a great source of vocabulary. Written in Early Modern English like the King James Version of the Bible, his works contain approximately 30% more vocabulary than



the Bible, so these readings also provide an opportunity to expand this type of lexicon.

Recognizing that there is merit and value in the study of literature requires the necessity of balance and prudence. On the one hand, secular literature is permitted because of its “redeeming qualities” in spite of crude or salacious content. On the other hand, some advocate no avoidable exposure to literature that has any elements of evil, even if it is a genuine reflection of human depravity. Scripture provides us with several examples to consider. Acts 7:22 indicates that “Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” which would include literature. As for Daniel and his three companions, “God gave them knowledge and skill in all learning and wisdom” (Dan. 1:17). And then there is Paul, who was so well-versed in literature that he was able to quote it verbatim (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 15:33; Titus 1:12). Paul used this knowledge as a segue into a deeper spiritual conversation with his heathen audience. Our purpose for studying literature may indeed include the aesthetic and literary value, but ultimately should develop in our students a deeper moral and spiritual consciousness.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Elliot, Ward and Robert Valenza, “Shakespeare’s Vocabulary: Did it Dwarf All Others?” *Stylistics and Shakespeare’s Language—Transdisciplinary Approaches* (Continuum Books), 2011.

Horton, Ronald Arthur, *Christian Education: Its Mandate and Mission* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press), 1992.

“King James Bible Wordlist & Definitions.” *Word List, Dictionary, and Definitions for the King James Bible*. Morton Publications, Feb. 2016. <http://www.preservedwords.com/wordlist.htm>. Accessed September 22, 2016.

Prior, Karen Swallow. “A Biblical Basis for the Study of Literature.” *The Well*. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1 Sept. 2014. <http://thewell.intervarsity.org/in-focus/biblical-basis-study-literature>. Accessed September 13, 2016.

Dr. Daniel Sweetman is an English teacher at Plymouth Christian Schools in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He holds a PhD in English Literature from Drew University.

The History of Literacy

As I am writing this article, I am surrounded by books in the Hekman Library at Calvin College. This library is definitely not the largest in the world, but it does contain over 1.75 million books, journals, and articles. This is a phenomenal amount of resources to read and from which to learn. There are various subjects represented: theology, nursing, literature, biology, engineering, and a host of other subjects. The inquiring mind will always have something to read. But it was not always like this. As you visit your libraries, no doubt, this Scripture verse comes to mind, “Of making many books there is no end” (Eccl. 12:12). But this wealth of information was not always enjoyed by society. The fact that all these resources exist speaks to the fact that we live in a largely literate society, and that is a huge blessing. Let’s trace the development of this blessing of being able to read throughout the history of civilization.

Some of the earliest cultures of the world developed a system of writing. The ancient civilizations of the Egyptians and the Sumerian dynasties are known for their use of symbols and pictures as a form of writing, but literacy was basically restricted to the ruling class and the priestly class. Reading was seen as something reserved for those in power, so that the common people could be held in ignorance.¹ This allowed for political and dark spiritual power to run rampant in these cultures.

Parallel to these ancient, pagan cultures was the nation of Israel, with her strong emphasis on oral tradition, but also an increase in an emphasis on the importance of reading. The development of reading can be seen in that the Lord had written the Ten Commandments with his own finger for Moses to read and pass on to the Israelites as a reminder of His will for them. Moses wrote the Pentateuch, or the first five books of Moses, so that Israel could have a permanent record of the will of God for them as a nation, as individuals and to regulate their worship of God. Scribes carefully recorded the families and genealogies for posterity. The prophets came to speak the word of the Lord to the Israelites and these words were recorded in what we now know as the Scriptures. One specific example is found in Jeremiah, where Baruch, the scribe, wrote down the words of Jeremiah for King Jehoiakim (Jer. 36). Further development in the history of literacy can be seen in the

New Testament. Jesus Himself also valued reading as we follow Him into the synagogue at Nazareth and He opens the Scriptures and reads to the people (Luke 4). This is evidence of a growing emphasis on the ability to personally read the Scriptures. Jesus underscored this when He said, “Search the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, for they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).

Developments in the New Testament took place within the context of the Greco-Roman world. Reading in ancient Greece “was generally viewed as oral performance, especially in the case of poetry recitals to private audiences...silent reading...was a marginal activity in the Greco-Roman world.”² Another reason for the emphasis on oral reading was the sheer expense and effort expended in the production of books, as well as a lack of education to teach people to read. The production of books influenced the rate of literacy among the common people. The Romans developed the practice of writing on animal skins, replacing papyrus made from reeds, thereby making the production of books less expensive. Because they used vellum, this allowed them to re-use the skins by scraping off a layer and then writing again on the clean surface. So within the Greco-Roman world, literacy was mostly confined to the educated and political elite of society, a trend that persisted into the Middle Ages.

During the time of the Middle Ages, reading was something that primarily occupied the time of monks and theologians. Medieval education was not widespread but largely confined to the cathedral schools and monasteries. There was a cleavage between the educated priests and monks and the uneducated common people, who lived under the tyranny of ignorance. During the late Middle Ages, there were two persistent attitudes towards education and hence also towards reading. The first was that the church contributed to the ignorance of the masses by restricting education and reading to the priests and monks; the other was that education, and by extension reading, was a waste of time unless one was to enter a vocation within the church.³

The dawn of the Protestant Reformation saw monumental change in these attitudes for a number of reasons. The Reformers emphasized the need for universal education for boys and girls, regardless of profession. Behind this

need for religious and secular education was the desire to teach and read the Scriptures. It has been well documented that education throughout the history of Christianity often focused on the necessity of reading the Scriptures, and this in turn led to a flourishing of broader education and culture in general. This is a principle engendered and promoted in the Reformation. Schools were established by the Reformers, and later by the Jesuits, in an effort to train children to read; reading was seen as a path to knowledge of God and knowledge of the world in which one lived. Parallel to the Reformation was a movement known as the Renaissance, which saw a return to the ancient sources of Latin and Greek literature, as well as a flourishing of the arts and music. Culture suddenly began to burgeon with a renewed interest in education that was not confined to theology anymore. Along with the Renaissance was the advent of the printing press, which suddenly made literature vastly easier and cheaper to print and disseminate.

It is within this story of the history of literacy that we find ourselves today. The story has not remained static. Indeed, the rate of literacy in the world today is unprecedented. And this history continues to be written today, in what we now call the Information Age, because of the abundance of material that we have at our fingertips to

read. With the onset of technology, the ability to read, and to do so widely, has grown exponentially. This is certainly change we can embrace, but it also brings along with it several cautions. Have we lost, in the words of the precocious Anne of Green Gables, “our scope for the imagination,” by being inundated with information? Have we lost the art of reading deeply and meditatively in a world of 400 characters or less, of sound bytes and visual stimulation? Has our reading and meditating on Scripture been impacted by the next article popping up in our newsfeed? Has the quality of what we read been impacted negatively as information floods our booksellers and the online world? Literacy must not be taken for granted, nor must it be abused. It is a tremendous gift from God so that we can know Him and the world He has created. How are you stewarding this gift?

1. Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 12–13.

2. Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World*, 17.

3. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 127.

Rev. Maarten Kuivenhoven is a pastor in the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Michigan.



Cultivating a Child's Lifestyle of Reading from a Parent's Perspective

The importance of learning to read goes without saying. Hours are spent in the classroom and at home learning letters and their sounds, putting them together to form words, and progressing along the phonics pathway to reading sentences and paragraphs. Then finally, we experience the joy that comes to both parent and child from completing the first reader! I still remember the excitement and sense of accomplishment when each of my four children reached this milestone. Reading opens a whole new world to the reader. It engages the mind in a way no other activity can. It exposes us to new ideas and other cultures, different ways of viewing and doing things. It allows us to take in information and interact with it, stimulating our minds, activating our thought processes and enabling us to sort through facts and perspectives and form our own opinions and beliefs about a topic or issue. It helps us to reason, opening our minds, with the ultimate goal of closing upon the truth. But sometimes, as reading becomes more difficult and books become thicker and more intimidating, both the amount and the level of reading falls off. How do we counter this? As parents and educators, we want to keep this momentum going. Plus, with all the other enticing activities and distractions vying for our time and attention, how do we as parents cultivate a habit—and hopefully a lifestyle—of reading in our children? How do we instill in them a love for reading? Additionally and perhaps more importantly, how do we cultivate a lifestyle of reading widely, deeply, and discerningly?

An important way to encourage children to read is to model reading ourselves. As parents, we have the God-given responsibility of role modeling for our children in every way, including reading. Our children see what and how much we read. They will begin to form an idea of what we value. So we must ask ourselves: What do I read? Is it material that is beneficial and thought-provoking? How much time do I spend reading valuable literature? Or do I spend an inordinate amount of time “reading” social media? Or do I read at all? Do my children see me reading the Bible for devotions or at times when I am seeking guidance or consolation? Do they see that I love to read? Our children tend to emulate what we do, so we must do the hard work of self-examination in this area of reading and make a correction, if needed, if we ever expect to plant seeds that would yield excellent readers in our offspring. Never forget the impact we, as parents, have on the habit formation of our children.

If we desire to raise a family of readers, then we should read aloud to our children. We cannot delegate the responsibility

of reading aloud exclusively to a teacher, but rather we must embrace this opportunity as time to transfer our ideas, opinions, and values to our children. Studies have shown the importance of reading aloud to your children, especially with regard to them becoming frequent readers.¹ Reading aloud to children demands their listening and concentration skills, exposes them to advanced vocabulary, and provides a special time of bonding between parent and child. When reading aloud, we should read with expression, drawing our child into the narrative with voice changes that match the characters. We want our children to become engaged in the story, not think it is flat or boring. We desire our children to enjoy, indeed, relish the experience. This is particularly important when we are reading the Bible to our children. We should read the Bible with reverence and awe as our holy God's gift of written communication to us, but if we read in a wooden, rote way, as if we are just performing a duty perfunctorily, we may be communicating a strong message that the Bible's truths are not living and active in our lives. No other book can compare with the Bible, because it is Spirit-breathed and has the power of the living God behind its very words. Our desire is for our children to understand this from the Holy Spirit Himself as well as the care, attention, and regard we give it whenever we read the Bible.

Reading aloud to our children is also a natural time to cultivate an environment for discussion. Discuss the characters, whether it be their thought processes, their motives, or their actions. Ask whether their thinking is biblically sound and if the choices made and the actions taken are sinful or proper. This helps our children to become skillful in reading deeply as well as forming and, depending on the age, articulating a biblical worldview. A word of caution here: at times, too much questioning can disrupt the flow of the narrative and can sometimes be distracting to a listener. We must use discretion and understand the developmental level of our children and allow them time to absorb the material and engage their own mental faculties. Remember that we are tilling the soil, with the ultimate harvest of instilling a love for reading as well as developing discernment. However, with consistency and as they mature, our children will be in a habit of asking these questions as they approach any reading material. In order to prepare my children to think critically and discerningly about a literary work, or anything, for that matter, I taught my children to ask these questions as they read:

What is the author communicating? Is it true?



*From what worldview is the author writing? Is it biblical?
Should I believe what the author is saying? Is it credible?
Are there conflicting viewpoints? Have I read them and
given them thought?*

Once armed with these tools and having learned to use them well under our guidance, a child, now a teen and beyond, is prepared to read more widely and should be encouraged to do so.

We cannot and should not shelter our children; instead, we should expose them to contradicting viewpoints while they are under our tutelage so that they can begin to logically dissect the argument or rationale, and, leaving the emotion out of it, critically evaluate the work to see if it holds any weight or value. As they become more accustomed to these tools, they will be able to handle more difficult material. Introduce classic writings, primary sources of history, documents from our forefathers, Puritan writings, classic literature, and so on. You may find that certain of your children take to reading more quickly than others. Each child is unique and possesses their own learning style. Some may be more auditory learners and struggle with reading.

Perhaps a word here about how to encourage a struggling or non-reader is in order. Although I'm not an expert in this area, and there are cases where professional help is needed, I can address those children who are having difficulty in getting over a hurdle in their desire to put forth the effort to read. My recommendation would be to give them reading material that is of interest to them. For example, literature about their favorite animal or something they are interested in learning or building is often helpful. Individual time spent reading aloud to them is encouraging. I also see much value in augmenting reading with audiobooks for everyone, but especially for a non-reader or those who struggle. We all like

a great story read to us and it is a great way to gain knowledge and expand our vocabulary. We can either follow along in the text or simply enjoy the narrative while we are driving or doing something mindless.

Finally, and most importantly, the ultimate value in learning words is so that we can read the Bible and begin to understand the Word Himself. Jesus is the very Word of God, God's message of salvation to us. Through His written Word, the Bible, God has chosen to reveal Himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is God's most effective expression of who He Himself is. Just as the right choice of a word clarifies a vague concept, so the Word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, illuminates our understanding of who God is and allows us to believe the truth by faith.

God's Word is quick and powerful (Heb. 4:12). There is nothing so motivating for me to teach my child to read and discern what he reads as the promise of God that His Word will not return to Him void, but will accomplish that which he pleases (Isa. 55:11), and His pleasure is not in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked would turn from his way and live (Ezek. 33:11). God's Word is truth (John 17:17), and it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). Thus, in the pages of God's most holy Word, we pray our children will find the Living Word and embrace Him as His Savior. By His grace, it will be followed by a daily hunger and thirst for His righteousness and growth in grace.

1. Alison Flood, "Sharp Decline in Children Reading for Pleasure, Survey Finds," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/09/decline-children-reading-pleasure-survey>. Accessed September 15, 2016.

Ellen Greendyk is a member of the Kinnelon HRC in New Jersey. She and her husband have four grown children. Ellen has many years of experience in homeschooling her own children and holds a BA in Education and a Masters in Consumer Affairs.

Why Read Biographies?

We live in a time when many in the church struggle to connect with other members of the body. Many consider connectedness something that happens online rather than through living in community. If you don't believe me, ask the closest millennial; his or her deepest relationships may be with people they know via pixels and screens. We are "alone together," as sociologist Sherry Turkle has put it. The struggle for community is a problem in the world and increasingly it is also a problem in the church.

Besides this lack of connection (or communion), the twenty-first-century North American church is also largely ahistorical. Being ahistorical, or having a disregard for the history of the church, has led to old errors being revived, to a disconnection with ancient Christianity (hence the number of evangelicals that go to Rome or the Eastern Church in search of historical connection), and to an inability of individual Christians to gauge their experience against the experience of others.

Lack of connection and community, as well as an ahistorical approach to Christianity, has caused a deficiency in the lives of believers. What can be done to help encourage connection, community, and history? There are several vital remedies for regaining vibrant and experiential Reformation Christianity, but let me offer you just one: read biographies.

In both times of struggle and spiritual outpouring, biographies connect us to the history of the church and the experience of other believers, and they encourage in us a vibrant Christianity. The New Testament makes it clear that this is the way the church is to interact with the lives of the saints who have gone before us. Biography is helpful.

"And what shall I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets...." In Hebrews 11, the Apostle Paul whets the appetite for the Christian to explore the lives of those before him or her. When he wrote of Barak and Samson and David and others, he was writing with a millennium between himself and those whom "time would fail me to tell of."

The apostle challenges the church to consider the biographies of the saints. Time would fail for him to express the full value of knowing of their lives. What can we learn from this positive approach to Christian biography? What encouragements are there for the ahistorical and disconnected believer in the pew?

Christian History Did Not Begin with You

One of the clearest applications that can be drawn from the apostle calling us to consider David and Barak and Samson and a host of others is that Christian history did not begin with you. Several weeks ago, I had a conversation with a young man who wanted me to help him defend the Trinity to his girlfriend. I agreed and began to talk through the history of the doctrine. Respectfully, he interrupted and told me that he only wanted "to use the Bible, not history or theology." As pious as that statement sounds, that's not how it works. The church has a history and the more we become familiar with the names and faces—through biography—the better off we are at understanding that the history of Christianity did not begin the moment you were converted.

Theology in Context

Connected to the fact that Christian history did not begin with you is the fact that theology happens in context. The Bible did not drop down from the sky with the doctrines that we hold spelled out. The Three Forms of Unity, the Westminster Confession, and the ancient creeds all have a context. Biography helps us to understand that context and teaches us to appreciate the work of God in leading the church to refine her theological understanding of the teaching of the Bible.

Descriptions of Experiential Grace

Reading biographies helps us to understand the ways the Lord works in the lives of His people. We all know that the normal Christian life is a life under the means of grace that God provides, but what does that look like exactly in the life of the believer? Christian biography puts flesh on experiential Christianity. We are helped in our understanding of how God has converted, justified, and sanctified those who have gone before us. Biographies teach us of experiential grace.

Faithful Witnesses: Run!

Knowing *how* the Spirit of God works in the conversion of sinners is helped by biographies, but there also seems to be a Hebrews 11 encouragement in reading them. Run! Run, Christian! Many know the encouragement that a faithful

biography brings. Many know the encouragement to the soul of reading about a Jonathan Edwards, Mary Prentiss, William Carey, or another faithful brother or sister. Run, Christian! Keep running, Christian! Add these saints to your “great cloud of witnesses” as the Spirit encourages you to “run the race set before you.”

Perseverance in Suffering

The Hebrew Christians to whom the apostle wrote were in danger of falling away. The apostle cheered them on with the fact that Jesus is better! As we reflect on the cloud of witnesses given as a cheering section for the faithful runners, we are reminded that suffering occurs. Perseverance is needed in the midst of suffering, especially in those trying hours of temptation or struggle or persecution. Biography reminds us that we are not alone. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* served as a reminder to the English Marian refugees of the sufferings of their brothers and sisters in England. *Scot's Worthies* served the Covenanters by reminding them of the sufferings of their covenanted forefathers. The Voice of the Martyrs stories of suffering remind us that the same is true today: Christians suffer. Our siblings in Christ suffer. There may come a time when we will suffer. Biographies remind us that Christ will sustain us in the midst of suffering just as He sustained our suffering siblings for centuries—millennia, even.

Prayers for the Holy Spirit's Outpouring

Biographies also remind us of better times in the past and encourage us to pray for better times in the future. Read about George Whitefield whose preaching brought tears to the eyes of the miners that “carved lines of white” on their faces. Read about the Welsh revivals. Narratives of reformation and revival in all eras of Christian history encourage the soul and remind all of us to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We live in spiritually dry times and biography reminds us that the Holy Spirit has poured out reformation and revival in similarly dark times; biography teaches us to pray for that work.

Conclusion

Biographies of the lives of the saints ought to be great encouragements to us as Christians. Living in ahistorical times, times of distant fellowship, we need to increase our biography reading. We need to be reminded that our faith is bigger than ourselves. We are taught from biographies that theology has a context. We are encouraged by God's redemptive acts—both the ordinary and the extraordinary—through the lives of saints who have gone before us. We are encouraged to run—sometimes in the midst of suffering. And we are encouraged to pray for great outpouring of the

Holy Spirit in our lives and the communities in which we live and serve.

Friends, read Christian biography for the sake of your souls.

Dr. Nathan Eshelman is a current student at and graduate of Puritan Seminary; pastor of the Los Angeles, California, Reformed Presbyterian Church (RPCNA); president of the RPCNA's Home Mission Board; board member of Crown and Covenant Publications; and a blogger at www.gentlereformation.com. He and his wife, Lydia, have five children, ages 4–13.

TOP 10 BIOGRAPHIES OF CHRISTIAN MEN

1. *Charles Spurgeon's Autobiography: The Early Years and The Full Harvest*
2. *Life of Martyn Lloyd Jones* by Iain H. Murray
3. *Andrew A. Bonar: Life and Letters* by Marjory Bonar
4. *Robert Murray McChyne* by Andrew Bonar
5. *Asabel Nettleton: Life and Labors* by Bennet Tyler
6. *David Livingstone: The Truth Behind The Legend* by Rob Mackenzie
7. *Augustine's Confessions*
8. *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* by George Marsden
9. *Here I Stand: A Life Of Martin Luther* by Roland Bainton
10. *Defending The Faith: J. Gresham Machen* by Daryl Hart

TOP 10 BIOGRAPHIES OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN

1. *Gladys Aylward: The Little Woman* by Gladys Aylward
2. *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Ten Boom
3. *By Searching: My Journey Through Doubt Into Faith* by Isobel Kuhn
4. *Mary Slessor of Calabar, Pioneer Missionary* by W. P. Livingstone
5. *A Chance To Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael* by Elisabeth Elliot
6. *Give Me This Mountain* by Helen Roseveare
7. *My Heart In His Hands: Ann Judson of Burma* by Sharon James
8. *The Nine Day Queen of England: Lady Jane Grey* by Faith Cook
9. *A Passion for the Impossible: The Life of Lillias Trotter* by Miriam Rockness
10. *Evidence Not Seen* by Darlene Rose

—DR. DAVID MURRAY

Faith IN CHRIST (16)

DOCTRINAL CHRISTIANITY | George Lawson

These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name. —JOHN 20:31

Dr. George Lawson (1749–1820), who studied under John Brown of Haddington, became pastor of the Associate Synod church in Selkirk, Scotland in 1771. In 1787, he succeeded Brown as professor of theology in the Divinity Hall, which was then moved to Selkirk so that he could continue serving as pastor there. As a professor of theology he trained scores of men for the ministry for more than three decades and was loved by all the people of God. He became best known for his sermons and commentaries, particularly for his commentary on Proverbs and his books on Ruth, Joseph, Esther, and David. Less known is his scarce work, *Helps to A Devout Life*, being a Treatise on Religious Duties. This remarkable little book is a summary of how Christians ought to live. It is divided into a Trinitarian structure: the duties we owe to Christ, the duties we owe to the Father, and the duties we owe to the Holy Spirit. The entire book is full of practical, savory truth. As space allots, we hope to print this book in short articles in this periodical. The article below is the sixteenth part of the second chapter.

MOTIVES AND ENCOURAGEMENTS TO FAITH IN CHRIST (CONT.)

Practical Directions

Third, if we have not yet believed in Christ, it is high time for us to flee from the wrath to come.

Today, if we will hear the voice God, we must lay hold on eternal life. “Now is the accepted time,” and we know not how long it may continue. This night our souls may be required of us, and there is no work nor device in the grave. Just dissuaded from self-murder, the Philippian jailor seemed as incapable as most men of doing anything truly good; yet he believed in Christ, and at once tasted the joys of salvation. The murderers of our Lord were in a very bad way when Peter and the other apostles preached to them the glad tidings of salvation through Him, whom a few weeks before, they had treated as a malefactor; and yet they believed and received the gift of the Holy Ghost. David swore unto the Lord, and vowed unto the mighty God of Jacob that he would not go into the tabernacle of His house, nor rest in his bed, nor give sleep to his eyes, nor slumber to his eyelids, till he had found a house for the Lord! Did he account the finding of a habitation for the Lord a matter of so much importance that it admitted of no delay? How great must be our infatuation if, through sloth or selfishness, we postpone for a single night or hour the duty of finding for Jesus a dwelling in our hearts. He stands at the door and knocks. Let us remember how short and uncertain human life is, and not for a single instant shut Him from our souls through unbelief.

No doubt our evil hearts will offer great opposition to this needful duty of believing; but let us bear in mind, we are not called to perform it by any strength inherent in ourselves. Abraham and other believers in ancient times experienced similar difficulties, both in the beginning and progress of their faith; but they judged Him faithful who had promised. The grace of God is as rich and free as in the days of old, and He still delights in glorifying it (Eph. 2:6–8). Think of the irreparable loss already sustained by millions of the human family because they refused to believe in Jesus, or because they trifled away their precious hours in perplexing doubts or half-formed resolutions. Think of

the mercy and power of our compassionate Redeemer, and of the commission He received of the Father in favor of miserable sinners, and let us build all our confidence on that foundation which God hath laid in Zion—“It is a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation; he that believeth shall not make haste.”

Fourth, “Let us hold fast our faith in Christ, and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:5).

Trials of faith are necessary and useful; and God, who manages all things for the best interests of His people will take care that they shall not be lacking (James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6). No one need expect to live long without having his faith severely tried and assaulted. Satan is an irreconcilable enemy of faith, for he knows it to be destructive to the interests of his kingdom in the world. When he sought to have Simon that he might sift him as wheat, it was his intention if possible to destroy his faith. The faith of the good man could not have endured the trial had not Jesus prayed for him that it might not fail.

The world is unfavorable to faith—worldly prosperity and adversity being equally unfriendly to it. Pleasant things are too apt to draw away our thoughts and desires from the Rock of our salvation. Disagreeable events often tend to shake our confidence in Him who hath promised that no evil shall happen to the just.

The flesh is a foe of faith. The corruptions within us which war against the soul, the carnal appetites and inclinations which wound the conscience all tend to weaken that faith amid so many trials and assaults. Our response depends, not upon our own powers, but upon the grace of our divine Redeemer. To receive from Him needful supplies of strength we must be diligent in the use of those means which His wisdom has prescribed. He told Peter that He had prayed for him that his faith might not fail; but He at the same time directed him and the other disciples “to watch and pray that they might not enter into temptation.”

Can You Be Happy in Every Circumstance?

*God can make you happy in any circumstances.
Without him nothing can.*

—ANDREW BONAR

There are two difficult things to believe in this quote. The first is that God can make you happy in any circumstances. The second is the claim that without God, nothing can make you happy.

Let me take the “easiest” of these difficulties first, which is the second: “Without God, nothing can make you happy.”

NO GOD, NO HAPPINESS

This does not mean that you cannot have any happiness without God. You can, but it’s too shallow and too brief to really satisfy or to really deserve the name “happiness.”

Sure, you can have a few moments of happiness at a football match...until they lose. You can have a few hours of happiness at a party...until you wake up the next day. You can have a few days of happiness with your new car...until the first scratch, or until the neighbor gets an even better one.

Because these joys are separated from the source of all happiness, they cannot go deep or last long. If you doubt that, read Ecclesiastes.

WITH GOD, ALL HAPPY

“God can make you happy in any circumstances.” This is even harder to believe. But let’s qualify it a little. Bonar is not saying that in the midst of the most painful providences—like a cancer diagnosis or a bereavement—we can expect Christians to be immediately full of joy.

Not at all; Christians weep and sorrow, too. However, the Christian battles against that sadness by faith, gradually and slowly beginning to win the victory, to see the good hand of God, to sense the Father’s love, to experience the Savior’s sympathy, and to enjoy the Spirit’s comfort.

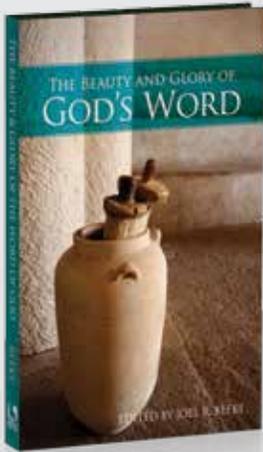
As faith strengthens, so does joy, so that even in hard providences there is a deep and stable and substantial joy. It doesn’t remove the sorrow, but it counter-balances it and hopefully, eventually, even outweighs it.

“I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content” (Phil. 4:11).

Dr. David P. Murray is Professor of Old Testament and Practical Theology at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids and a pastor of the Free Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan.



NEW RHB BOOKS

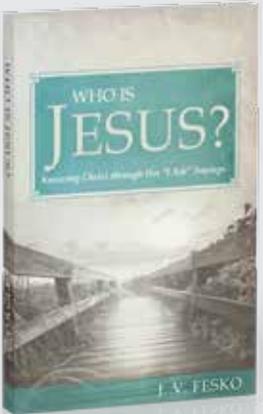


The Beauty and Glory of God's Word

Joel R. Beeke, editor

"The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps 19:7). In this age of uncertainty, we need to stand on the rock of God's revelation. You will find encouragement in this book to trust the Bible as God's inerrant, authoritative, clear, and sufficient word, as well as guidelines for how to use the Bible for personal joy and practical living. Contributors include Michael Barrett, Joel Beeke, Gerald Bilkes, Ronald Kalifungwa, David Murray,

Jack Schoeman, Geoff Thomas, and William VanDoodewaard.
(HC, 160 pgs) \$25.00|\$12.50

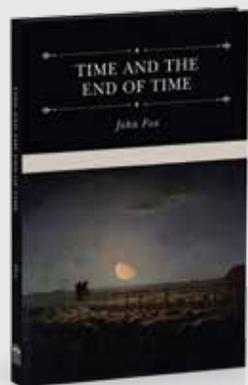


Who is Jesus? Knowing Christ through His "I Am" Sayings —J. V. Fesko

Who is Jesus? Is He God, as the church has claimed for nearly two thousand years? Or is He just a good man? J. V. Fesko takes a close look at Jesus' "I am" claims in the gospel of John and guides us to a better understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus, the author says, conducted His ministry clothed in His "coat of Old Testament colors" made, in God's providence, of the promises,

prophecies, themes, and ideas that foretold the Messiah. Jesus' claims of deity reveal that He is the great I AM, the name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Fesko views the "I am" sayings of Jesus through the perspective of the Old Testament, and we come to see Him in His biblical glory as God in the flesh, who dwelled among men to seek and to save those who were lost. Includes study questions, suitable for both individual and group study.

(PB, 112 pgs) \$10.00|\$7.50



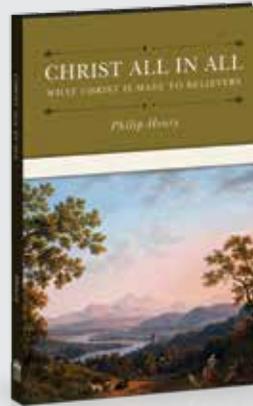
Time and the End of Time: Discourses on Redeeming the Time and Considering Our Latter End —John Fox

"A work of *infinite moment* depends on a *moment of time*." John Fox's *Time and the End of Time* presents the never-dying soul with the weighty things one must deal with while standing on the coast of eternity: God, sin, heaven, hell, and, most of all, the personal work of Christ. Fox's piercing and searching expo-

The titles below are recently published or reprinted. The first price is retail, and the second is our discounted price. PB = paperback, HC = hard cover.

sition of two main texts, Ephesians 5:16 and Deuteronomy 32:29, engages readers with motivations, directions, and applications so they can both "redeem the time" and "consider their latter end." The span of life on earth quickly vanishes, and what is done with it will make or mar for eternity. Either infinite joy with God or the endless abyss of His fury—the hinge swings in time. "Therefore, do not procrastinate or delay...for a world."

(HC, 192 pgs) \$25.00|\$19.00



Christ All in All: What Christ is Made to Believers

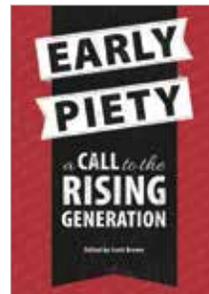
Philip Henry

This remarkable exposition of Colossians 3:11 considers forty ways that "Christ is all, and in all" for believers—our hope, refuge, and righteousness to name a few. As Philip Henry demonstrates, Christ alone can bring eternal happiness, and without Him nothing else will do. Each chapter provides an edifying meditation, calling us to find our satisfaction in Jesus. So what is your most perplexing problem, and what would you say is the one thing you need most? Read this compelling work

on the sufficiency of Christ and be encouraged to answer with Philip Henry, "None but Christ, none but Christ!"

(HC, 384 pgs) \$28.00|\$21.00

OTHER BOOKS

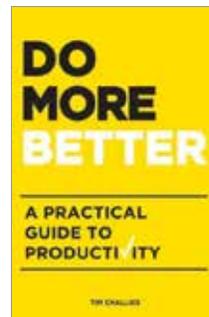


Early Piety: A Call to the Rising Generation

Scott Brown, editor

I highly recommend *Early Piety* as a book that meets one of the greatest needs of our day. It is a voice calling to young people in the wilderness of this world to live and walk *solus Deo Gloria!* And, it is a valuable tool for parents to teach us how to pray for and train our children. May God use this excellent book to instill true piety or godliness early in the lives of many.

(NCFIC, HC, 215 pgs) \$24.95|\$14.00



Do More Better: A Practical Guide to Productivity

Tim Challies

Do More Better is a short, fast-paced, practical guide to productivity to share what Challies has learned about getting things done in today's digital world. You will learn the common obstacles to productivity, three essential tools for getting things done, the power of daily and weekly routines, the great purpose behind productivity, and much more. Includes bonus material on taming your email and embracing the inevitable messiness of productivity.

(Cruciform, PB, 120 pgs) \$10.00|\$7.50

CRUEL WORDS

Is saying mean things really murder?

Suggested Reading: James 3

While words do not physically kill someone, they can kill a person's reputation. When we slander or gossip, we attack another person. Bullying, cruel teasing, mocking, and using words to degrade another are forms of murder as well; they aim to kill a person's sense of worth and respect. Using words in these types of harmful ways stems from the same motivations as murder.

Never degrade or mock others. God has created each person unique and of eternal importance. Disrespectful expressions regarding gender, race, intelligence, or status are sinful. Remember that every talent and ability we have is a gift from God. If God blessed you with more innate intelligence, health, strength, or coordination than another, this is not your doing; why then should you act as if you are superior? If you mock others, you are not only insulting them, but also their Maker. If you laughed at a painting and made fun of it, would this not deeply insult the artist who painted it?

Mean, hurtful words are often expressed when we become angry. We all must pray and work to control our tempers. Uncontrolled anger is often destructive; if not physically, then mentally and emotionally. When angry, our language often becomes abusive. The Lord instructs us, "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Prov. 16:32).

Read that which James writes about the tongue in the suggested reading for this meditation. The gift of language is a special gift of God. It is one of the traits that distinguish us from animals, and it is one of the ways we reflect something of God, of His image. But we can use words in heavenly or in devilish ways. We can use words in Christ-like ways, speaking truthfully, lovingly, tenderly, and caringly for the good of others. Or we can use words in Satan-like ways of speaking in untruthful, hateful, and harmful ways to destroy others.

Pray, strive, and develop your ability, habits, and character to speak in a more Christ-like fashion for the building up of others.

Read Matthew 5:21–22. How is Jesus seriously warning us in these verses about controlling our anger and not using cruel words? Why do you think Jesus and James use such strong language when teaching and warning us about the words we use?

RESPONDING TO CRUEL WORDS OR ACTIONS

How should I respond when someone says or does really mean things to me?

Suggested Reading: Matthew 5:38–48

A young soldier was cruelly bullied and mocked by another for being a Christian. One night after a long march in the rain and mud, the Christian soldier knelt to pray at his bedside and was hit on his back and head by something; the bully, with loud laughter, had thrown his muddy boots at him. The next morning, however, the bully found his boots at his bedside, neatly cleaned and perfectly polished. This act changed things. The bully could no longer enjoy cruelly teasing the Christian soldier and the bullying stopped.

Living out of a charitable spirit and showing unconditional love is challenging for all of us. It is difficult when others, in our opinion, do not deserve it. It is hardest when the person has mistreated us by unprovoked, cruel words or actions. To really respond with charity from our hearts, we need God's grace.

When Jesus provided us with examples of how to show unconditional love, He gave two scenarios that would have been very challenging for the Jews of His day. Reflect on the suggested reading above. The "smiting" referred to was an insulting hit, a "slap with an open hand," not hitting with a fist. It means a slap in the face. Also, Roman soldiers had the

authority to force the Jews, and others under their rule, to carry their loads for one mile. It was very humiliating and insulting for a Jew to be treated like this. They were forced to do the work of a slave for the Romans who they hated ruling over them. You can be sure that a Jew did not carry a load one step beyond what he was compelled to do!

Yet it is exactly those times when we are unjustly insulted and humiliated that provide wonderful opportunities for the truth of the gospel to shine in and through us. The polished boots, the turned cheek, the offering to carry the load for a second mile—these would all clearly draw the attention of unbelievers. Seeing unconditional love in action causes the unbeliever to think, Why do Christians do this? Why do they respond like that? In times of persecution, the world often witnessed persecuted Christians responding with unconditional love. They heard Christians' charitable words and saw their forgiving actions. In times of persecution many unbelievers were converted to Christianity and the church grew both in quantity and quality. A "living gospel sermon" is often the most powerful kind!

Why is a "living gospel sermon" often so powerful? Is your life, by God's grace, sending such a message? How is Jesus the perfect example, as well as the necessary source of strength, for you to be a "living gospel sermon"?



IN EVERYTHING GIVE THANKS

“In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Ever since you were little, your parents have taught you to say “thank you” when you receive something. You might think they are just teaching you to be polite. But there is much more to being thankful than saying, “thank you.”

Paul tells us it is God’s will that we thank Him in everything. “In everything?” you ask. “I can see thanking Him for things that I like, but do I have to thank Him for things that I don’t like, too?” Yes, everything means everything.

Let me tell you a story about our niece Tori. When she was five, she was attacked by some dogs and was bitten many times. She almost died. But God saved her life through wonderful nurses and doctors. She was in a children’s hospital in Toronto. She told some of the other sick children about Jesus Christ, whom she loves very much. Some of them also loved Him, but some did not. Tori told her mom, “I would rather have these wounds on my body and have Jesus in my heart, than have no injuries and no pain and no Jesus.” How could Tori say that when she had pieces of flesh and muscle missing from her legs? How could she endure having over 300 stitches all over her body?

No one likes hard times. When you have something bad happen to you, like losing a pet or someone being mean to you, it hurts. We might wonder why God doesn’t just give us pleasant things, since He is able to do that. Wouldn’t that make us very thankful? No, actually it would make us spoiled. We are sinners, and if we got everything we wanted, we would just keep wanting more. We would never be happy. God knows our hearts, so He sends hard times. Maybe school is hard for you. Maybe your family is poor. Maybe your parents argue. Whatever is happening, God knows about it. It feels like He is pushing you away, but He is really pulling you towards Him. He says, “Come unto

me all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). God is speaking to you! He is calling you with a loud voice, saying, “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me” (Psalm 50:15). God has His arms open, ready to help you. If you run away from Him, your bad things will get worse and your heart will be in darkness. But if you run to Him, your bad things will turn into blessings.

How does He help? By teaching you that He is holy and you are a sinner. When you repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, He fills your heart with love, peace, and thankfulness. Ask for the Holy Spirit. God promises Him to those who ask. Then you will realize that every good gift comes from the Lord and that you don’t deserve His gifts. This will make you truly thankful in your heart. Then when God helps you get through your difficulties or takes them away, you love Him and want to honor Him.

Tori is nine years old now. She has scars. She receives much comfort knowing that her best friend, Jesus Christ, has scars, too. His scars prove that He went through very hard times; He understands your pain. His scars show that He took the punishment we sinners deserve, even though He is sinless. Because of His scars, the bad things in your life can turn into very good things. Pray and read the Bible. Ask Him for the gift of Himself, then everything will be good after that, even the bad things. Tori tells her parents, “Don’t be sad this happened. God had a plan; how can we go against it? Look at how much we have learned and how our faith has been strengthened!”

In everything give thanks. Thanksgiving Day is one day, but if we are Christians, every day is Thanksgiving Day. And heaven will be a Thanksgiving Day that never ends.

Mary Beeke is a homemaker, wife of the editor, and member of the Grand Rapids Heritage Reformed Congregation.

THANKSGIVING

To be thankful is something that should come easy to us as Christians. But does it? Are you often thankful; or only once in a while? It is good to have a National Day of Thanksgiving, but it is better to be thankful every day as we sing of in Psalter 251, Psalm 92:

*It is good to sing Thy praises and to thank Thee, O Most High,
Showing forth Thy loving-kindness when the morning lights the sky.
It is good when night is falling of Thy faithfulness to tell,
While with sweet, melodious praises songs of adoration swell.*

This puzzle is to help you find out a bit more about biblical Thanksgiving.

1. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 we find the reason *why* we should be thankful. "For this is the _____ in Christ Jesus concerning you."
2. We also find in this text in what *circumstances* we should be thankful. "In _____ give thanks."
3. Who is it we give thanks to? 1 Corinthians 15:57: "But thanks be to _____, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."
4. Which two words are used in Psalm 100:4 to express thanksgiving? "Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with _____: be thankful unto him, and _____ his name."
5. What are the reasons for giving thanks to the Lord? Psalm 26:7: "That I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving, and _____ of all thy _____."
6. Psalm 92:2 gives two more reasons for giving thanks and praise to the Lord. "To shew forth thy _____ in the morning, and thy _____ every night."
7. When we praise and thank the Lord we make much of God. What is the word used in Ps. 69:30? "I will praise the name of God with a song, and will _____ him with thanksgiving."
8. When we praise and thank the Lord we do not boast of ourselves, but we boast of the Lord. What is the word used here in Psalm 86:12? "I will praise thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart: and I will _____ thy name for evermore."
9. Thanksgiving should be a large part of our daily quiet time with the Lord. Fill in the words of Philippians 4:6 that speak about the things we do in our quiet time *with thanksgiving*, "Be careful for nothing; but in everything by _____ and _____ with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God."
10. What is the word used in Colossians 2:7 that shows that we should *always* be *very* thankful? "Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, _____ therein with thanksgiving."
11. Till when will we show the Lord our thanksgiving? Revelation 7:12 "Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for _____ and _____ Amen."

Ask the Lord to help you be always thankful for His goodness in your life. To help you see that even in the most difficult of times, He is your Refuge, your Help, and He will guide you in the right way. Trust Him.

ANSWERS TO LAST MONTH'S PUZZLE

PART 1	4. precepts	PART 2	4. hid	8. meditate
1. law	5. statutes	1. keep	5. teach	9. delight, not forget
2. testimonies	6. commandments	2. taking heed	6. declared	
3. ways	7. judgments	3. sought	7. rejoiced	

The Thorn

STORY FOR CHILDREN | ANDREA SCHOLTEN

Jane Stevens held out her hand to her mother. “It hurts!” she exclaimed as her mom gently pulled out the thorn. Jane had been picking blueberries from their garden when she had reached into the middle of a bush and had grabbed a thorny plant instead. “What is that big of a thorn doing in the middle of the blueberries anyway?” she asked her mom.

“I’m not sure how I missed it when weeding, but that’s certainly no place for a thorn. I’ll deal with it as soon as I can.” Mom smiled. “Here’s some cream and a Band-Aid. You’ll soon feel as good as new.”

Sure enough, Jane’s hand soon felt better and when her cousin Lucy ran over to play that afternoon, she had totally forgotten about the thorn. The two girls eagerly ran to the backyard, excited to have a whole afternoon of play ahead of them. But a short hour later, however, Jane came into the house looking grumpy, and Lucy was not with her.

“Where is Lucy?” asked Jane’s mom.

“She’s gone home,” Jane answered in an annoyed tone.

“Really? I thought that she had come to spend the afternoon.”

“She didn’t want to stay any longer,” said Jane, hurrying away. Jane’s mom said nothing but when Jane later came downstairs with a tear-stained face, she took her daughter aside and asked her what had happened. Soon the whole story spilled out.

“While we were playing in the garden,” Jane said unhappily, “I asked Lucy to go across the fence and gather wildflowers with me. But she didn’t want to go, because she wanted to play with my new doll. She said that she had come on purpose just to play with that doll. I got angry at her and said that I wasn’t going to take my doll out that afternoon at all, and then she said that if I was going to be so angry, she would just go home. I told her she wouldn’t actually go home, and then she said she would, and so she marched out of the garden. I thought

she was tricking me, but then she really did run home. I was so angry at her, but now I feel sad.”

“Well,” said Jane’s mom slowly, “it looks like the thorns having been pricking people again.”

Jane looked at her mom, puzzled. “We didn’t go near the thorn this time.”

“No, but just like the garden is no place for a thorn, so friendship is no place for such unkindness. Lucy was your guest, and she was naturally excited to play with your new doll. But you were just thinking about what you wanted to do instead of making her visit a happy one. And so she has left very unhappy, just like the thorn left you very unhappy this morning. But what’s worse, a thorn in the hand or a thorn in the heart?”

“A thorn in the heart,” Jane said as a tear slipped down her cheek.

“But guess what?” her mom smiled. “I dug up that ugly prickly thorn this very afternoon. And you can dig up your thorns, too. Ask God to forgive your sin and also to fight against the ugly thorn of unkindness. You can let it grow, or, with God’s help, you can pull it up. What do you want to do?”

Jane looked at her mom seriously and replied, “I will try to get rid of it, Mom. I don’t want such ugly feelings inside of me.”

Jane’s mom hugged her tightly. “I’m glad. But remember, one time of digging won’t be enough. Just like thorns keep popping up in our gardens, so sin will keep coming back. We need to be watchful and not careless. I never even noticed the thorn in our garden and so it grew bigger and bigger! We need the Lord to give us eyes to see our sins and the strength to keep pulling them up. He is always willing to help the needy.”

Andrea Scholten is a school teacher, a writer for children, and a member of the HRC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This article is adapted from *The Little Girl’s Treasury*, compiled by Annie Brooks. Choteau: Gospel Mission Press, 1980.





and announcements

Obituary notices, church events, and marriage and anniversary notices will be printed free of charge and under no obligation of a gift received. Other announcements and/or requests will be approved by the editorial committee on an individual basis as received.

INSTALLATION OF REV. BARTEL ELSHOUT IN HULL, IOWA HRC

September 25, 2016, was a memorable day for the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Iowa, for on this Lord's Day Rev. Bartel Elshout was installed as her third pastor. The Hull congregation had been vacant since 2012 upon the departure of Rev. Michael Fintelman who had served us for seven years. Since that time, nine pastoral calls extended by the congregation had been declined. Though the congregation was faithfully served by other pastors during the time of her vacancy, there was much prayer that the day would come that the vacant pulpit of Hull would again be filled.

That prayer was answered when on July 3, 2016, Rev. Elshout accepted the call extended to him. Providentially he had already been serving the congregation since his marriage to Clarice Van Beek, the widow of Gerald Van Beek who for many years served the congregation faithfully as elder. The growing bond of mutual love culminated in the extension and acceptance of a pastoral call. Sunday, September 25, 2016, was therefore a joyful day when, during the morning service, Dr. Joel R. Beeke installed Rev. Elshout as the pastor of our congregation. The text for this installation service was 2 Corinthians 6:8-10. The theme of the sermon was "The Ministry's Beautiful Paradox," and Dr. Beeke then developed this theme by focusing on the following points: 1. Recognizing it; 2. Rejecting it; 3. Rejoicing in it; and 4. The reality behind it. After Dr. Beeke gave him his ministerial charge, Rev. Elshout committed himself to his pastoral charge by answering affirmatively to the prescribed questions. After this service, members and visitors were given the opportunity to express their best wishes to Rev. and Mrs. Elshout.

During the evening service, Rev. Elshout preached his inaugural message from Acts 4:12. The theme of the sermon, "Salvation for Sinners," was developed in three points: 1. A salvation that is in Christ alone; 2. A salvation revealed in Christ's Name; and 3. A salvation that is a divine must. Following the sermon, Rev. Elshout spoke a personal word to the consistory and congregation of Hull, as well as to visitors, family members, his children, and his wife. Dr. Beeke then addressed Rev. Elshout on behalf of the Heritage Reformed Congregations, after which Elder Doug Post addressed both him and the congregation on behalf of the consistory. Rev. Elshout concluded this service by pronouncing the blessing upon the congregation as her own pastor.

As we reflect on this special day, we are humbled by the evident manifestation of the Lord's grace and lovingkindness toward our congregation in providing us again with our own pastor. It is our fervent prayer that the divine must that has directed Rev. Elshout to become the shepherd of our flock will

culminate in abundant fruit upon his ministry among us—all to the glory of our triune God.

—The Consistory of the Hull, Iowa HRC

The full and correct address of our pastor:

Rev. Bartel Elshout

311 E. Diagonal Street, Inwood, IA 51240-7755

Tel.: 1-712-753-4751 (Home) Tel.: 1-712-451-9302 (Cell)

E-mail: belshout@gmail.com

TEACHERS NEEDED

HERITAGE REFORMED CHRISTIAN SCHOOL is accepting teaching applications for possible openings for the 2016-2017 school year. Interested K-6 applicants should contact Mr. John Zomer at (605) 359-7206 or email (johnz@zomertrucks.com). HRCS is a multi-grade classroom setting that is located in Rock Valley, Iowa. You may also visit the school's website at heritagereformedschool.com.

JORDAN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL (near St. Catharines, Ontario) is a small but energetic JK-12 learning community nestled in the heart of Niagara wine country. We are presently seeking applicants for a grade 1/2 combined classroom for a maternity leave from November 2016 to June 2017, with the possibility of further employment in the coming year. The successful applicant will be an energetic and motivated team player who inspires young students to learn. You will be committed to a Reformed worldview while preparing students with the fundamental skills for further learning; you will be comfortably versatile with technology and will bring skills that complement our present teaching team. Please include with your application, your philosophy of education, and a statement of faith. All submissions will be carefully considered. Please send your application to the attention of Mr. Mark Fintelman at principal@ourjcs.ca or Mr. Paul Wagenaar at wagenaarpaulw@gmail.com.

PLYMOUTH CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS HRC TEACHERS' CONFERENCE

Educators and others who are interested are invited to attend the HRC Teachers' Conference at Plymouth Christian High School scheduled for February 16-17, 2017.

The theme of the conference is "What Doth the LORD Require of Thee?" with a variety of topics to help equip teachers to train children in the biblical worldview including:

The Task: *What doth the LORD require of thee?*

The Need: *How can we help our students maintain a compassionate biblical worldview in the face of an abandoned culture?*

The Preparation: *Tools for Bible study*

The Students: *Who are we teaching?*

The Challenge: *How do we ensure that what we teach is important?*

Breakout sessions include: Biblical Worldview Tools, Biblical Worldview Discussion, and Banish Bullying/Cultivate Kindness.

For further information, please see the school website: plymouthchristianschools.org (choose "Information" then "Teachers' Conference" tabs) or use this link: <http://www.plymouthchristianschools.org/teachers-conference>.

RENEWAL AND GIFT SUBSCRIPTIONS

Most subscriptions to *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* expire with the November/December 2016 issue. Please forward your renewal in the envelope provided prior to January 15 to avoid missing future issues (unless your church provides payment).

Subscription rates for 2017 have remained unchanged. As the rates fall below costs incurred, donations remain indispensable. As in former years, we are trusting that many of you will be able to assist with smaller or larger gifts to enable us to continue keeping our subscription rates low.

Our appreciation is also extended to those of you who have donated generously for free subscriptions to seminaries, pastors, and prisoners. Please consider doing so again this year. If we had more donations for this purpose, we would be able to reach many more church leaders and prisoners with Reformed, experiential truth.

Please also prayerfully consider providing your friends with a gift subscription to the *BSGT*. That would be an excellent way to spread the Reformed faith and at the same time assist us in keeping our subscription prices as low as they are.

Finally, heartfelt gratitude to all who have assisted in providing material for *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*: our ministerial brothers, assistant editors, and others for their timely contributions; our subscription manager; our typesetters, secretaries, and printer; and our *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* Committee. Without you, this task would not be completed each issue. Above all, may God command His blessing upon this work to many hearts—saving the lost, edifying His people, and glorifying His worthy name. For this, we are totally dependent on His free and sovereign grace.

—JRB

O Jesu! King of wondrous might!
O Victor, glorious from the fight!
Sweetness that may not be expressed,
And altogether loveliest!

Remain with us, O Lord, today!
In every heart Thy grace display;
That now the shades of night are fled,
On Thee our spirits may be fed.

All honor, laud and glory be,
O Jesu, virgin-born, to Thee!
All glory, as is ever meet,
To Father and to Paraclete.

—BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

RENEW NOW!

RENEW NOW SO AS NOT TO MISS 2017 ISSUES

- Please renew my subscription to *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* for 2017. Payment is enclosed.
- Enclosed please find payment for _____ gift subscriptions. Names and addresses of the gift subscriptions are enclosed.
- Enclosed please find a donation for a gift subscription for _____ prisoners.
- Please charge my VISA/MC: # _____
Exp. Date _____ Signature _____

Subscription price: \$25.00 in the United States; \$30.00 in Canada, payable in U.S. funds. To foreign countries \$35.00 (surface mail) or \$65.00 (air mail), payable in U.S. funds. (\$36.00 for *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* on CD.) As rates for North America do not cover expenses incurred, donations are most welcome. (Back issues are \$4.25 each.)

Name _____
Street _____
City _____
State/Province/Country _____ Zip/Postal Code _____

Mail to: **THE BANNER OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH**
540 Crescent St. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 U.S.A.

BOUND COPIES OF "BANNER OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH"

Once again, we make available to our *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* readership the possibility of purchasing bound copies of this periodical. Please place a check in the box corresponding to the option(s) in which you are interested and forward to the subscription manager by January 31, 2017.

- Enclosed please find \$30.00 for the binding of the 2016 issues of the *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*. My six issues are enclosed.
- Enclosed please find \$50.00 (\$30.00 for binding and \$20.00 for a set of six issues) for a bound copy of the six 2016 issues of the *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*.
- I would like to pre-order a bound set of 2017 issues of the *Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth*. Please put my name on reserve, and I will forward you \$50.00 upon receiving the bound volume in early 2018, D.V.
- Please charge my VISA/MC: # _____
Exp. Date _____ Signature _____

Name _____
Street _____
City _____
State/Province/Country _____ Zip/Postal Code _____

Mail to: **THE BANNER OF SOVEREIGN GRACE TRUTH**
540 Crescent St. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503 U.S.A.

NATIONAL NEWS**THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH'S SURPRISING ANNOUNCEMENT**

For 40 years, the United Methodist Church has supported the Supreme Court's infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision—that is, until their September General Conference.

Delegates of the country's third-largest religious body voted 445 to 310 to repeal the official resolution supporting the case establishing a constitutional "right" to abortion during its General Conference. They also voted to sever its affiliation with the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC), an interfaith organization co-founded by the United Methodist Church.

The RCRC advocates for abortion without restrictions—the legal killing of *any* pre-born child for *any* reason at *any* point during pregnancy. The group even supports partial-birth and sex-selection abortion, and promotes rituals to bless the work of abortion clinics.

"You can begin to see why it's big news for the UMC to take two big leaps towards a complete pro-life position. Pregnant, abortion-minded women within the Methodist denomination may now reconsider their decision," says Jim Daly of Focus on the Family. "But beyond that, it's also important for the sake of the Gospel that the United Methodist Church moves to a position that's more faithful to biblical truth regarding the sanctity of human life."

INTERNATIONAL NEWS**CUBA: CHRISTIANS FACING THREATS, CHURCHES BEING BURNED**

ChristianToday.com reports that Christians in Cuba are experiencing escalated threats due to their faith. Rev. Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso stated that "the threat of physical violence...comes with the territory of being a Christian" in Cuba.

Although Cuba's constitution guarantees religious freedom, this hasn't deterred the government from targeting Christians. From January to July 2016, there were 1,606 recorded violations of religious freedom in the country. These violations included destruction of churches, church property, and arbitrary arrests of Christians.

Barroso said Christians face "the problem of destroying or even burning things inside the building; not to mention, the threat of physical violence that comes with the territory of being a Christian in Cuba."

Despite the threats, however, Barroso remains hopeful for Christians in Cuba. "The reason the government sometimes tries to silence the Church or to close down church buildings is because it is worried about how many people are turning away from the state and looking to God (and the church) for answers and for hope," he said. (Veronica Neffinger | Editor, *ChristianHeadlines.com*)

BELGIUM SEES FIRST CASE OF MINOR BEING GRANTED EUTHANASIA

A terminally ill minor has been helped to die in Belgium for the first time since the country did away with age restrictions on euthanasia two years ago. Belgium is the only country that allows minors of any age assistance in dying. In Holland, the lower age limit for euthanasia is 12 years.

The Belgian law has several rules for the euthanasia to be approved. It requires the minor to be in the final stages of a terminal illness, to understand the difference between life and death rationally, and to have asked to end his or her life on repeated occasions.

It also requires parental consent and finally the approval of two doctors, including a psychiatrist. The law—one of the most far-reaching in the Western world—had wide public support when it was introduced in 2014, but was opposed by some pediatricians and the country's Roman Catholic clergy. (*OneNewsNow*)

PERSECUTION FOCUS**HUNGARY OPENS OFFICE TO ADDRESS CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION**

Hungary, which has during the past year come under pressure for its handling of Europe's mass migration crisis, has become the first government to open an office specifically to address the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Europe. "Today, Christianity has become the most persecuted religion, where out of five people killed [for] religious reasons, four of them are Christians," says Hungary's Minister for Human Capacities, Zoltan Balog. "In 81 countries around the world, Christians are persecuted, and 200 million Christians live in areas where they are discriminated against. Millions of Christian lives are threatened by followers of radical religious ideologies."

Hungary's new office will have a starting budget of US \$3.35 million. Minister Balog said it is of the "utmost importance" to help persecuted Christians, to raise international awareness of their "untenable situation," and to coordinate humanitarian efforts.

The move sets a precedent on the international stage. It comes after Hungary's right-wing conservative Prime Minister, Victor Orban, drew criticism in the EU by saying Europe should focus on helping Christians before helping millions of "Islamic people" coming into Europe. "If we really want to help, we should help where the real problem is.... We should first help the Christian people before Islamic people," Orban said.

Orban's government has campaigned against an EU plan to spread some of the burden of the influx of migrants and refugees by requiring member states to accept quotas: he's called a referendum in October at which voters are expected overwhelmingly to back the government and reject any future quotas. (*World Watch Monitor*)

IRAN: CHRISTIAN REVIVAL SWEEPING COUNTRY DESPITE PERSECUTION

Iran is experiencing a Christian revival despite the Christian persecution that exists there, reports ChristianToday.com. Gathering together to worship the Lord is prohibited in Iran, but that isn't stopping God from working. Many believers are connecting with a Christian community online. "The main church is my house, and through the Internet I connect to everybody," said one believer named Reza. "That's why it's become like an Internet church." Through the internet, believers connect to churches in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Malaysia via Skype.

In 1994, there were about 100,000 believers in Iran. Currently, the number has risen to about three million, despite the fact that persecution against Christians has also increased, and Iran is ranked ninth on Open Doors World Watch List for Christian persecution. Reza urged Christians around the world to pray for believers in Iran. "I'm just begging, really, from the other believers, from other sisters and brothers from all over the world, to pray for Iran and to all the people of Iran to find God and be familiar with God, (and) with Jesus Christ," he said. (*ChristianHeadlines.com*)

CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY? (5)

WHAT AM I?

Am I purely biological? Am I body and mind? Am I a soul captured by some dust? Am I the same person as I was ten years ago, even though my physical appearance, my character, and my preferences are different now? Will I cease to exist at death? What is a human?

Can Paul help us answer these basic philosophical questions? A survey of his letter to the Colossians will tell.

What Paul Says

Paul is clear: as part of all things, people were created by Christ and for Christ (1:16). People's lives are maintained only because all things hold together in Christ (1:17).

This unifies who people are. All people have been given their senses, consciences, and consciousness in order to live for God. While humans have created categories to identify race, status, and cultures, Paul shows the church that Christ, who is all and in all, binds all these categories together in unity, erasing all such human distinctions (3:11). Though unique in body and personalities (2:5) and minds (3:2) and roles (3:18), God does not discriminate (3:25), and He expects all people to be treated justly and fairly (4:1).

Paul is also clear that people, as they are born, are alienated from God and are hostile in their minds, doing evil deeds (1:21). They are apart from God, dead in their own trespasses with a great debt towards Him (2:13–14). In their hostility to God, people have earthly tendencies including sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires, and covetousness (3:5).

Yet, people can be redeemed from that state of corruption to a new state of reconciliation to Christ (1:20). They can be raised with Christ (2:11–12; 3:1) and renewed in the image of their Creator (3:10). The Father has qualified the elect and brought Christians into light from darkness—into the kingdom of His Son from having no inheritance whatsoever (1:12–13). Believers then can be called saints and brothers in Christ (1:2).



Because of this hope, people are worth encouraging and praying for (1:2–3, 9). They are capable of understanding revelation (1:5–7), can grow (1:9), and can be strengthened by spiritual power (1:11–12). They can know the hope of glory (1:27). People can reach assurance (2:2), and desire to live as God's servants to others (4:12).

While people are free to enjoy the joys of life (2:18), they are to live discerningly (4:2). They are to be established in the faith and not be taken captive by vain thinking (2:6–8). They are called to have love for Christ and the saints (1:4, 8). They are to walk worthy of the Lord and are to bear fruit (1:10). They are to act according to their own conscience in regard to the Old Testament requirements (2:16). Christians are called to be holy and beloved, with compassionate hearts; full of kindness, meekness, and patience; forgiving one another (3:12–13). They are to live in relationship to others, acting out of love for others (4:3–5).

Ultimately, people do not belong to themselves but to God, and are to live for Him (3:23–25). Then those in Christ will appear with Christ at the end of time, and live with Him in eternal glory (3:4).

What Paul is Responding to

In a sense, Paul's description of the person was a response to the influence of Judaism on the Colossian church (see 2:11; 2:16; 3:11).¹ He was reminding the Colossians they were not to fall to any "external pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their Jewish and pagan neighbors."² Rather, they were to see people the way God sees them. The way to salvation was, and still is, not through escaping one's self or distinguishing one's self from others. Rather, "he who knows Christ has found deliverance from the evil lurking in his own soul."³

The Implication for Christian Philosophy

So how should Christians concerned with a Christocentric philosophy view themselves? Because Christ created all people, then the evolutionary tale of survival of the fittest has no place in a Christian way of thinking. People are not animals. They have a distinct divine origin, were created in the image of God, and can enjoy fellowship with God.⁴ Because Christ made people for His glory, the minimization of people to whatever they can produce or contribute has no place in the Christian way of thinking. Because people are called to live for Him, the simplistic way of seeing people as biological material without a soul is simply wrong. While memory places a large role in the secular world's definition of personal identity, it is the Christians' identity in Christ that should define who they are and how they live.⁵

1. L.M. McDonald, "Colossae," in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 225.

2. O'Brien, "Colossians," 148.

3. Holmes, *Christianity and Philosophy*, 27.

4. Plantinga, *Christian Philosophy*, 58.

5. Terence Penelhum, "Personal Identity," in Edwards, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 6:100–106.

Rev. David VanBrugge is a pastor of the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Feel free to email him: dvanbrugge@gmail.com.