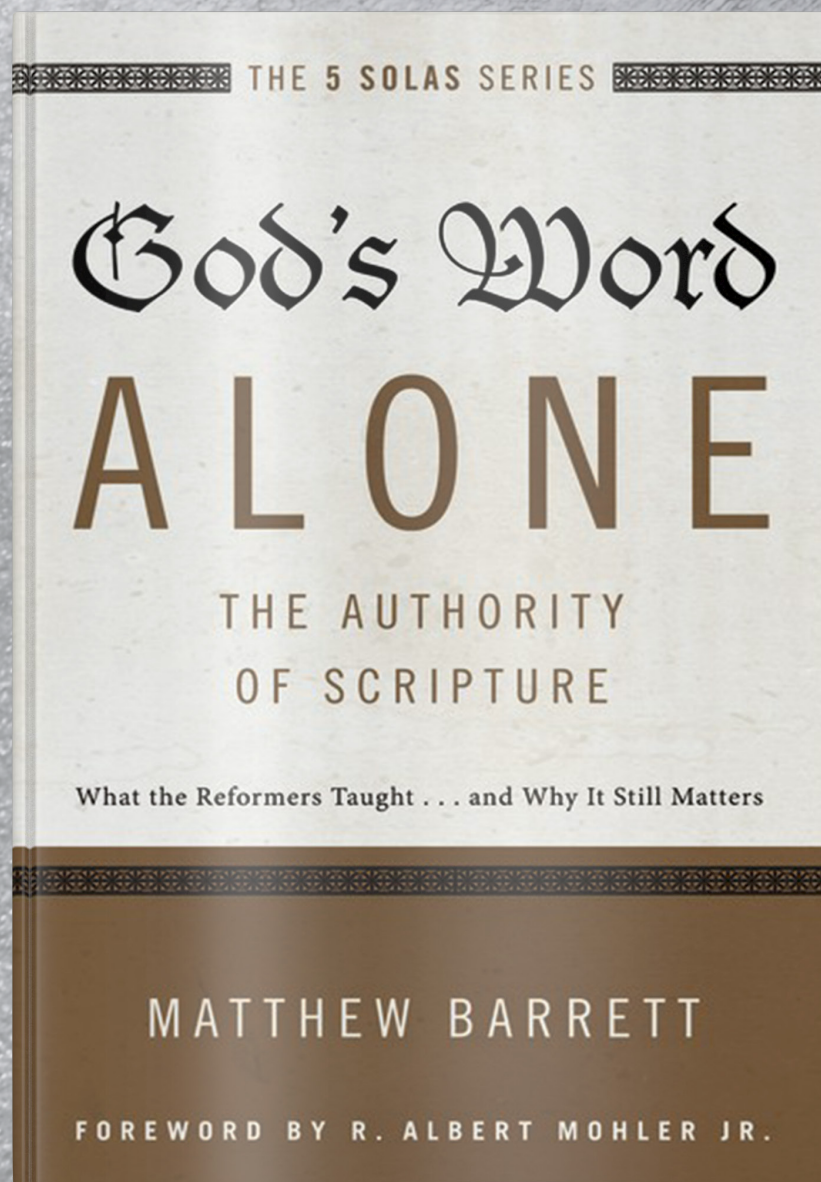


# CREDO

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— I —



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Say the word “doctrine” in church and you will get some strange looks. Say it again and you will find yourself sitting all alone. For many Christians today doctrine seems miles removed from real life in the church. Doctrine is for academics that spend their time speculating in their ivory towers. It’s the stuff of the head, but Christians are to be concerned with matters of the heart. Plus, shouldn’t we just stick to reading the Bible anyway?

Perhaps this will come as a surprise to some, but the Bible is doctrine’s number one fan. In fact, for Jesus and the apostles doctrine was everything. It really mattered. Entering the kingdom of God, a proper understanding of the gospel, and a real relationship with the living God all hinge upon one’s doctrinal beliefs concerning the character of God, the heinousness of sin, the divine identity of Christ, and the nature of the cross.

Doctrine is so important to the biblical authors that Paul told Titus to teach only what “accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). And when Paul spelled out the qualifications to become an elder in the church, an ability to teach biblical doctrine was at the top of the list. “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

In this issue of *Credo Magazine*, several pastors and theologians help us understand just how much doctrine matters for the Christian life and for the church. We will discover that doctrine infiltrates the songs we sing, the sermons we preach, and the way we counsel each other as disciples of Christ. We will learn that nothing could be more critical to a right relationship with God and others than sound doctrine. Whether we realize it or not, doctrine is a way of life. The Christian life depends entirely upon sound doctrine. In short, doctrine matters. ◀

**Matthew Barrett**  
Executive Editor

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# 10 QUESTIONS WITH LELAND RYKEN

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Leland Ryken's love for the classics, the Puritans, British gardens, and the St. Louis Cardinals is contagious

Leland Ryken is Emeritus Professor of English at Wheaton College, where he has continued to teach part-time since his official retirement in 2012. He also continues to publish and speak. He is the author of numerous books, including *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, *A Christian's Guide to the Classics*, and *How to Read the Bible as Literature*. Recently he has written a new biography of J. I. Packer with Crossway called *J. I. Packer: An Evangelical Life*.

**I** **Your career has been a bridge between two disciplines: English and the literature of the Bible. Many of our readers may be pleasantly surprised to learn that it is possible to integrate two disciplines like you**

**have. Others may be skeptical. Reflecting on your own career, how have you seen students benefit by holding English literature in one hand and the Bible in the other?**

I tell my students that a very fruitful two-way street exists between literature and the Bible. On the one hand, knowing the Bible enables us to see much more in literature than we would otherwise see, partly because the Bible is the greatest source and influence for English and American literature. I agree with Northrop Frye, towering literary critic from a bygone era, that the Bible should form the foundation for literary education. Traveling the other way, our knowledge of literature makes us better readers of the Bible because the Bible is a

very literary book that at the level of form and technique requires that it be read as we read ordinary literature. People would handle the Bible so more skillfully if they simply applied what they know about stories and poems in general to the Bible. Martin Luther was of the same opinion, incidentally, saying that by the study of literature “people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily.”

## 2

**Pastors tend to limit themselves to reading the Bible and books about the Bible. Can a pastor (and his preaching) benefit from reading English literature?**

Acquaintance with English literature instills a grasp of literary form and technique and thereby improves a preacher’s ability to interact with the biblical text, which regularly employs literary techniques. One reason preachers often reduce the Bible to a set of ideas is that they do not know how to interact with a literary text. Additionally, the subject of literature is human experience as we live it, and contact with literature can awaken the voice of authentic human experience that is often lacking from the pulpit.

Out of the abundance of one’s reading the minister speaks, and much of the time our ministers speak from a somewhat sterile world of Bible commentaries and religious books. The pastors at the church where I attend regularly publish blurbs on “my summer reading” or “books I am currently reading” in the church newsletter, and virtually all of the books are expository books dealing with religion or leadership rather than works of imaginative literature. This saddens me because it represents a missed opportunity.

**If you could recommend just three “classics” every Christian should read, what would they be and why?**

I wrote my dissertation on John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, so naturally I am partial toward it. It embodies a Christian view of reality in a work of high art. C. S. Lewis gave me the formula “line-by-line deliciousness,” and *Paradise Lost* has it.

Secondly, since Shakespeare is the greatest English author, and since his tragedies are the highest expression of his genius, I think a reader should master at least one of the following three plays—*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*.

Thirdly, as a Christian critique of modern culture, Leo Tolstoy’s novelette *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is hard to beat. I am partial toward it because my reading of it as a college sophomore was my first really intense experience of a Christian classic, showing me how Christian experience can be embodied in imaginative literature. There is a sense in which it did for me what George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* did for C. S. Lewis: it baptized my imagination.

**Your most recent book is a biography on J. I. Packer [Crossway]. Packer has been massively influential in the lives of many Christians today. Tell us, then, what will be his single most important legacy that he leaves behind?**

Packer is too large a figure to enable me to identify a single legacy, so I will name five areas in which Packer helped chart the direction of evangelical Christianity for at least half a century.

**OUR KNOWLEDGE OF LITERATURE MAKES US BETTER READERS OF THE BIBLE BECAUSE THE BIBLE IS A VERY LITERARY BOOK THAT AT THE LEVEL OF FORM AND TECHNIQUE REQUIRES THAT IT BE READ AS WE READ ORDINARY LITERATURE. PEOPLE WOULD HANDLE THE BIBLE SO MORE SKILLFULLY IF THEY SIMPLY APPLIED WHAT THEY KNOW ABOUT STORIES AND POEMS IN GENERAL TO THE BIBLE. MARTIN LUTHER WAS OF THE SAME OPINION, INCIDENTALLY, SAYING THAT BY THE STUDY OF LITERATURE “PEOPLE ARE WONDERFULLY FITTED FOR THE GRASPING OF SACRED TRUTH AND FOR HANDLING IT SKILLFULLY AND HAPPILY.**

(1) He defended the authority of the Bible and encouraged Christians to make it central in their lives.

(2) He represented a conservative and traditional voice in the face of liberalizing trends in society and the church.

(3) He elevated the common person and devoted his professional life to doing theology for the people of God (in the words of the title of a book published in his honor).

(4) He gave us a model of someone who did the task before him and left the results to God, as opposed to being a celebrity and cultivating a following.

(5) Packer made his contributions to the church chiefly through his publications, so we can say that his greatest legacy has been his published writings.

**5**

**You have also written on the Puritans. Aren't the Puritans just a bunch of “joy-kills,” always walking around looking to stamp out fun wherever it is found,**

**all in the name of godliness? Do you really think Christians today can benefit from these “worldly saints”?**

As the foundations of our culture continue to disintegrate around us, the Puritans become more attractive with every passing year. To begin, although the Puritans were serious people, they relished life in a way that we can emulate. They believed the right things and can thereby serve as a ballast for us against the aberrations of our day. If we hope to keep our bearings and sanity, one of the first things we should do is spend time reading the Puritans. They were godly people, and the very nature of our times pushes us in the direction of being secular people. I will speak personally in saying that we need all the help we can get to keep us on the path that leads to life; the Puritans can provide part of that help.

**This coming year will be your forty-ninth year of teaching at Wheaton College! Based on that experience, what word of advice would you give to professors at Christian colleges and seminaries?**

**6**

We live in inauspicious times for teachers, and I feel somewhat apologetic about having had my career before the secular assault on Christian education became the threat that it is today, and when students were more interested in learning than they are today. Within these reduced expectations, I think that teachers nonetheless need to continue to be idealists in regard to the possibility of making a difference in students' lives. The harvest is



less abundant than it once was, but a harvest is still possible. I would also encourage teachers not to abandon the traditional moorings of Christian education and culture. To adapt an axiom from T. S. Eliot, the past is where we start from.

7

**You've travelled a fair amount, including trips to England. For our readers looking to visit England, what three places would you say are a "must see" and why?**

Now that my Wheaton-in-England days are over, I am sometimes overwhelmed with nostalgia for the land of Britain. The places I miss most are the examples of cultivated nature as epitomized by British gardens and estates—Regent's Park in London, Penshurst Place in the Kentish countryside, Hampton Court in suburban London. The Lake District is of course a "must see" region.

I love the churches and sacred spaces of England, from Salisbury Cathedral (my favorite British cathedral) to "George Herbert's church" (as literary folk affectionately call it) at Bemerton, seating fifty people and located a few miles from Salisbury. The remains of the bombed-out Coventry Cathedral and some features of the interior of the new cathedral provide some of my most emotionally charged experiences in England. I also love literary sites—Milton's cottage, the Shakespeare sites in Stratford-upon-Avon, the Wordsworth houses in the Lake District.

8

**What is a permanent legacy that you picked up from your travels in England?**

My primary means of physical exercise is walking, and it started with my sojourns in England. Walking is also one of my primary contacts with nature,

and the British love of nature has always been very special.

**It's a rainy day and you have a fresh, hot cup of coffee. You have no grading to do, no meetings to attend. It's just you and your books. Tell us, what book are you just dying to read?**

I will make a confession: most of my reading grows out of either my teaching or my writing. I do not lament this, but the public does not fully realize that the person who does not compose books and essays and public addresses is often "better read" (as we ordinarily use that phrase) than the writer and speaker. With that as foundation, I will say that often I can't wait to get to the next source that will yield information for my current writing project. For at least a decade I have been compiling a list of "books to read in retirement," but to speak the truth, I have not yet gotten to it (though I have published more than a dozen books since my official retirement in 2012, most of them short books).

**Having lived in Wheaton, Illinois for so long, do you remember the golden days of Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls?**

The professional sports teams in Chicago have never lit my proverbial fire, but certainly the Michael Jordan era was a glorious one for anyone living in the Chicago area. I stand as tribute to the formative influence that one's place of origin and the athletic loyalties acquired in childhood exert throughout one's life. I have always been a St. Louis Cardinals fan, as are my son and his family. ■

9

10

**YOU ARE  
WHAT YOU THINK**  
**TEARING DOWN  
POPULAR THEOLOGICAL FALLACIES**

By  
David B. Garner

Every society has a rulebook, but living in one's birth culture creates a blind embrace of its practices, norms, and expectations. We believe certain things about speech, social cues, and even driving habits with little awareness of what we prize or *why* we prize it. Behavior witnessed outside the cultural rulebook tilts us off center, leading us to a myriad of responses including inexplicable indignation. Identifying underlying cultural assumptions often requires an international friend or a sociologist to hold up a mirror before our eyes. Even then we may resist its telling reflections.

The theological world is no different. There is much to celebrate in recent studies of ancient languages, Ancient Near East culture, Second Temple Judaism, and biblical theology. Volumes of publication have informed the Church usefully. But for all the good, theology possesses its own contemporary rulebook, which has adopted a number of fallacies. I hold up a mirror here for us to reflect on three of the most common ones.

### **Fallacy 1: All theology is tentative**

Like a riptide sweeping away even the Michael Phelps of theology, a societal vortex has snatched every confident voice from theological discourse. Theological statements, it is contended, *never can be certain*.

Such claims of theological uncertainty range from the mildly humorous—"Put 10 theologians in a room and get 17 opinions on a doctrine or a Scripture text"—to the sophisticated—as represented by the former Protestant turned Roman Catholic, sociologist Christian Smith, who sees in Protestant theology a "pervasive interpretive pluralism."

Smith's fancy shorthand expresses a desperate determination: the incompatibility of theologies, such as Arminianism and Calvinism, mandate theological uncertainty.

Evidently, we cannot trust our Bible, but not because, as classic liberalism argued, the Bible itself is untrustworthy. Rather because we are. The arguments go like this: "Bible reading requires Bible interpretation. Humans do Bible interpretation. Humans produce disparate interpretations." The conclusion? "All theological conclusions are inherently provisional." The logic is formulaic: Same Bible + Different Conclusions = Uncertainty.

Battle weary, yet longing for a foothold, most conservative Bible students stumble through the fog, hoping to land somewhere close to the truth. But in the journey, the demands for "epistemological modesty"—that allegedly essential framework for contemporary theological discourse—swallow all confidence whole. Inconclusiveness offers the only socially acceptable posture toward biblical doctrine. Some have even argued that the very desire for certainty exposes psychological dysfunction. Certainty is impossible; longing for it is personal weakness. So if you seek theological certainty, you may elicit an additional diagnosis for the next DSM: the PTC—Professing Theology as Certain Disorder.

For Smith, the apparently irreconcilable difference between Protestant theologies issued him divorce papers, so he left his Presbyterian heritage and wed himself to Rome. Our goal here is to critique neither Rome on authority and certainty, nor Smith on his new theological marriage. But note well. He has grossly (and confidently) overstated the disparate character of various evangelical theologies.

Yet we must ask whether his representative theological skepticism is necessary. Is all theology really tentative, inconclusive, and provisional? Should we operate at all times with a hermeneutic of doubt? Am I warped if I want certainty?

Epistemological modesty sounds so compelling, so humble, so godly. After all, which of us wants to claim we have the corner on truth? How can we really know *we* are right and someone else is wrong? Though such “humility” seems so right on the surface, a quicksand foundation lies beneath it. Consider the words of Deuteronomy 6:4–7, as an example:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

The Almighty expects us to keep his commands on our hearts and teach them to our children. How can we treasure them or teach them if we cannot really know them? Are we prepared to say that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob *may* be the *one* true God, who *may* want us to teach our children about the God who *may* be?

Would we dare infer that God is unable or unwilling to speak to us in words we understand? In either claim, we deny what God himself insists and defy him personally. The First Speaker in the universe intends that we understand his words, and even builds human accountability into what he

## IS ALL THEOLOGY REALLY TENTATIVE, INCONCLUSIVE, AND PROVISIONAL? SHOULD WE OPERATE AT ALL TIMES WITH A HERMENEUTIC OF DOUBT? AM I WARPED IF I WANT CERTAINTY?

says. Evidently, the Almighty does not deem his speech ambiguous.

In John 14:6, Jesus plainly affirms he is the *only* access to the God of heaven. Should we entertain his exclusivist assertions with skepticism? Are we prepared to say that Jesus *may* be *the* Way, *the* Truth, and *the* Life? When Paul insists on the core components of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1–3, does the key purpose and power of Jesus’s gospel work lack sufficient clarity for us to grip it with outright certainty? Would we contend that Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection *may* provide the forgiveness of our sins?

These questions do not deny interpretation of even the plainest of texts. Scripture does not make brute statements that circumvent our interpretive lenses. But human interpretation does not blockade certainty, because what God intends to communicate lucidly, he communicates lucidly. Our createdness and fallenness present no barrier to our kind and gracious Creator.

To be sure, Scripture does not reveal everything with equal clarity. *But* “. . . those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient un-

derstanding of them” (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.7). We dare not read pointed truth in Scripture and then object, “Did God actually say...?”

Sound familiar? It should. We have heard *that* question before! Using the tools of hermeneutical suspicion, the wily serpent (Gen. 3) inserted doubt in our first parents’ minds about God’s Word. Satan created confusion over the clear command of God; he blew smoke into clear blue sky. Note well: the hermeneutic of skepticism was the product of the enemy, not of God. Unbelief clouds the clear truths of Scripture. Faith lasers through the fog and understands.

## **Fallacy 2: Theological certainty is arrogance**

This fallacy draws immediately upon the prior one. The claim of comprehensive skepticism glides effortlessly from intellectual discourse to moral disdain. The hermeneutic of doubt offers humility as its moral defense.

Are you confident in your faith? If so, you are ar-

**USING THE TOOLS OF HERMENEUTICAL SUSPICION, THE WILY SERPENT [GEN. 3] INSERTED DOUBT IN OUR FIRST PARENTS’ MINDS ABOUT GOD’S WORD. SATAN CREATED CONFUSION OVER THE CLEAR COMMAND OF GOD; HE BLEW SMOKE INTO CLEAR BLUE SKY. NOTE WELL: THE HERMENEUTIC OF SKEPTICISM WAS THE PRODUCT OF THE ENEMY, NOT OF GOD. UNBELIEF CLOUDS THE CLEAR TRUTHS OF SCRIPTURE. FAITH LASERS THROUGH THE FOG AND UNDERSTANDS.**

rogant. Do you preach, “Thus says the Lord”? If so, you commit homiletical hubris. Do you hold personal theological convictions with, well...conviction? If so, your “holy” intolerance is wholly intolerable.

Note to self: never speak as if with unbending authority, for to do so is divisive, unkind, and even unchristian. Jesus would have us love, accept, and embrace all men, all thoughts, at all times. Calling one religion better, let alone claiming one as exclusively right, is to draw boundaries that alienate. Theology that divides or makes people uncomfortable lacks moral credibility. Dogmatism wounds. Ambiguity gently and kindly offers a safe place for all thinking.

Theological confidence, then, is not just inappropriate; it is repulsive. Again the logic is formulaic: Confidence = Arrogance. Uncertainty = Humility. Certainty and humility are incompatible in every way. Uncertainty tracks the moral high ground.

*But by whose judgment?*

Many have poked humorously at God’s Ten “Suggestions.” But any recasting of divine Word hardly amuses (God, anyway). Turning divine revelation into human possibility is no longer to speak for God, but to oppose him. Diminishing divine authority by so-called epistemological modesty is a tool of covenant rebellion against the God who has spoken. Moral opposition against dogmatism is not humble opposition, but a hellish distortion.

Ironically, in the world of “humble” uncertainty, new certainties boldly rule. The reigning certainty is global *uncertainty*. Its cousin *inclusivism* requires that the exclusivity of the gospel be *exclusively* excluded. If you are certain of your theology, you are naïve, stupid or an evil bigot. If you are certain of your uncertainty, you wisely and generously share sentimental drivel—what the contemporary world perversely calls love. May the words of Paul in Galatians 1:6–10 drive fear into our hearts over such distortion!

Further, to equivocate over that which God has spoken unequivocally is indefensible hubris! How

**IDEAS MATTER. THINKING SHAPES LIFE. JUST ASK OUR UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS. IN FACT, IDEAS YIELD THE SUB-STRUCTURES FOR VALUES, PRIORITIES, BELIEFS, CONVICTIONS, AND PRACTICES. WE ARE WHAT WE THINK. THIS PRINCIPLE BEGINS IN THE REALM OF THEOLOGY, THE QUEEN OF THE SCIENCES. WE ALL THINK ACCORDING TO A SYSTEM OF THEOLOGY. WE LIVE, CHOOSE, THINK, AND WORSHIP ACCORDING TO WHATEVER THEOLOGICAL SYSTEM GOVERNS OUR THOUGHT. TO THROW OUT THE REVEALED SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS TO REPLACE IT WITH ONE OF OUR OWN.**

humble is it to declare as *unclear* that which God has spoken clearly? To treat preaching of God’s Word as a conversation or suggestion about divine counsel rather than a declaration of divine authority attempts a coup on God and his Word.

I humbly assert with full confidence, *these things ought not be*.

### **Fallacy 3: Doing is more important than thinking**

If confidence is a cultural sin, so too is any *system* of theological thought. Like a leaky pressure tank, complaints blast from even churchgoers’ lips: Bible lessons are too content-heavy and too impractical, theology books too academic, scholarship too scholarly, and think tanks too think-tanky. Preaching? Well, let’s get real. Don’t bother us with the intricacies of the atonement; just talk about what Jesus would have us do. Three practical to-dos and a heart-warming story, thank you very much.

Produced in ivory towers, theology fails to relate, to connect, to compel. Soaking in a cesspool of empty rhetoric, doctrine stagnates and poisons. What we need, it is argued, is people who *do* rather than people who *think*. Theology that only thinks is theology that truly stinks.

The do-is-better-than-think argument turns quickly to the Bible itself. See for yourself. James insists, “be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). Jesus himself elevates obedience when he warns the “Lord, Lord” criers (Matt. 7:21). He further affirms, “Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:28). The Psalmist asks, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to your word.” (Ps. 119:9) and “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin

against you” (Ps. 119:11). More important it seems is what we do with the Bible, not what we think about it.

But is the do-is better-than-think argument even practically defensible? Will it really do?

To be fair, too much theological reflection has suffered abstraction and irrelevance, even deadness (cf. James 2:14–26). Such so-called theology is tragic and tyrannical. Theologians rage over seeming minutiae, and evidence little concern over faith and faithfulness. But a critical caveat is in order. When casting darts from the armchair, the hurlers must confess their limits. Just because someone does not readily see the relevance of doctrinal precision does not mean it lacks relevance. One could hardly overstate the weightiness of *one* Greek letter in the historic debates on whether Jesus was God! The answer to this question only determined whether or not our salvation is a divine gift. That’s all. Come to think of it, I am glad our forefathers spent some 500 years *thinking* on this one.

Ideas matter. Thinking shapes life. Just ask our university professors. In fact, ideas yield the sub-structures for values, priorities, beliefs, convictions, and *practices*. We are what we think. This principle begins in the realm of theology, the queen of the sciences. We all think according to a *system* of theology. We live, choose, think, and worship according to whatever theological system governs our thought. To throw out the *revealed* systematic theology is to replace it with one of our own.

The proper question, then, concerns *which* system of theology. Is it the God-given one or an idolatrous counterfeit? Only the given system of doctrine in Scripture can rightly judge. As the voice of God, Scripture is its own final arbiter. And the Bible’s

intrinsic self-interpreting authority ably governs what we must think and what we must do.

Several implications flow. First, in order to be doers, we must be knowers. That is, faithful doers do *the Word*. Truth governs acts. Deeper knowing indeed comes by doing (Hebrews 5:14), but doing that precedes biblical knowing prejudices practice because it assumes an a-biblical (even unbiblical) knowing. Doing augurs the truth more deeply in our souls, but the doing does not create the theology; instead it deepens truth’s impact upon us.

Second, faithful sermons are not to-do lists. Such “practical” preaching unavoidably suffers from moralism, and moralistic preaching is *not* gospel preaching. It replaces gospel grace and glory with glamor and glitz. In spirited (lower case ‘s’!) fashion, the “doer” preachers make us feel bad about guilt yet good about our ability to do something, or

**THE BIBLE, FROM GENESIS THROUGH REVELATION, PRESENTS A SYSTEM OF DOCTRINE, WHICH IS THE BASIS FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING AND OUR ACTIONS. FAITH AND OBEDIENCE APPLY THE TRUTH [THEOLOGY] GIVEN BY GOD, NOT THEOLOGY CREATED BY MAN. APPLICATION RELIES UPON THE DIVINELY GIVEN SYSTEM OF THEOLOGY.**

they diminish our sense of guilt and stroke us with heart-warming platitudes. Oprah Winfrey can do both. Let's leave these with her.

By stark biblical contrast, biblical preaching calls us to act because of Jesus whom we *know*, the salvation we *possess*, and the Spirit who *indwells* us. Moral “yes” to Jesus grows out of the redemptively prior and Spirit-applied “it is finished” of Jesus. Sermons, therefore, are not practical because they tell us what to do. They are practical because they point us to Jesus who is our life. Grace-filled obedience sprouts from the cross-centered life. Sermons that are faithful are first theological.

Third, systematic theology rightly conceived is no imposition on the text of Scripture. Paul tells Timothy to “guard the deposit” (1 Tim. 6:20) and describes the redeemed Romans as those “who have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Rom. 6:17). The Bible, from Genesis through Revelation, presents a *system* of doctrine, which is the basis for our understanding and our actions. Faith and obedience apply the truth (theology) given by God, not theology created by man. Application relies upon the divinely given system of theology.

Systematic theology, in its proper form, derives *from* the text of Scripture. It draws upon the meaning of texts in context, the meaning of passages within books, and the meaning of books within the canon of Scripture. It should always be, as John Murray urges us, “radically non-speculative.” In other words, systematic theology—faithfully understood—is biblical. It is the teaching, including the “good and necessary consequence,” of Scripture expressed. Systematic theology orients pastoral or practical theology. Practice must not create

our theology; theology governs and corrects our practice.

With the gale-force pressures to esteem doing over thinking, systematic theology for many has been relegated to the shelves of an earlier (and more naïve) age. Many have openly repudiated systematic theology as a discipline. Others have retooled systematic theology around some new and imposed concept, such as “missional” theology. Such modifications are neither innocuous nor biblical.

No matter how well intended or passionate, so-called “missional” theology inevitably redefines theology according to human activity rather than divine revelation. The system of theology given by God must *inform* all mission; mission, however it is couched or calibrated, must not commandeer our systematizing. “Missional” theology commendably affirms the *practicality* of truth, but erroneously hoists *our work* over God’s work in Christ as explained in Scripture.

Combatting the trends, our delight in God’s Word must make its *system* of doctrine govern our mission. Our doing must be seeded in God’s revealed Word; only with deep roots in the vital nourishment of God’s Word will we grow like trees that bear fruit in season (Ps. 1). Faithful biblical thinkers are biblical doers. Faithful doers continue to feast on God’s Word and its rich and relevant Christ-centered system of doctrine.

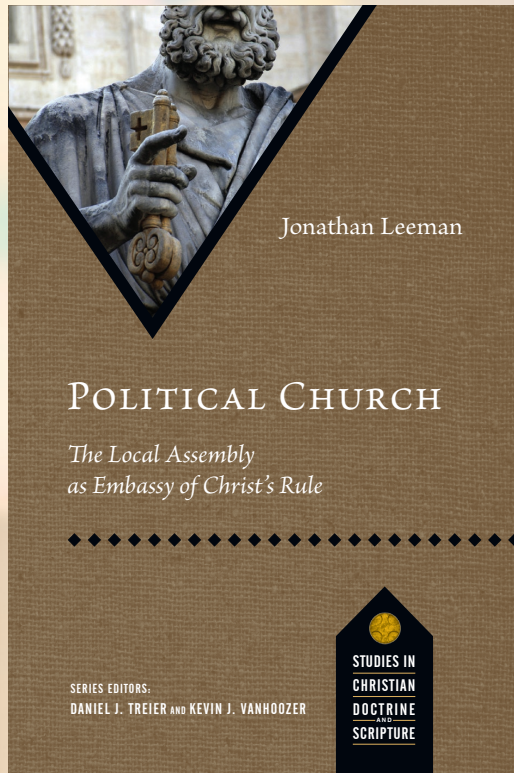
“Apart from me, you can do nothing,” Jesus says (John 15:5b). Any other arrangement of things will ultimately fail. Fallacies always do.

**David B. Garner** is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA. 



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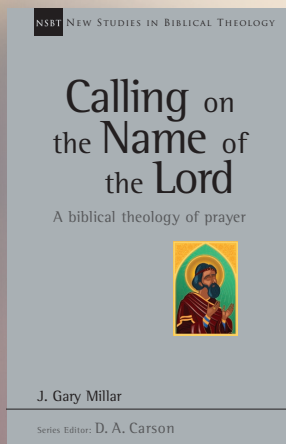
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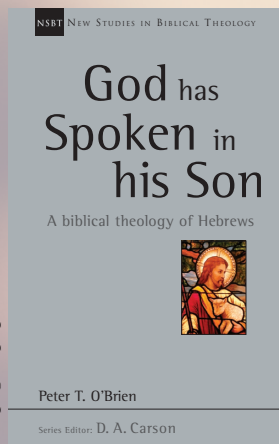
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**THINK  
GOD'S THOUGHTS  
AFTER HIM**

AN APOLOGETIC FOR DOCTRINE

By Jeremy Kimble

## A STUDY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS NOT MEANT TO KILL YOUR HEART FOR WORSHIP; RATHER IT IS INTENDED TO ENLIVEN YOUR AFFECTIONS FOR GOD AND HIS GREATNESS.

**S**ystematic theology is a phrase that may bring exhilaration to some hearts, but more often it can bring thoughts of boredom, irrelevance, and even trepidation. Many churchgoers hear the word “theology” and automatically think such content is simply beyond them. In some conversations I have heard people claim that theology is unnecessary and even dangerous, as it is likely to kill your heart for worship. “Knowledge puffs up,” they say, and therefore it is best to avoid such matters.

This claim, however, misunderstands the intention of theology. A study of systematic theology is not meant to kill your heart for worship; rather it is intended to enliven your affections for God and his greatness. The right study of God should lead to an ever-deepening love for God and a desire to participate in the mission he has given us. As such, doctrine is of utmost importance, and not just for those in the academy, but also for all who are believers in Jesus Christ and part of the church.

My aim in this article is first to define systematic theology, then to offer a brief autobiographical synopsis of how I came to love systematic theology, and, finally, to demonstrate the importance and relevance of systematic theology to the Christian life. In all of this, my goal is to offer an apologetic for Christian doctrine, so that, as Jonathan Edwards said, people’s affections for God can be elevated, cultivated, and strengthened by the truth of who God is and what he has done on our behalf.

### What is systematic theology?

In his popular textbook, *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem has defined systematic theology simply as “any study that answers the question

‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic.” In other words, systematic theology takes more of a topical focus and analyzes the teaching of the entirety of Scripture on a major theme, such as the Trinity, the nature of sin, the person and work of Christ, or the doctrine of the church. Wellum and Gentry agree with this definition, but give more precision, saying that theology involves “the application of Scripture to all areas of life.” In their book *Kingdom Through Covenant* they elaborate on this point and offer the following definition:

Systematic theology, then, inevitably involves theological construction and doctrinal formulation, grounded in biblical theology and done in light of historical theology, but which also involves interacting with all areas of life—history, science, psychology, ethics, and so on. In so doing, systematic theology leads to worldview formation as we seek to set the biblical-theological framework of Scripture over against all other worldviews and learn ‘to think God’s thoughts after him,’ even in areas that the Bible does not directly address. In this important way, systematic theology presents a well thought out worldview, over against all of its competitors, as it seeks to apply truth to every domain of our existence.

These definitions demonstrate that those who study the Bible cannot avoid theology. It is a joyful result of their labors, and one that enriches the way in which they love God and others. Systematic theol-

ogy, therefore, is crucial for the Christian life, for the lives of individual believers, for the life of the church, and for our witness to the world.

### **My journey into the world of systematic theology**

My first exposure to systematic theology came in high school. During my junior and senior year, an interim pastor at our church took it upon himself not only to preach each week, but also to teach the high school Sunday School class. This pastor slowly and methodically worked through various doctrines. While I was not necessarily enthralled by this kind of teaching at this stage of my life, it was a first exposure and helped me understand the major themes in Scripture.

I went to a Christian college, and as a Pastoral Ministries major I actually took six different theology classes. It was here that I first began to develop a love for the discipline. I realized that I am a big picture person. I love seeing how things fit together. While I thoroughly enjoyed the details of exegesis and classes that focused on a particular book in Scripture, I derived greatest enjoyment from inter-disciplinary conversations that covered exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology. I loved thinking in worldview terms and recognizing how all of this truth affected every facet of life.

Upon graduation I entered seminary and my love for systematic theology continued to intensify. I was involved in church ministry while in seminary, and while all the classes were helpful in serving as an associate pastor, I continued to find that my classes in theology provided the go-to content for my teaching and preaching. I didn't want my congregation just to know a few of the key stories of the Bible; I wanted them to be conversant with the whole of Scripture, making the necessary textual and thematic connections, and then understanding how that affected their worldview, value system, home life, vocation, and everything else about them.

This was confirmed even more in my heart when I visited a school where I was considering doing a PhD in systematic theology. When I told the professor my intention, he smiled and then went on to describe systematic theology as "the great vacuum" discipline. What he meant by this statement is that systematic theology is a culminating discipline, one where you must take into account all the other facets of theological inquiry and bring them together into a cohesive understanding for the present day.

### **Why is systematic theology important for all Christians**

The longer I have been in ministry, the more I have

**IF A DOCTRINAL STATEMENT IS LOOSE AND BRIEF IN THE NAME OF SOMETHING LIKE TOLERANCE, THIS WILL NOT ULTIMATELY BRING ABOUT UNITY. CHURCHES MUST KNOW WHAT THEY BELIEVE AND LINK ARMS WITH OTHERS WHO HOLD TO THOSE CONVICTIONS, ALL BASED ON THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD. ROBUST THEOLOGY STATED OVERTLY IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH WILL THUS HAVE GREAT EFFECT IN BRING ABOUT UNITY IN THE CHURCH.**

realized the importance of all Christians studying to show themselves approved workmen of God (2 Tim. 2:15), and this includes a thoroughgoing knowledge of systematic theology. But, some readers may ask, why is systematic theology of such importance to all Christians? Isn't that stuff reserved for the likes of pastors and seminary professors? While in no way exhaustive, here are several reasons why systematic theology is of such importance to the life of a Christian.

*First, sound doctrine will assist you in reading the Bible more effectively.* As you understand the connection between the Bible and theology, you can think of feedback loops. In other words, reading the Bible will sharpen your theological acumen, and as you continue to engage in theological inquiry this will help you read the Bible more accurately. This is, as Grant Osborne has said, a “hermeneutical spiral” wherein we are better equipped to think God’s thoughts after him.

*Second, good Bible reading and theological study should lead to increased love and holiness.* One could call love and holiness the two great roots of a tree from which spring the other communicable attributes of God. We learn from theological inquiry that love and holiness are foundational to

**SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, THEREFORE, IS NOT INTENDED TO BE SOME ARID, DRAB ENTERPRISE RELEGATED TO THE IVORY TOWER OF THE ACADEMY. RATHER, IT IS INTENDED TO ENLIVEN OUR HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS FOR THE PERSON OF GOD AND THE WORK OF GOD TO THE GLORY OF GOD.**

God’s character, and, therefore, he calls us to love him with all (Deut. 6:4-5; Matt. 22:37), to love our neighbors as ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:38), and to be holy as he is holy (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). Theology both instructs us in these matters and highlights the promise of God’s gracious empowerment to live out these realities, for “God is able to make all grace abound to [us] so that... [we] may abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8).

*Third, while many people may think of theology as divisive in nature, in fact sound doctrine is a great and needful means to unity in the church.* From the earliest history of the church, systematic theology has been key in outlining the beliefs of Christians and setting the parameters of orthodoxy. When a local church gathers and the members ascribe to a specific doctrinal statement, derived from sound exegesis and theological formulation, this garners confidence in beliefs and a rallying point for the people. If a doctrinal statement is loose and brief in the name of something like tolerance, this will not ultimately bring about unity. Churches must know what they believe and link arms with others who hold to those convictions, all based on the truth of God’s Word. Robust theology stated overtly in the life of the church will thus have great effect in bring about unity in the church.

*Finally, systematic theology is a key discipline for the proper worship of God.* This is true because, first, Scripture instructs us what proper worship of God should look like, both for the individual Christian and for the church. We are not to deviate from these norms, and therefore theology does us a great service in clarifying what proper worship looks like. Theology also aims at stoking the flame of our affections for God. As we understand the call to relate rightly to God, we understand that we

## A STUDY OF SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY IS NOT MEANT TO KILL YOUR HEART FOR WORSHIP; RATHER IT IS INTENDED TO ENLIVEN YOUR AFFECTIONS FOR GOD AND HIS GREATNESS.

are to fear God, love him, delight in him, rejoice in him, humble ourselves before him, repent before him, pray to him, depend on him, sing to him, and wait for him. Doctrine, rightly done, instructs us about these matters and also gives us a heart to relate to God in these various ways. Theology is not a cold, dead thing; it is meant to give life and produce in us a passion for God and his purposes.

### Theology for the world

These points of importance focus mainly on the individual Christian and the church, but theology can also affect the world, and herein we find its relevance. Theology should shape our witness. Systematic theology leads to apologetics—that is, to forming and defending the Christian worldview. While we recognize that it is God who gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6), we are called to plant and water by sharing the gospel with those who do not know Christ.

Recognizing also that the Spirit must work in the heart of an individual for conversion, systematic theology is a helpful tool in this enterprise as it clarifies a Christian worldview and leads to cogent arguments for the plausibility of that worldview. As the majority of people in our churches work in environments where many of their co-workers are non-Christians, and as we interact with individuals at restaurants, the gym, and sporting events, the discipline of systematic theology becomes extremely relevant. It offers the framework needed to explain, defend, and exult in the glories of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians must be able to think well in areas such as biblical exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, worldview, ethics, philosophy, apologetics, and so on. Systematic theology is the single discipline that brings these diverse disciplines together in a coherent format. As such, it is a culminating discipline bringing together the various strands of data needed to love God rightly with our minds. It also expands the capacities of our hearts to see and savor the triune God and worship him rightly. Finally, it provides the basis and impetus for participating in the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations.

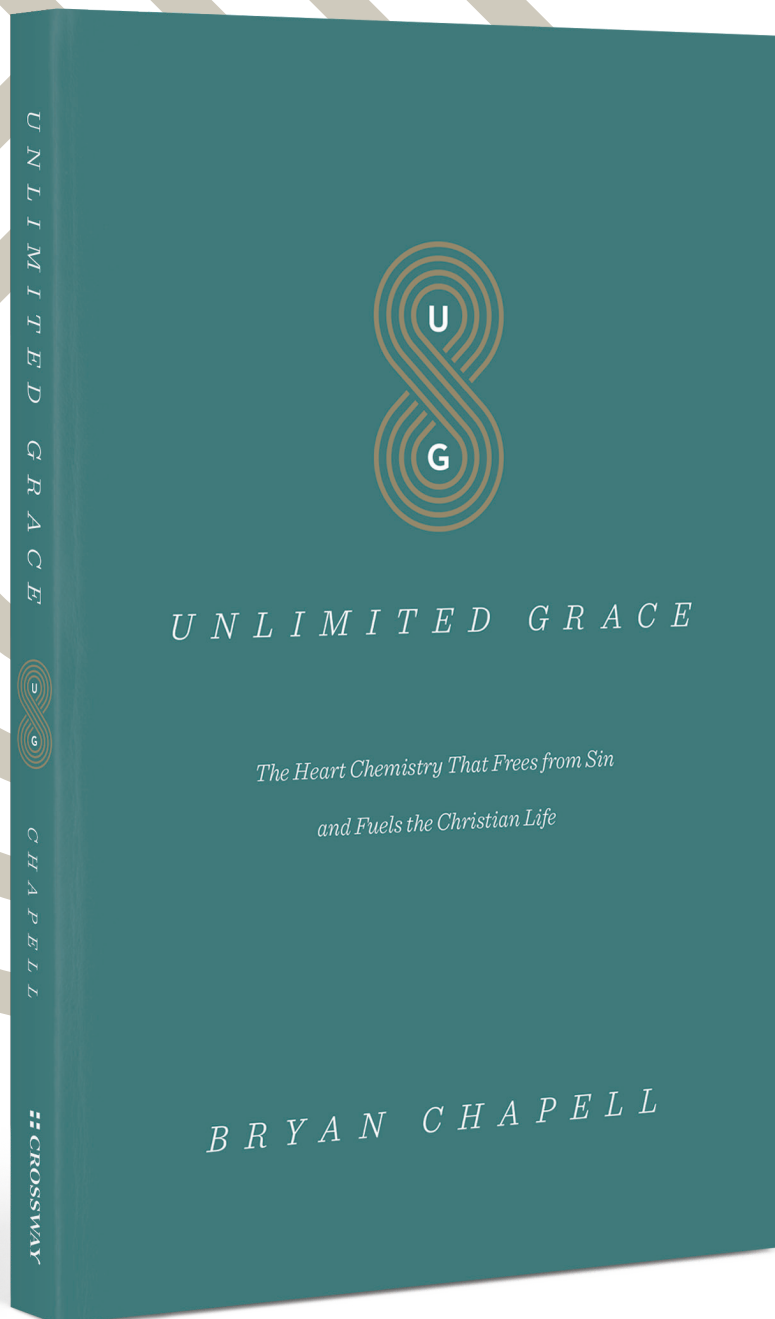
Systematic theology, therefore, is not intended to be some arid, drab enterprise relegated to the ivory tower of the academy. Rather, it is intended to enliven our heads, hearts, and hands for the person of God and the work of God to the glory of God.

*Jeremy M. Kimble (PhD, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) is Assistant Professor of Theology at Cedarville University. He is the author of That His Spirit May Be Saved. ◀*

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Professor of Biblical Spirituality and Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*



HOW GOD'S  
**UNLIMITED GRACE**  
FUELS AND EMPOWERS  
OUR OBEDIENCE



**DOES  
THEOLOGY  
MAKE A DIFFERENCE  
IN THE PASTORATE?**

**BY SCOTT SAULS**



In the world of ministry and ministers, there is often a love/hate relationship with theology. On the one hand, we love theology because it gives us an ordered, systematic, and storied picture of the sixty-six books of the Bible. We might say that theology packages the Bible - which for many can feel uncomfortable - into a more digestible, less intimidating, easier to understand, and organized whole. At its best, theology gives us an interpretive lens from which to more clearly see God, the world, our neighbor, and ourselves. It anchors us and forms our most deeply held convictions. It gives us greater certainty about things that are true and things that are not; about things that should be treated as lovely and things that should be treated as repulsive; about things that are healthy and that enhance life, and things that are harmful and diminish life. On the whole, and when handled with humility and care, theology can be a tremendous asset to our existence.

On the other hand, if handled poorly, theology can turn us into the worst versions of ourselves. As Paul was quick to warn the Corinthian saints, we can fathom all mysteries, but if we don't have love, we have and we gain nothing (1 Cor. 13:1).

**AT ITS BEST, THEOLOGY GIVES US AN INTERPRETIVE LENS FROM WHICH TO MORE CLEARLY SEE GOD, THE WORLD, OUR NEIGHBOR, AND OURSELVES. IT ANCHORS US AND FORMS OUR MOST DEEPLY HELD CONVICTIONS. IT GIVES US GREATER CERTAINTY ABOUT THINGS THAT ARE TRUE AND THINGS THAT ARE NOT; ABOUT THINGS THAT SHOULD BE TREATED AS LOVELY AND THINGS THAT SHOULD BE TREATED AS REPULSIVE; ABOUT THINGS THAT ARE HEALTHY AND THAT ENHANCE LIFE, AND THINGS THAT ARE HARMFUL AND DIMINISH LIFE. ON THE WHOLE, AND WHEN HANDLED WITH HUMILITY AND CARE, THEOLOGY CAN BE A TREMENDOUS ASSET TO OUR EXISTENCE.**

James says the same thing, perhaps even more bluntly, when he says that having the most sound, water-tight, correct system of doctrine *by itself* puts us in the same category as the devil of hell. "Even the demons believe," James says, "and they shudder" (James 2:19).

I think what both Paul and James were getting at is this: It is quite possible to memorize the whole Bible and to affirm and believe and even preach every single word that it says, and still not be even remotely submitted to it. To the degree that this is the case, we, like the demons, should begin to shudder. And then we should run to Jesus, immediately.

### **LIKE A SKELETON**

My predecessor at Christ Presbyterian Church, Dr. Charles McGowan, once shared a metaphor with me that I found both humorous and helpful. He said, and I paraphrase: "Scott, I believe that in the life of a Christian, theology should function like a skeleton. The skeleton is, of course, absolutely necessary for providing structure and strength to the rest of the body. But, like a skeleton, if our theology is the *only* thing or even the *main* thing about our spirituality that is visible to

**TO LOVE GOD FULLY, WE MUST FIRST HEAR FROM HIM CLEARLY—NOT FROM CULTURE OR THE LATEST RELIGIOUS TRENDS OR OUR FEELINGS, BUT FROM HIM—PRECISELY HOW IT IS THAT HE WISHES TO BE LOVED. CAN A HUSBAND REALLY LOVE HIS WIFE IF HE FAILS TO STUDY HER—WHAT SHE LOVES, WHAT MAKES HER FEEL LOVED, WHAT MAKES HER TICK? SIMILARLY, WHEN WE LIMIT OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD BY LIMITING OUR PURSUIT OF THEOLOGY AND SOUND DOCTRINE, WE LIKEWISE LIMIT OUR ABILITY TO LOVE HIM RIGHTLY.**

others, it means that we are either spiritually sick or spiritually dead.”

Ouch. And yet, so spot on. In his skeleton metaphor, Charles was in a way explaining why some people think of seminary, the place where many aspiring ministers go to become sound in their theology, as a “cemetery.” Those who think of seminary in this way are concerned that the study of Scripture might become so much of an academic exercise that the pursuit of God wanes into a dull, lifeless, and in many ways useless endeavor. Positively, these are also people who have not forgotten that the first and greatest commandment is to *love* the Lord our God with our whole selves, and to *love* our neighbor as ourselves.

### **SEMINARY OR CEMETERY?**

Charles McGowan’s skeleton metaphor is especially relevant for those of us who come from a Reformed Presbyterian tradition. You see, we Reformed folks are known for priding ourselves on our sound doctrine (and I don’t use the word “priding” lightly). Most of us would say that sound doctrine—that is, a biblically-grounded, water-tight theology—is the greatest strength of our particular tradition. And indeed this may be true. However, when we fail to prioritize the life of the heart as a logical and necessary fruit of the life of the mind—manifest through things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—we run the risk of missing the entire point. Deep knowledge of Scripture as the *sword* of the Spirit, and the sound doctrine that flows from it, must always lead to manifestations of the *fruit* of the Spirit.

So, should we cease to *study* the Scriptures and engage with theology for fear of our faith landing in the cemetery? Should we so fear a knowledge that “puffs up” that we downplay theology altogether? Shall we assume the popular stance that says, “Don’t give me doctrine, just give me Jesus,” forgetting that “Give me Jesus” is a statement that is, to be sure, loaded with doctrine?

Rather than relegate the pursuit of sound doctrine to the cemetery, I believe that we must instead redeem and restore the term to its original intent: “Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your *mind*” (Rom. 12:1-2).

Wherever Scripture talks about sound doctrine, the Greek word that is translated “sound” was a common medical term meaning “healthy.” The skeleton is by no means an enemy to health, but is a friend and supporter of it.

### **DOCTRINAL PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT DOCTRINAIRE**

When I was a first-year student at Covenant Theo-

## A PUFFED UP PASTOR WILL ATTRACT AND AFFIRM A PUFFED UP CONGREGATION. SIMILARLY, A THEOLOGICALLY SHALLOW PASTOR WILL ATTRACT AND AFFIRM AN UN-ROOTED CONGREGATION. NEITHER ONE IS DESIRABLE.

logical Seminary, Dr. Dan Doriani taught us that the academic pursuit of God does *not* have to lead us to the proverbial “cemetery.” Rather, to the degree that we come to love the Lord our God *with our minds*, we will be rightly equipped to healthily and rightly love him with our hearts, souls, and strength also. To love God fully, we must first hear from him clearly—not from culture or the latest religious trends or our feelings, but from *him*—precisely how it is that he wishes to be loved. Can a husband *really* love his wife if he fails to *study* her—what she loves, what makes *her* feel loved, what makes her tick? Similarly, when we limit our knowledge of God by limiting our pursuit of theology and sound doctrine, we likewise limit our ability to love him rightly.

So then, what we are talking about here is not the ceasing of all things doctrinal, but of all things doctrinaire. The New Testament Pharisees provide a portrait of this. To be doctrinaire is to be puffed up, prideful, spiritually bloated, and relationally intimidating and non-accessible. To be *doctrinaire* is to read our Bibles every day and be in three weekly Bible studies, while actively serving and loving no one. It is to think too highly of ourselves and too lowly of our neighbor, perhaps even thanking God “that we are not like other men” as the Pharisee did in Luke 18.

For pastors, a richly developed, scripturally grounded, sound, studied, robust, and *healthy* doc-

trine is therefore essential. As the pastor’s health (or lack thereof) goes, so goes the community that he serves. A puffed up pastor will attract and affirm a puffed up congregation. Similarly, a theologically shallow pastor will attract and affirm an un-rooted congregation. Neither one is desirable. While the first will be experienced as distant and cold, the second will be experienced as squishy, and highly susceptible to being “tossed about by every wind and wave of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). In either case there will be zeal, but the zeal will be misguided and *unhealthy* because it is not according to knowledge.

### DISCIPLES OF CULTURE INSTEAD OF JESUS

A chief reason why a commitment to sound doctrine should be preserved is that without it, we and those we serve put ourselves at risk of becoming disciples of (doctrinaire or doctrine-less) culture instead of Jesus. Staying rooted in Scripture-based, sound doctrine keeps us wise. That is, it keeps us rooted in God’s ways, which are higher than our ways, and in God’s thoughts, which are higher than our thoughts. Culture will shift, and human opinion will shift, but truth will not.

This is what makes the Bible, and healthy theology that proceeds from it, so relevant: *It shows no interest in being relevant.* Instead, it enters and scrutinizes our human systems, philosophies, and theological constructs, both affirming that which is good and true, and correcting that which is not.

### WHEN THEOLOGY CATCHES FIRE

A second and chief reason why sound doctrine is important for ministers is that, as McCheyne once said, the most important thing that a minister can give to his people is his own holiness. We pastors

## WHEN WE BLEED BIBLE, THAT IS, WHEN OUR Demeanors SHOW THAT WE ARE INTO THE TRUTH BECAUSE THE TRUTH HAS GOTTEN SO INTO US, IT BECOMES INFECTIOUS AND CONTAGIOUS. FOR US AND FOR THE PEOPLE THAT WE LEAD, THE VIRTUES OF THE KINGDOM—OF LOVE AND THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT—ARE CAUGHT, NOT ACHIEVED.

can only lead our people as far as we ourselves have gone with God. We see this in the apostle Paul, who wrote, “That which I *first* received from the Lord, I then delivered to you...” (1 Cor. 11:23). We also see it in the twelve disciples, who had become *like* Jesus as a result of being *with* Jesus, taking upon themselves his easy yoke and light burden of grace, learning from him, and through this finding rest for their souls. Then, and only then, were they prepared to carry his grace and truth to the world, plant and pastor churches, and do many good works in his name.

There is also a ripple effect when truth and theology get into us to such a degree that, as with Jonathan Edwards, it “catches fire.” According to Tim Keller, Edwards became so richly saturated with Scripture that, if you poked him with a fork, he would immediately begin to bleed Bible. And when we *bleed* Bible, that is, when our demeanors show that we are *into* the truth because the truth has gotten so *into* us, it becomes infectious and contagious. For us and for the people that we lead, the virtues of the kingdom—of love and the fruit of the Spirit—are caught, not achieved.


### BLEED BIBLE WHENEVER POKED

Finally, this excerpt from Jonathan Edwards’ *Personal Narrative* gives a sample, and hopefully also some serious inspiration, for loving God as doctrinal people who are not doctrinaire, and as people who “bleed Bible” whenever we are poked:

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my

horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception ... which continued as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have, several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.

As was the case with Jonathan Edwards, may our skeletons also support and be surrounded with such muscle.

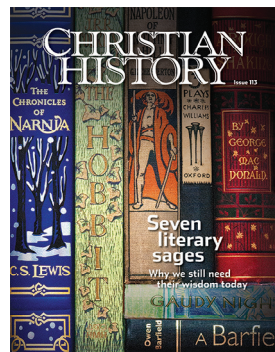
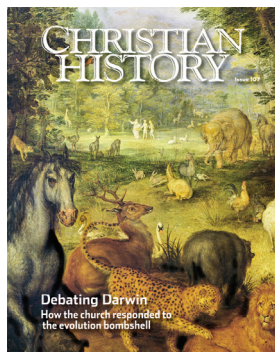
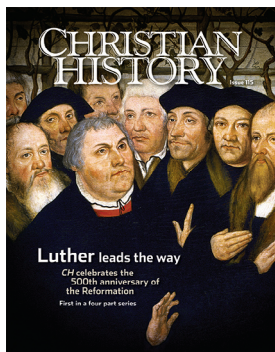
**Scott Sauls** is senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee and author of *Jesus Outside the Lines and Befriend*. 



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**CALLING ALL THEOLOGIAN...**  
**SERIOUSLY, ANYONE?**

*By Matthew Barrett*

**“If a man adopts a false method, he is like one who takes a wrong road which will never lead him to his destination.”  
—Charles Hodge**

It's been nine months. Nine months, that is, since my family jumped on an airplane and moved from California to London. Since arriving, British evangelicals have been very curious as to the differences between churches in the U.S. and churches in the UK. My response is usually the same: churches in the UK give healthy attention to liturgy, expository sermons have priority over churchy gimmicks, and there is far less obsession with celebrity pastors and megachurches. Churches in the US could learn a thing or two from British brothers and sisters.

And yet, there is one glaring hole smack-dab in the middle of an otherwise seamless fabric: a suspicion toward theology. To be honest, I found this, well...strange. Apparently I'm not alone in noticing either. As Kevin DeYoung pointed out back in 2014, after returning from a prolonged stay in England: “more full-time church workers and pastors could benefit from a seminary education. ...I sensed that young men and women in England were Bible people (which is most important), but less in tune with old books and any particular theological tradition.” This past March, after another extended speaking tour in London, DeYoung drew a similar conclusion: “reformedish evangelicals in the UK are Bible people,” but they are “less conversant with systematic theology” DeYoung is on to something.

### Don't' we all love the Bible

The allergy to theology we are staring in the face tends to reincarnate itself in various forms. “I just read the Bible, brother.” Or: “Why can't we just stick with the Bible?” Such a mind-set has a long history.

While statements like these slide off the lips of evangelicals today, yesterday they were sung proudly by Protestant liberals in biblical studies. The many “quests” for the historical Jesus are a case in point. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Jesus scholars claimed to “just be reading the Bible.” Yet the Bible they read did not present the historical Jesus, but the Christ of faith. The apostles and early church creeds, some claimed, had imposed onto Jesus concepts like “deity.” Not to worry, biblical scholars were able to read the Bible with neutrality. Such neutrality meant Jesus could now be rescued from the scriptures. Layer after layer of Gospel narrative could be peeled back in order to exhume the real, historical Jesus. By 1991 the Los Angeles Times could confidently announce that the group of biblical scholars known as the Jesus Seminar now “Rules Out 80% of Words Attributed to Jesus.”

Of course, nothing is new under the sun. If we travel back in time to the fourth century we discover that Arius also believed he was “just reading and preaching the Bible.” Denying the full deity and pre-existence of the Son, Arius loved just sticking

to Bible verses like Colossians 1:15. I can hear him now: “Don’t tell me about the need to put *all* of the Bible together; let’s just stick to the text, please. This text says Jesus is the firstborn!”

A similar hermeneutic was put on display at the start of the 21st century as Open Theism fell like a bomb on the evangelical playground. Claiming to take the Bible seriously, advocates turned to specific texts in isolation from the rest of the Bible and concluded that God changes his mind after realizing he has made a mistake. After all, Genesis 6:6 literally says the Lord “regretted” that he had made man. Case settled.

Or consider an example closer to home. London pastor Steve Chalke, founder of the Oasis movement, just announced that his church will start performing gay marriages. Don’t miss Chalke’s key line of justification:

This is not because we’re liberal, it’s not because we’re light on the Bible, it’s because we take the Bible very seriously. We want to move

away from an over simplistic, over literalistic, immature understanding over Biblical texts that dumps many but keeps the ones we want. According to Chalke, he’s a Bible kind of guy.

### **Hermeneutics? Yes please!**

By now you get the point: claiming to “just stick to the Bible” doesn’t quite work for obvious reasons. But consider a few more. First, such a mind-set misunderstands who we are as readers. We do not approach the Bible neutral, a hermeneutical myth that is a remnant of the Enlightenment. For all its shortcomings, postmodernism has at least taught us that there is no such thing as neutrality. We come to the Bible with built in presuppositions about God and the world around us. The real question is not whether we approach the Bible with presuppositions, but whether or not our presuppositions are faithful to what the Bible itself says and teaches. In other words, the issue is not whether we come to the Bible with a system of doctrine, but whether that system is true to scripture.

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**IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO RESTATE THE BIBLE'S STORY; THAT STORY MUST BE INTERPRETED, AND ONCE INTERPRETED IT MUST BE APPLIED. CERTAINLY THIS WAS PAUL'S AGENDA (AND METHOD), AS HIS INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLICAL STORY LED HIM TO THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS WHICH IN TURN WERE MEANT TO DRIVE HIS LISTENER TO A DOGMATIC UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S BEING IN RELATION TO THE WORLD. APPARENTLY PAUL WAS A THEOLOGIAN.**

Second, such a mind-set misunderstands what the Bible is exactly. It is not a dictionary or encyclopaedia, as if we turn to a specific verse and, *voilà*, we have a scripted answer. No, the Bible is a story, God's story in fact. It's not a storehouse of facts (though facts are not precluded), but a storehouse of narrative. And this narrative unfolds within a particular storyline, a redemptive, covenantal storyline to be specific.

But it's *not* enough merely to read and retell the storyline of the Bible. "There is a time for storytelling, and a time for interpreting the story; there is a time for recounting history, and a time for saying what it events mean," Kevin Vanhoozer and Daniel Treier explain in their new book, *Theology and the Mirror of Scripture*. "Systematic theology is the time for interpreting the biblical story, and saying what it means."

Certainly the apostles didn't restrict themselves to regurgitating the biblical narrative. Rather, they strategically shifted gears from biblical theology to systematic theology, from drama to doctrine. This much is apparent in Acts 17:22-34 as Paul apologetically confronts the philosophers of his day. Here Paul assumes the flow of redemptive history in his speech, but he does not limit himself to the

biblical story. Instead, he builds upon it, erecting a theological framework that confronts the doctrinal ignorance of his listeners. Paul may start in Genesis, asserting God as Creator, but he quickly darts to divine aseity as the natural outcome of the Creator-creature distinction. From divine aseity Paul is then able to distinguish the one true God from man-made idols. Yet Paul does not leave his listeners with merely a transcendent God, but a God who is also immanent, so immanent that this God will judge the world in righteousness by his incarnate, resurrected Son, a fact that should drive every hearer to repentance.

All that to say, it's not enough to restate the Bible's story; that story must be interpreted, and once interpreted it must be applied. Certainly this was Paul's agenda (and method), as his interpretation of the biblical story led him to theological conclusions which in turn were meant to drive his listener to a dogmatic understanding of God's being in relation to the world. Apparently Paul was a theologian.

Third, such a mind-set forgets *who* is behind the biblical text. The Bible not only is written by diverse human authors, but a divine author, which means that the Bible is a *unified* book, breathed

out by God (2 Tim 3:16-17). Yes, we must pay attention to the intentions of each individual author, but we also must keep in mind the divine author's intent and purposes as his redemptive story progresses to a climax. It's precisely because of divine authorship that scripture can (and should) interpret scripture, the clear passages interpreting those that appear less clear. But let's be honest, if scripture interprets scripture, then theology is alive and kicking!

For instance, it's not enough to read Genesis 2 and reach a conclusion as to whether Adam is a historical person. One must also think through what implications rejecting a historical Adam might have for the entire Christian worldview, including one's understanding of original sin, union with the second Adam, and the trustworthiness of the NT (since authors like Luke and Paul assume Adam's historicity). Paul exemplifies this transition from text to doctrine in Romans 5, as he puts the whole Bible together to convey what the entire council of God says about our condemnation in the first Adam and our righteous status in the last Adam. Paul does not stop with the drama of the biblical storyline, but this drama leads to doctrine, and, if you keep reading Romans, you will discover that doctrine results in doxology (11:13) as well as discipleship (12:1-8).

If we take notes from Paul, then "doing theology" is inevitable and necessary. An expositional preaching series through James, for example, will be faced with the shocking statement that a person is "justified by works and not by faith alone" (2:24). The second the pastor begins reconciling James with Paul, he is "doing theology." Likewise, the stay-at-home mother will undoubtedly hear a knock at the door, only to have two JWs remind

## **EVERYONE IS A THEOLOGIAN, IT'S JUST A MATTER OF WHETHER YOU'RE A GOOD ONE, OR NOT.**

her that the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible, nor is there any Bible verse that explicitly teaches the doctrine of the Trinity. Should she put on her theologian's hat and start putting all of the Bible together in order to explain how extra-biblical concepts like "one in essence" and "three in person" are actually essential tools that safeguard the Bible's own teaching, then she, too, has rightly stepped into the sphere of theology. Indeed, she must if she is to give a reason for the hope within her (1 Pet 3:15). In other words, whether you realize it or not, you are a theologian.

### **If you're not a theologian, you're not really a pastor**

Last year at the Shepherds' Conference in Sun Valley, California, Ligon Duncan and Albert Mohler were asked how important it is for the pastor to be a theologian. Duncan, reflecting on his decades of pastoral ministry, explained how graduates of theological college must be committed to being life-long learners, which means not only studying the Bible "expositionally" but "topically" as well. This is hard for the pastor, since he is focused on a particular text each week, yet it is healthy and fruitful for his sermons for several reasons.

While you should be thinking weeks in advance about the specific text to be preached, you should also be thinking about how that text connects to other texts in God's one, unified canon. One of the keys to good preaching, Duncan explains, is expos-

ing how the text in focus intersects with the rest of the Bible. Yet, this is not only key to good preaching, but it's key to good systematic theology. The preacher must be concerned not only with "how the Bible relates to a specific topic, but how that topic relates to other topics the Bible talks about," Duncan explains. A failure to draw out the connections between one text and other texts is a failure to think theologically, an essential component to good preaching.

Practically speaking, Duncan advises pastors to always be reading "good, faithful, biblical, orthodox systematic theology." Admittedly, Bavinck, Berkhoff, or Calvin may not be the most "scintillating" reading; nevertheless, this type of reading is "fruitful for connections." Preaching commentaries may be "more immediately edifying," but reading systematic theology will "enrich your preaching in a profound way."


Mohler's response was even more pointed. He sometimes hears pastors say, "Well, I'm not a theologian, but..." To which Mohler responds: "If you're not a theologian, you're not really a pastor." Mohler captures the weight of pastoral ministry: "The pastor is the theologian most believers in the Lord Jesus Christ will ever know. So if you're not a theologian [to your church], then they don't have one! And that means you're not fulfilling the role of a pastor." This doesn't mean one must have a Ph.D. in systematic theology, but it does mean that as a pastor you have to "operate and think," even "teach and preach," as a theologian.

## **Be a theologian**

Just the other day I was relishing the British sunshine while talking with a group of students. As exhilarating as the sunshine was, a dark metaphorical

cloud suddenly hovered above when these students said that they have never attended a church where their pastor led the people through core doctrines of the faith in a midweek service or Sunday afternoon class. I may be new to the UK, but I know an old demon when I see one, and a neglect or worse, an antagonism to theology, is one old demon. Call me naïve, but I'm one theologian on mission to turn theological palookas into theological extraordinaires. Why exactly? Because, in the end, everyone is a theologian, it's just a matter of whether you're a good one, or not.

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# **Watch Your Doctrine**

**A Letter to a New Pastor**

**BY RAYMOND PERRON**

Dear Timothy,

*Warmest greetings in our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Savior of God's elect! I trust you and your little family are doing well in body and soul. You are always in my thoughts and prayers. It is easy for me to imagine how your hands must be full with your family responsibilities, especially with Mary's pregnancy, your two year-old boy and all the demands of your fresh pastoral ministry.*

*When you accepted this pastoral position, a new mission, a new work, even a new life began for you. Along with new responsibilities came new promises. But these new promises will be fulfilled through perseverance. I understand that you are still in a period of adjustment in your ministry. You must feel overwhelmed with the immensity of the task that lies before you. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, working with human souls represents the most difficult labor of all. Indeed, it is complex beyond calculation, defying analysis as it is made up of the entire spectrum of crises, countless impulses, passions and emotions. This is why "beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." My heartfelt appeal to you, my beloved friend and brother, is: Watch your doctrine! As I use the word "doctrine" you understand, of course, that I am referring to the wider meaning of teaching, namely the manner as well as the matter of the instruction conveyed.*

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**I**f I were to ask you to write a list of the most important things in your life and ministry, what would your list look like? What categories would emerge as your list grew? The apostle Paul's list expressed two categories, core values and doctrinal values: "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Today, we have come to a place where doctrine is no longer an issue, even among many professing followers of Christ. The time when hard and fast lines were drawn between people on the basis of their particular brand of doctrine is past, having been replaced by an emphasis on experience. But experience that is not given meaning by truth is of a most dangerous fabric. So let me draw your attention to the primacy of doctrine and, consequently, the utmost duty of watching it.

## **Doctrine in the life of Jesus**

First, consider the importance of doctrine (teaching) in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. "And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching [doctrine]" (Matt. 7:28). "Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 16:12). "And the scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching [doctrine]" (Mark 11:18; cf. Matt. 22:33; Mark 1:27; 4:2; 12:38; Luke 4:32; 18:19). What do these verses say? Our dear Lord was not trying to play up the requirements of his time by turning his sermons into philosophical, moral or aesthetic dissertations; nor was he limiting his presentation of the

truth in order to meet the individual views or fancies of his hearers. Truth remains truth inasmuch as it is in agreement with what God says is true. Only the Almighty has the authority to define doctrine because it originated in his mind. So when the Son of God came to earth, He practiced and taught His Father's doctrine: "My doctrine is not mine, but His who sent me" (John 7:16). "For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak" (John 12:49–50).

Your mission, dear brother, is to be a prophet of the Lord Jesus Christ. A prophet doesn't make up his message, but faithfully delivers the message he has received. The very same doctrine that was so dear to our Lord's heart must be dear to ours as well. So watch your doctrine and be faithful to teach all that God has delivered to us in His Word.

### **Doctrine is the main weapon**

Second, consider the importance of doctrine in the Early Church. Let me, beloved brother, quote just one text that shows the place of doctrine in the first days of Christ's church. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42; cf. 5:28). The very first thing in which they were persevering was the apostles' doctrine, this set of beliefs, "this system of truth" that is now contained in Scripture. When we look at all the exhortations that the apostle Paul addresses to Timothy and Titus, we cannot escape the conclusion that doctrine was the main weapon in the fight for truth and against falsehood. For example, "... holding

fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). This is the very same weapon you have been given. So, keep it sharp, watch your doctrine!

### **Doctrine is a safeguard in life**

Third, consider the importance of doctrine for your own life. Life is a most eventful pilgrimage during which we experience an unending succession of seasons. My dear friend, let me confess to you that I have tasted a plethora of the soul's states, from the greatest joy to the deepest despair, from the most blazing enthusiasm to the darkest and most morbid passivism consequent to a loss of motivation. In every single circumstance, doctrine proved to be a safeguard. How I cherish the words of the apostle: "For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe" (Phil. 3:1). How much we need to remain in sound doctrine, avoiding the snare of always looking for new things.

### **Temptation to compromise**

I have known you since your teenage years—your constancy and steadfastness have always been a great blessing to my soul. Nevertheless, let me remind you that time is able to erode the highest mountains. Watch your doctrine to make sure it will not suffer the erosion that can be caused by the passage of undisciplined years.

The pressure of life, the ever-increasing responsibilities of a growing family on top of the endless demands of the pastoral ministry, the daily decision-making obligations, could lead you to the temptation of neglecting the cultivation of your doctrine. Take heed to yourself and to your doctrine!

Fatigue and discouragement form a powerful destructive team. It will happen many times that the circumstances of your life and ministry will be at loggerheads with your doctrine. Be prepared to stand firm—watch your doctrine. Look where the apostle finds comfort in the midst of life’s most abrasive situations:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life

in you. And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed and therefore I spoke,” we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:1–18).

We find the apostle facing counterfeit gospels, being involved in a hot spiritual battle, feeling his human weakness, being hard pressed by all kinds of troubles, even seemingly defeated. But he does not lose heart! Why? Because he finds comfort in his sound doctrine.

### **Doctrine matters in ministry**

Fourth, consider the importance of doctrine for your ministry. My dear young friend, God has called you to the loftiest task of all, namely taking care of his flock. Indeed, “if a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work.” Sound doctrine represents the essence of your care for those who are under your ministry: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased

with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

The apostle next writes about the wolves, even from within the church, that will come and not spare the flock. Let me remind you, Timothy, that the most efficient way of keeping the flock safe against the cunning and craftiness of wolves and against the various winds of deadly doctrines, is to build a fortress of sound doctrine. “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16).

Consider the value of a human soul. The soul—“the life of the life,” as someone called it—is capable of an eternity of good or woe. A soul possesses incalculable potentialities of good and evil extending in a boundless eternity. Consider the importance of your care to such a soul and the consequences of neglecting it. It has been said that the value of a thing is measured by the price paid for it. The cost of the souls that our Lord committed to your care was nothing less than the blood of the eternal Son of God himself. So, when you appraise the souls committed to you, you must not only reflect on what they are and what they should be, but also appreciate the value that God himself has set upon them.

You will certainly understand, beloved friend, that if I insist so much on the necessity to watch your doctrine, it is because so many circumstances and foes are going to try to prevent you from doing so. Let me remind you of two of them, namely peer pressure and rampant relativism

### **Relativism a virtue?**

I begin with the latter, relativism. This heinous vice is nowadays considered a virtue. Indeed, to

be dogmatic today is the unforgivable sin but to be “open” is the supreme grace, though it is done at the expense of truth. Be prepared to hear all kinds of devastating statements such as: “It doesn’t make any difference what you believe as long as you are sincere,” or “We are all going to the same place anyway, we just have different roads.” Nothing could be further away from God’s revelation than these insipid clichés. One Christian leader has rightly warned, “Where the Scriptures are ignored, God is ‘the unknown God’” (Acts 17:23).

You will also meet people saying, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” You certainly agree with me that we would not challenge the need of such a relationship with our Lord; nevertheless, the existence of this relationship as well as its quality rests upon doctrine. A relationship grounded on falsehood is most deceitful. A true relationship with Jesus must be based upon the truth. Only when we know the truth are we set free (John 8:32).

As you look around you will quickly recognize that the main concern of our contemporary evangelical churches is feelings. This concern manifests itself most often in a church’s music and preaching (often mistakenly identified as “praise and worship”). Thus, after a service when you have sung traditional hymns, some people may ask you why you do not have praise and worship in your church. For them, if they did not experience strong feelings of wellbeing, there was no praise and worship—as if worship should consist of exciting each other instead of proclaiming God’s virtues and work.

Second, it is common today to see people willing to pay lip service to the importance of theology but



whose pulpit “has in large measure succumbed to the triumph of the therapeutic,” as one contemporary theologian has aptly put it. Indeed, my dear friend, be prepared to face the fact that in many ways psychology has taken the evangelical mind captive. How important it is to remember that real “psychology” (science of the “psyche” (soul) is the Word of God.

You will also have to deal with falsely pietistic people who divorce true spirituality from theology. Theology is simply what we know about God. How then can one have an authentic spirituality without a true knowledge of God? As you aim at developing a deep spirituality in the people to whom you are ministering, give heed to your doctrine!

### **Peer pressure in a consumeristic culture**

Let me share a few thoughts with you on the second hindrance to sound doctrine, peer pressure. The apostle Paul warns us of what is awaiting every preacher of the glorious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:3–5).

My dear brother, those of this world will not endure sound teaching. They will not want to hear it when you preach it. They will tell you it is outdated and unappealing. In the world of business, when

you have a product no one wants, you are told to change it and adapt it to the tastes of the consumer. But that is not the rule of the kingdom; truth is not a product that can be adapted according to the consumer’s fantasy. The Word of God is not a product developed through research; it is God’s revelation. Messengers don’t edit and adapt a revelation; they proclaim it. So the apostle’s argument is this: the very fact that people don’t want to hear the message is an unmistakable indication that they need it. So preach it!

Let me warn you from my own experience that you are going to be enticed to adapt the message of the gospel in order to attract more people. You will find in your own heart the subtle desire to be successful in the eyes of people. After all, it looks so good in our monthly reports to have impressive figures of numeric growth. And you will be tempted to spiritualize your wrong motivation by saying that you are looking for the best way of furthering God’s kingdom. Now, there is no shortage of would-be counselors who will invite you to look at how fast the church down the road is growing. Why shouldn’t you adopt the same strategy? “Here is the way to do ministry, in a manner that will be more agreeable to the wishes of the majority of the people.” “We are not talking about changing the message, but just smoothing it a little bit, just telling people what they want to hear so that you can win them for Christ.”

Isn’t it subtle? Doesn’t it sound good? But following this counsel would represent a denial of what the Bible teaches about our methods of evangelism. It would be adopting the old sophist creed: *homo mensura*—man is the measure of all things. Bear in mind, dear friend, that it is the Word of God that does the work of God. The power is not in the

sower but in the seed. Look at our gracious Lord Himself. He was never concerned with figures but was obsessed by truth. Be his imitator. Never forget that the church is not a gathering of people whom we have convinced with human arguments or attracted by worldly means. The church of the living God is the pillar and foundation of truth. So watch your doctrine!

### **Cultivate a companionship with the Bible**

Bear these last words of exhortation from an old friend who has already walked many miles down the road you are just beginning. Make your teaching visible for others to comprehend and emulate by being right in your personal life. Be careful in the cultivation of your own spiritual life, giving yourself to prayer and to diligent and regular study of the Word of God. May the words of the psalmist be the testimony of your own heart: “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day... How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps. 119:97, 103).

All kinds of important and urgent activities will constantly try to compete with these first duties that are yours as a minister of the Word. Be on your guard and get prepared for a daily, hot struggle in this matter. Cultivate a constant and systematic companionship with the Bible. Refresh your thinking through confessions of faith and books on systematic theology. Take frequent opportunities to fellowship with people of like mind.

Oh my dearest young co-laborer, preach the Word. Preach it in a sound way; preach it in a faithful way; preach it in a systematic way; preach it in an expository way; preach it doctrinally. Doctrine

elucidates the text and guides in the exposition of it. Moreover, doctrine will help you in measuring the rectitude of your exegetical conclusions. Watch your doctrine. Live it and preach it.

Rest assured of my deepest affection. Convey my love to Mary and to your dear son. There are no words to tell you how precious you are to my heart. May our covenant God keep pouring upon you his richest blessings.

Coram Deo,

Raymond Perron

*Raymond Perron has served in the pastoral ministry for twenty-six years. He was born in the province of Quebec, Canada. He holds an M.Div. from Toronto Baptist Seminary and a Ph.D. in theology from University Laval. Raymond is currently a national missionary with the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America. He started a church (Église réformée baptiste de la Capitale) in Quebec City in 1988 where he is still pastor. He is also working at another church planting project in Montreal (Église réformée baptiste de Montréal). Raymond and his wife Diane have been married for twenty-three years and have one son. This article is an excerpt from Dear Timothy: Letters on Pastoral Ministry, edited by Thomas K. Ascol (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2004). Used by permission. ■*

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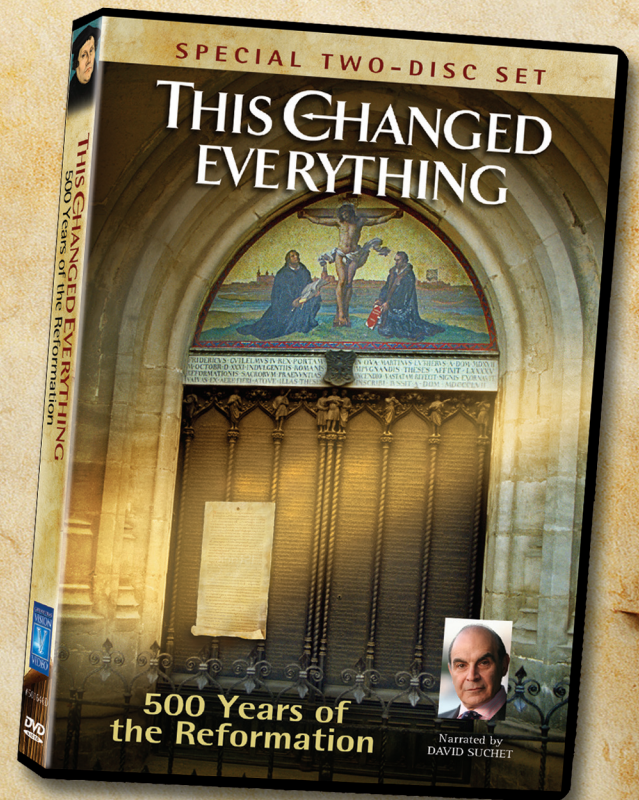
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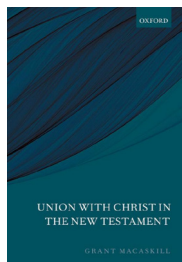
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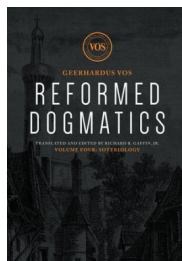
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### UNION WITH CHRIST REVISITED

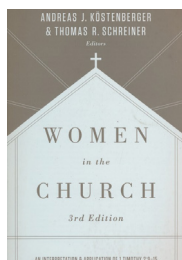
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# UNION WITH CHRIST REVISITED

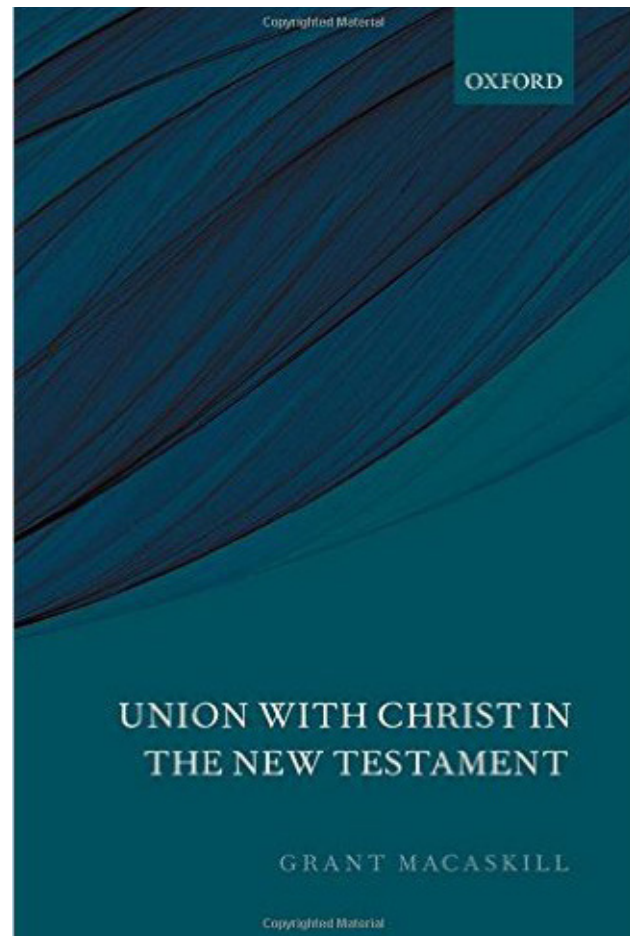
*Covenant, Temple, Spirit—Why  
They Have Everything to do  
With Union With Christ*

by J. V. Fesko

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Interest in the doctrine of union with Christ continues to rise and shows no sign of abatement. In this vein Grant Macaskill, Senior Lecturer in New Testament Studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, has written a recent contribution that adds to the ever-increasing body of literature on the subject: *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (OUP, 2013). Macaskill presents a complex and full-bodied argument as his main thesis, one that bears repeating:

The union between God and humans is covenantal, presented in terms of the formal union



between God and Israel. The concept of the covenant underlies a theology of representation, by which the story of one man (Jesus) is understood to be the story of his people. Their identification with him, their participation in his narrative, is realized by the indwelling Spirit, who constitutes the divine presence in their midst and is understood to be the eschatological gift of the new covenant. Reflecting this covenantal concept of presence, the union is commonly represented using temple imagery. The use of temple imagery maintains an essential distinction between God

and his people, so that her glorification is understood as the inter-personal communication of a divine property, not a mingling of essence. This union is with a specific people, the members of which are depicted as the recipients of revealed wisdom, and this is the grounds of their intimacy with God. While the mystical language of vision is used to describe this knowledge, it is democratized to indicate that the revealed knowledge in question is possessed by all who have the Spirit, who are marked by faith, not just by a visionary elite. The faith that characterizes this group is a real enactment of trust in what has been revealed in Jesus Christ, manifest in the conduct of the members of this community and particularly in their love for one another. The sacraments are formal rites of this union, made truly participatory by the divine presence in them (2).

This is Macaskill's argument in summary, which might be simplified as follows: He argues that the New Testament presents a covenantal understanding of union with Christ, commonly conveyed in terms of temple imagery, that communicates the fellowship between God and his people through the work of Christ and the Spirit, and reinforced by use of the sacraments.

Such an expansive argument naturally requires an equally comprehensive treatment of the subject. Macaskill presents his argument in twelve chapters where he sets the state of the question with a survey of union with Christ in New Testament scholarship, followed by chapters on Patristic and Modern Eastern Orthodox treatments, Lutheran and Reformed understandings of union, and the backgrounds of union, including various Old

Testament concepts. Macaskill then presents the core of his argument with chapters on the temple and the body of the Messiah, other temple images in the New Testament, sacraments and union with Christ, participatory elements in the Pauline corpus, participatory elements in Johannine literature, and then participation in the rest of the New Testament.

There are a number of strengths in Macaskill's book including his willingness to engage historical and systematic theology, his familiarity with Eastern Orthodoxy, and exploration of various New Testament passages with a keen interest and awareness of their Old Testament counterparts. In his exploration of historical theology, Macaskill presents a primary source reading of various Patristics, Eastern Orthodox theologians, and Luther and Calvin, which is a very refreshing contrast to how many New Testament scholars approach their task, locked in the echo chamber of the New Testament guild with a thin understanding of the history of the doctrine.

His engagement with Eastern Orthodoxy is also stimulating given the recent scholarly interest in the doctrine of theosis. In his exploration of these various historical issues, he handles them well, such as his reluctance to employ the term theosis given its widely varied meaning (75), the problematic claims of the Finnish school's interpretation of Luther on union with Christ (82), or his correct dismissal of the Calvin vs. the Calvinists thesis common to the works of J. B. and T. F. Torrance and Douglas Cambell (88-92). Macaskill creates an excellent intra-canonical dialogue between the Old and New Testaments with concepts that feed into one another. He traces, for example, the Adamic background to union with Christ

through the Old Testament and Second Temple Judaism, but at the same time is careful to distinguish between biblical and Judaistic interpretation: “The subtle point is that what Paul and other New Testament writers depict as being realized in Christ—the experience of divine communion—Judaism typically depicts as realized through temple and Torah” (143).


When Macaskill crosses into the second portion of his book, he builds his case that the New Testament theologies of participation, or union, rest upon the conflation of the metaphors of temple and body. These images overlap with other concepts such as glory, God’s presence, and the close connection between Messiah and his people (170). As he builds his case he factors the role and place of the sacraments and how they function in relationship to union with Christ. Macaskill places the sacraments in a covenantal context as the symbolic instruments that highlight the divine presence through the Spirit. The sacraments foster the vertical communion that comes through the Spirit as the means of personal transformation (217). In this respect, one of the strengths of Macaskill’s argument is the regular attention that he gives to the role of the Spirit in the doctrine of union with Christ. For example, in his treatment of 2 Corinthians he notes that in 3:3, “You are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts,” Paul combines two key Old Testament texts that point to the Spirit’s role in the believer’s union with Christ, Jeremiah 31:31-33 and Ezekiel 36:25-27 (227-28). All in all, in my judgment, Macaskill makes a convincing case regarding the connections between covenant, temple, and union with Christ.

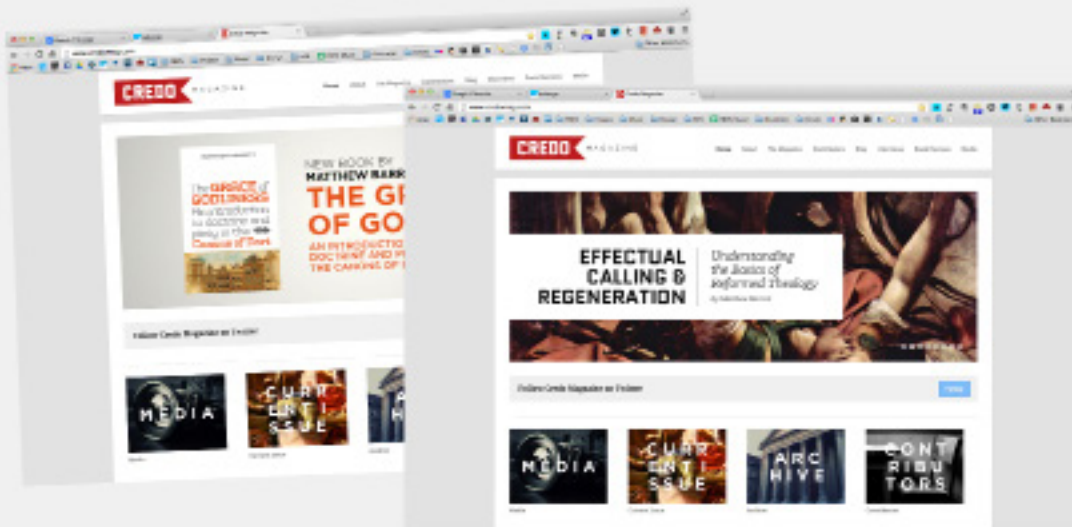
Despite making a successful case for his overall argument, there are a few notable weaknesses in Macaskill’s treatment. First, Macaskill is aware of the issues and debates surrounding union with Christ and its legal-forensic elements, especially given his interaction with Campbell and his criticisms against “justification theory” and Vanhoozer’s proposed rapprochement between the Old and New Perspectives on Paul (35-38, 242-43). And while he does interact with issues related to atonement, especially in his exploration of Isaiah 53 and its connections to the New Testament, he does not adequately delve into the questions related to union with Christ and justification. He merely claims that a “proper attention to the place of adoption in Paul’s theology, and its relationship to justification and covenant, significantly addresses the points of tension in New Perspective readings of Paul” (243). Yet, are there not significant elements related to temple and justification that add more to the discussion? What of the Day of Atonement, for example, when the high priest transferred Israel’s sins to the scapegoat or the requirement that he scrupulously abide by every ordinance in order to bring about an efficacious sacrifice (Lev. 16)? Such texts surely speak to matters of justification and imputation and operate within the broader categories of temple and covenant, do they not?

Another weakness comes in the relatively scant attention that Macaskill gives to the doctrine of faith. Macaskill rightly places great emphasis upon the work of Christ and the Spirit and its participatory character (263), and he even clearly states: “Union with Christ is by faith” (300). But as other reviewers have pointed out, Macaskill does not spend much of his study explaining the nature of faith. Christ and the Spirit get the lion’s share of treatment and analysis, but if his goal is to address

the doctrine of union with Christ, then it seems that more attention should fall upon the means by which believers actually participate in Christ. Macaskill spends a whole chapter, for example, on the sacraments but does not adequately explain how they intersect with faith.

All in all, despite these drawbacks, Macaskill has written a valuable piece of scholarship that contributes to the ongoing efforts to reach a greater understanding of union with Christ. The volume's weaknesses notwithstanding, Macaskill advances the discussion by highlighting the connections between union with Christ, covenant, temple, and especially the work of the Spirit. Anyone interested in the doctrine of union with Christ would do well to consult this well-written and clearly argued volume.

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*Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology*  
*Westminster Seminary California* 



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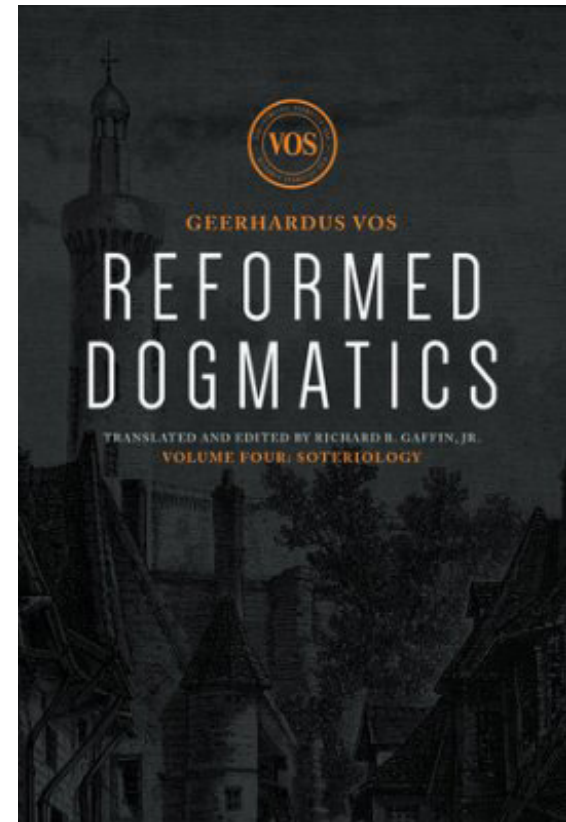
# THE PITCHER WHO CAN HIT

## *Geerhardus Vos' Reformed Dogmatics*

by Brad Bitner

**J**ake Arrieta of the Chicago Cubs is known for his great pitching. But—to the surprise of those who know him less well—the boy can also hit; he’s arguably the best hitting pitcher in baseball in 2016. When it comes to theology, Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949) is best known as an ace biblical theologian. With the recent publication of four out of five volumes of Vos’ *Reformed Dogmatics* in English translation (Lexham Press), it turns out Vos can hit as well as pitch. As Scott Swain wrote in his review of Volume One last year, these are works “of theological consequence.”

That Vos was a dogmatician as well as an exegete and biblical theologian will surprise only those who don’t know him very well. We have long known—strictly from Vos’ own works—that he distinguished biblical theology carefully from systematics, yet he never drove a wedge between



the two. Using a tree metaphor favored by the old Princetonians, Vos once wrote, “Dogmatics is the crown which grows out of all the work that Biblical Theology can accomplish.” And yet, intriguingly, Vos’ *Dogmatics* were composed from 1888-93 (published in 1910). This means they were crafted prior to any of his seminal writings on biblical theology. Thus, the metaphor may need adjusting: was dogmatics for Vos only the spreading crown of the great theological tree? Or was it also somehow part of the root system—in either case distinguished from, but joined inseparably and organically to the bole and branches of biblical theology?

There is much fodder indeed here for further insights into a robust Vosian theological method in which we observe the subtle movement from system to text and vice versa. As Richard Gaffin

(whom we have to thank for overseeing the translation and editing of these volumes) observes in the Preface to Volume One (Lexham Press, 2015), “English readers will now be able to explore the relationship between the early Vos of the Reformed Dogmatics and his subsequent work in biblical theology” (viii). It is a relationship, Gaffin rightly suspects, that will evince a “deep, pervasive and cordial continuity” (ix).

Especially with the release of Volume Four on soteriology, we witness the future champion of a distinctive redemptive-historical approach to the *historia salutis* (history of salvation) setting his mind to the careful distinctions of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation). Vos summarizes the *ordo* (Ch. 1; see Romans 8:28-30) as the “series of acts and steps in which the salvation obtained by Christ is subjectively appropriated by the elect” (1.1). Thus the *ordo* is not the revealed story but the revealed logic of God’s saving work. Biblical theology, he would point out in his Princeton inaugural, gathers the biblical revelation in the form of a line; systematic theology forms a kind of circle. Yet, both the line and the circle are (or ought to be) thoroughly biblical.

In the logical series of the *ordo*, Vos notes, there is “a multiplicity of relationships and conditions to which all the operations of grace have a certain connection.” As a result, without careful distinctions, the “fullness of God’s works of grace and the rich variety of His acts of salvation would not be prized and appreciated” (1.2). Thus, not only is the *ordo* biblical, getting it right is critical to preserving the glory of divine grace.

These relations and conditions within the *ordo* are dealt with under five headings: Regeneration and Calling (Ch. 2), Conversion (Ch. 3), Faith (Ch. 4),

Justification (Ch. 5), and Sanctification (Ch. 6). In each chapter, Vos begins with the key biblical terms and texts and builds his treatment step by step, always with further definition and distinction. As he reminds us throughout the volume, his aim in considering the *ordo* is a clearer view of God’s glory. Vos understands this to be chiefly revealed in the gracious application of the merits of Christ the Mediator to the believer.

These chapters are really gathered lecture notes, and in them we see the mind of a teacher interested in modelling dogmatic method for his students. Vos provides a pattern for how to ask good questions, how to fairly describe views with which he disagrees, how to expose assumptions and discern entailments, and – crucially – how to make careful, logical, and biblically-warranted distinctions that matter. “It is necessary,” Vos avers, in discussing justification in relation to the merits of the Mediator, “to make these distinctions, which for many will perhaps appear subtle, since at present the danger of a confusion ... is especially great” (5.38). Such distinctions, careful definitions of terms, and concern for contemporary theological debates and pastoral implications are characteristic (on faith and mystical union with Christ: “as always, vagueness and generality expose us to error” (5.43).

Some questions and answers are brisk and catechetical (“What is regeneration? Regeneration is an immediate re-creation of the sinful nature by God the Holy Spirit and an implanting into the body of Christ.” 2.1). Others are hard work, requiring patient concentration (the answer to “What is the connection of conversion to faith?” carries on over three pages; 3.14). Still others would make challenging exam questions for theo-

logical students or, indeed, for candidates on the floor of presbytery (“Can you show that the inherent righteousness of the regenerate does not come into consideration with God as the judicial basis for their justification?” 5.30). But notwithstanding—or rather, because of—such rigor and careful distinctions, many passages sing.

Take, as a particular example, aspects of Vos’ treatment of justification in Chapter 5. Given ongoing debates over the precise relationship of faith to justification, of justification to sanctification, of justification to union with Christ, and of charges of legalism and antinomianism, this chapter has a lot to offer. Repeatedly, Vos insists on the legal, forensic character of justification (and adoption, 5.17). So, in 5.32, we read:

Is it true that this doctrine of imputed righteousness opens the door to antinomianism?

a) No, for the imputation of the merits of the Mediator is not something that remains outside of us but has as a consequence our subjective re-creation. Justification is thus in a judicial sense the root of our sanctification. Where the former is present, the latter cannot remain in abeyance.

b) As far as the temporal order is concerned, regeneration even appears, along with conversion, before justification. No one says that he is aware of standing righteous before God who is not regenerate and has not received a new principle of life. From this it follows that his conviction regarding justification will also be governed by this new principle that seeks God’s glory in all things (cf. Gal. 2:19, “... so that I might live to God.”).

Earlier, in Chapter 4, during his discussion of faith, we glimpse Vos’ philosophical chops as he interweaves the biblical data concerning be-

lief with epistemological reflections that interact briefly with Locke, Kant and others, all this en route to linking faith explicitly to the notion of testimony. As Vos parses the concepts of knowledge and faith, one cannot help but wonder what kinds of formative interactions he would have with the young Cornelius Van Til as he lectured at Princeton in the coming decades. (We know that Van Til studied under Vos before joining him as a colleague at Old Princeton. Van Til preached from 2 Corinthians 5:1 to a mere handful of people in attendance at Vos’ interment in August of 1949. He is reported to have said at one point, “Dr. Vos was the greatest pedagogue I ever sat under.”)

Later, at the close of Chapter 5, while reflecting on apostasy and the perseverance of the saints in relation to sanctification, Vos spends four pages engaging in a “theological exegesis” of Hebrews 6:4-8 (setting it wonderfully in context within the unit 5:12–6:20).

All in all, this is a rich and thought-provoking volume. It builds systematically on insights and positions taken in the previous three volumes (Theology Proper, Anthropology, and Christology) and leaves us eager for the publication of the final Volume Five (Ecclesiology, the Means of Grace, Eschatology).

Perhaps, like me, you have studied carefully Vos’ redemptive-historical method and have loved watching him pitch beautifully from the mound. If so, then you will also enjoy seeing him step into the batter’s box and, in Reformed Dogmatics, swing the systematic bat with skill and success.

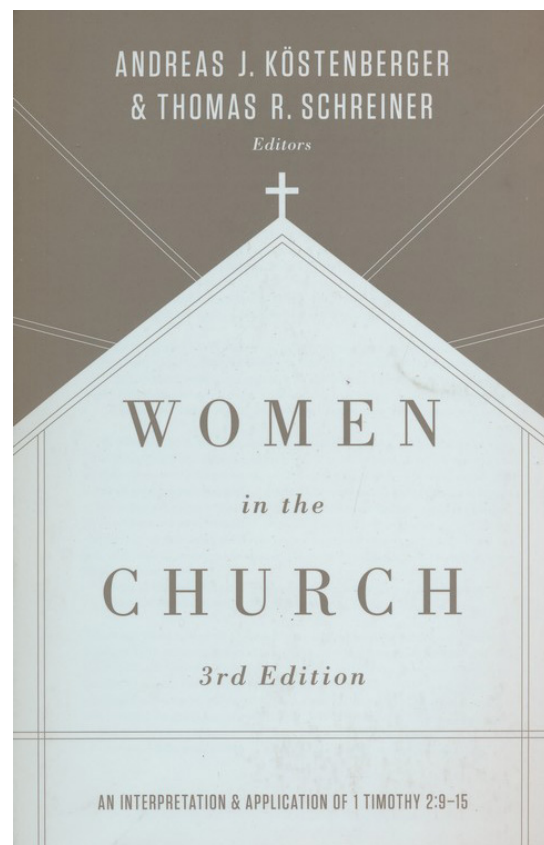
*Brad Bitner is Tutor of New Testament, Greek, and Biblical Theology at Oak Hill Theological College. ■*

# A STRONG CASE FOR COMPLIMENTARIANISM

*Why the Traditional Interpretation of 2 Timothy 2 is Best*

by Jessalyn Hutto

**T**he biblical case for distinct gender roles within the church has faced increasing scrutiny over the past several decades. As secular feminism has gained greater influence over the western evangelical church, traditional convictions of male leadership have been called into question, and the scholarship that supports such convictions has been challenged by those who would fashion a new and more palatable interpretation of Scripture – an interpretation that seems to better fit the context of our modern, gender-neutral society. Indeed, as the idea of gender itself has all but disappeared from modern secular thought, convictions of male authority and female submission within the church aren't merely seen as archaic (as they once were) but downright laughable. The modern Christian is forced to ask himself why he believes that a passage such as



1 Timothy 2:9-15, which restricts women from teaching or holding authority in the local church, actually means what it seems to say when it stands in such stark contrast to the culture at large.

*Women in the Church: An Interpretation and Application of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, edited by Andreas J. Kostenberger and Thomas R. Schreiner has provided a scholarly treatment of this difficult passage for over three decades. This third edition of *Women in the Church*, published by Crossway (2016), has received more than a face-lift. Indeed, many of the chapters have been rewritten, happily taking into account new data made available to scholars today.

Most notably, Al Wolters has skillfully taken up the treatment of the verb *authenteo* in the place of Henry Scott Baldwin. Denny Burk has contribut-

ed a new chapter defending the historical tradition of a non-pejorative translation of *authenteo* and calling into question the controversial updates found in the 2011 NIV. A final chapter focusing on application was altered, this time featuring a virtual round table made up of six gifted women who serve in their churches under the authority of men and one male pastor. It considers the practical outworking of the book's interpretation of 1 Timothy 2 from various perspectives.

The book begins with a helpful survey of the historical context of first-century Ephesus which provides a backdrop for Paul's instructions to the church there. Is it plausible, as some would suggest, that Paul is responding to a unique social issue facing Ephesus and thus rendering these restrictions on women a moot point for the global church? After sharing a thorough survey of the historical data, S.M. Baugh argues against such claims concluding that, "Ephesus's society and religion . . . shared typical features with many other contemporary Greco-Roman cities . . . Hence, we have every reason to expect that when Paul restricted women from teaching and exercising rule through special office over a man, he applied it to 'every place' (v.8)" (60-61).


Of course, at the heart of this book is the question of whether or not the Greek verb *authenteo* should be read pejoratively, ingressively, or neither. If 1 Timothy does not bar women from exercising authority over men in the church in general, but simply admonishes them not to usurp authority or domineer over the men in their congregations, then well-meaning, gifted women who are raised to positions of authority within their church needn't have their feathers too ruffled by Paul's admonition. If, however, the traditional interpre-

tation of *authenteo* ("to have authority") stands as the most natural and accurate interpretation, then these women are standing in opposition to God's holy design for the church. Therefore, what Paul means when he uses the verb *authenteo* is of great significance.

*Women in the Church* provides a thorough and compelling defense of the traditional interpretation of this word. Beginning in chapter 2, Wolters provides a detailed and technical survey of the overwhelming evidence in favor of a traditional understanding of *authenteo* while questioning the validity and at times existence of evidence to the contrary. Most convincing was the clear demonstration of *authenteo* commonly occurring "in Christian contexts with God or Jesus Christ as its subject" (113).

The chapters that follow build upon Wolters' treatment of the verb *authenteo*, exploring the syntax of 1 Timothy 2:12, interpreting the larger passage as a whole, and applying a sound hermeneutic to our exegesis. Each of these chapters and their authors work hand in hand. The result is one cohesive volume dedicated to defending the historic understanding of Paul's words, born "not out of prejudice or partisanship" (342), but out of a commitment to faithful historical, linguistic, and biblical study. It will continue to serve as an indispensable resource for pastors and lay people who desire to have a better understanding of the debate surrounding 1 Timothy 2 and the overwhelming evidence for a traditional interpretation.

*Jessalyn Hutto*

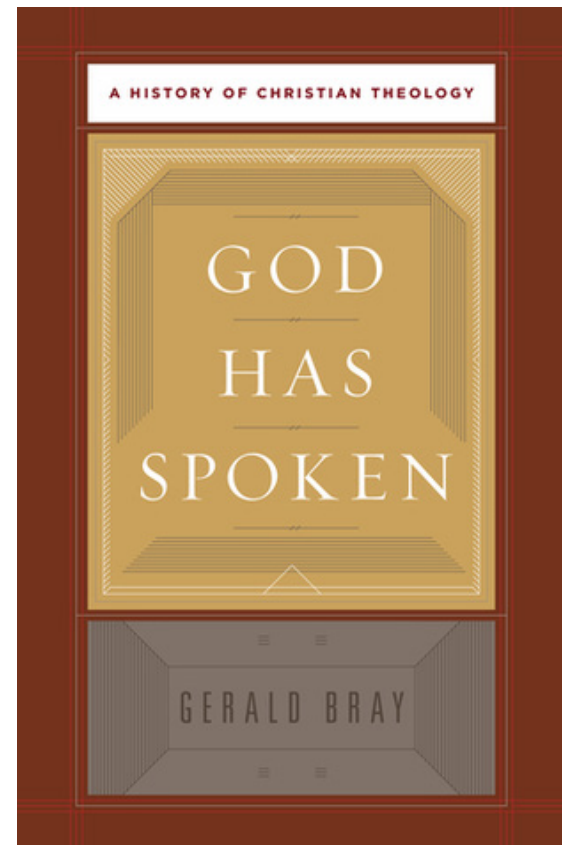
*Author of Inheritance of Tears: Trusting the Lord of Life When Death Visits the Womb* 

# A FRESH APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

*Gerald Bray's Massive Work is a  
Big Step in the Right Direction*

by Gary Steward

**P**astors, biblical scholars, and theologians need a solid grasp of the history and the development of Christian theology in order to wisely and carefully navigate the perennial theological issues that face the church in each generation. Classic works like William Cunningham's two-volume *Historical Theology* (1882) and Louis Berkhof's concise *History of Christian Doctrines* (1937) continue to be extremely valuable in this area, but fresh presentations are needed that address contemporary issues and trends as well. Jaroslav Pelikan's *The Christian Tradition* (1873-1990) is a very helpful work, but consists of five extensive volumes. Bengt Hägglund's *History of Theology* (2007) is also extremely helpful and very readable. Gregg Allison has recently published his *Historical Theology* (2011), which is arranged



to serve as a supplement to Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. W. G. T. Shedd, Geoffrey Bromiley, Justo González, Alistair McGrath, Roger Olson and others have also produced texts on historical theology that have various strengths and readability levels as well.

Gerald Bray, Research Professor of Divinity, History, and Doctrine at Beeson Divinity School and Director of Research for the Latimer Trust, has penned his own unique contribution to the area of historical theology in his large survey of Christian theology, *God Has Spoken: A History of Christian Theology* (Crossway, 2014). The uniqueness of his volume lies primarily in its organization. Instead of being organized chronologically or around specific doctrines, the volume integrates


these two approaches around a broadly Trinitarian structure. The eight section headings are as follows: “The Israelite Legacy,” “The Person of the Father,” “The Work of the Father,” “The Person of the Son,” “The Work of the Son,” “The Person of the Holy Spirit,” “The Work of the Holy Spirit,” and “One God in Three Persons.”

Bray explains his rationale for this organization as follows: “Today we live in a climate where the doctrine of the Trinity has assumed a new prominence in theological discussion. ...It therefore seems logical and appropriate to adopt a Trinitarian framework as the basis for explaining historical theology in the current context” (16-17). Bray gently critiques the approach taken by Allison of taking “individual doctrines and trac[ing] their history.” According to Bray, this approach overly atomizes the individual doctrines, leads to oversimplification, and ignores the interconnectedness of each individual doctrine.

The result of Bray’s unique approach is a very rich and thoughtful discussion of the nature and work of our Triune God as it has been discussed throughout church history. All other doctrinal discussions and historical expressions of thought are connected with the person and work of each member of the Trinity. Some might find the organization of Bray’s book difficult to navigate, but the richness of Trinitarian discussion makes up for whatever would be gained with a strictly chronological or piecemeal approach. Further, there are extensive indexes to help make use of this book purely as a reference work.

Bray’s *God Has Spoken* will not appeal to all or be accessible to those who lack a basic acquaintance with historical theology. The works of Allison, Hägglund, or Berkhof might be more suited

to beginners. For those who are wanting to be more richly Trinitarian in their thinking and wrestle through how the doctrine of the Trinity affects all other doctrines, Bray’s extensive work fills a unique niche. It is hoped that this book (and the doctrine of the Trinity!) will become more and more valued in today’s church.

*Gary Steward*  
*Assistant Professor of History*  
*Colorado Christian University* 

# BARRETT'S BOOK NOTES

*Awakening the Evangelical Mind  
An Intellectual History of the Neo-Evangelical Movement  
by Owen Strachan  
Zondervan, 2015*

If you want to understand Evangelicalism today then it is essential to know something about the neo-evangelical movement of the early twentieth-century and its key representatives. Doing so will only help the evangelical today identify that which sets him or her apart from fundamentalists on the one hand and liberals on the other hand. Owen Strachan's new book is just the resource we need to get in touch with our evangelical roots. I especially appreciate Strachan's attention to Harold Ockenga, a key leader in his day, setting a vision for the future of Christian intellectualism. Carl Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, George Eldon Ladd, John Gerstner, and others also receive attention. Here is a book every evangelical should read, absorb, and learn from. It certainly will clarify our evangelical heritage, one we seem to be increasingly losing our grip on.

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*My Final Word  
Holding Tight to the Issues that Matter Most  
by Charles Colson with Anne Morse  
Zondervan, 2015*

Charles Colson has proved to be one of the most prophetic voices of our time. The former presidential aide to Richard Nixon spoke with boldness, unafraid to address the controversial issues of our day, encouraging Christians not to compromise their evangelical values and convictions. With his recent death, this book allows readers one last chance to hear Colson confront issues like Islam, same-sex marriage, crime and punishment, natural law, and the persecution of Christians. Though gone, his voice can still be heard.

*Martin Luther's 95 Theses  
with Introduction, Commentary, and Study Guide  
by Timothy J. Wengert  
Fortress Press, 2015*

In light of the upcoming anniversary of the Reformation, the publishing world is bursting at the seams once again with books on Martin Luther. So far Wengert's *Martin Luther's 95 Theses* is one of my favorites. Wengert focuses his attention on what factors led Luther to write his famous theses, which many historians have pointed to as a starting point for the sixteenth-century Protestant reform movement (though Luther could not have known it at the time). The reason I like Wengert's book so much is because he very clearly explains medieval Catholicism and why Luther reacted against it. This is hard to do because medieval soteriology is so complex. Yet Wengert is a tour guide that will explain the year 1517 with ease. Short, accessible, and exciting, put Wengert's book on your shelf this Reformation season.

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*Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God  
A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation  
by Vern S. Poythress  
Crossway, 2016*

Vern Poythress is one of those authors to keep up with (if you can). He writes on a wide variety of topics, bringing insight to each. But one of his specialty areas is hermeneutics. In his new introduction to hermeneutics, Poythress teaches the Christian how to read the Bible. His approach, however, is practical and pastoral, reminding the Christian that every time he reads his Bible he does so in the presence of God. This is not just a book for academics or students, but one that every pastor should dig through as it will guide him in how to interpret the Bible as he prepares to preach God's Word.



*John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*  
*A Biography*  
by Bruce Gordon  
Princeton University Press, 2016

This is not your typical book on Calvin. Gordon makes clear from the start that it is not a theology of Calvin, nor is it a history of Calvinism. Instead, says Gordon, he intends to “take the reader on a journey from the desk of the young John Calvin in Basel in 1536 to our world of social media religion by following the lives of one of the great books of the European Reformation, the Institutes of the Christian Religion.” And that Gordon does very well. The book is a fascinating one. Regardless of whether you agree with all of Gordon’s conclusions, Gordon takes you down expected and unexpected paths as he traces the influence of Calvin’s Institutes. This one-of-a-kind biography is just another reminder of how effectively the Lord has used the theology of the Institutes across the globe and through the ages.

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*Core Christianity*  
*Finding Yourself in God's Story*  
by Michael Horton  
Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016

If you find theology books hard to read, but nonetheless desire to learn and understand the core doctrine of the Christian faith, then this is the book for you. Horton will walk you through the basic beliefs of Christianity, demonstrating that they are biblically rooted and extremely important for life as a Christian. Along the way he will also introduce you to important historical figures, good and bad, providing historical insight to the discussion. I think this would be a fantastic book for church small groups to work through...and pray through!

*C. S. Lewis's Mere Christianity*  
*A Biography*  
by George M. Marsden  
Princeton University Press, 2016

In my experience, if there is a book almost every Christian (and sometimes non-Christian) has read it is *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Fitting nicely within the *Lives of Great Religious Books* series, George Marsden’s biography is a window into one of Christianity’s great classics. Marsden, one of the top historians of our day, takes us on a tour, starting with Lewis’s conversion as an atheist only to transition into the story of how *Mere Christianity* evolved. Marsden also moves past Lewis to explore how *Mere Christianity* changed the lives of figures like Charles Colson. If *Mere Christianity* played a significant role in your conversion, you will be intrigued to learn how God has used this classic to convert countless others.

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*Thomas Aquinas's Summa theologiae*  
by Bernard McGinn  
Princeton University Press, 2014

Unfortunately, Thomas Aquinas is not a historical figure many Christians today are familiar with and this is due in part because Christians are generally unacquainted with the medieval period. It is also due to the inaccessibility and difficulty of Aquinas’s writings. I hope McGinn’s new biography of Aquinas’s magnum opus, the *Summa theologiae*, will remedy this disease. McGinn highlights the contribution Aquinas has made to theology, but he also traces the reception of Aquinas up to the present day in a variety of circles. For novices, this book is not the easiest reading, but don’t let that keep you from getting to know this colossal theologian.

## B.B. WARFIELD ON THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS

Fred G. Zaspel

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Old Princeton Seminary was founded with stated objectives to produce students who were both highly learned and deeply “religious” – “spiritual” is the word we more commonly use today. The school was to be, “under the blessing of God, a nursery of vital piety as well as of sound theological learning, and to train up persons for the ministry who shall be lovers as well as defenders of the truth as it is in Jesus, friends of revivals of religion, and a blessing to the church of God.” The professors would seek to “unite, in those who shall sustain the ministerial office, religion and literature; that piety of the heart which is the fruit only of the renewing and sanctifying grace of God, with solid learning; believing that religion without learning, or learning without religion, in the ministers of the Gospel, must ultimately prove injurious to the Church.” The decided effort was not just to produce scholars but to “build up Christian men.”

Theological learning is a given at a seminary, of course, and the learning of Old Princeton gained for

it an international reputation. But from the beginning measures were put in place to accomplish the specifically “religious” goal also: morning and evening student-led prayer gatherings, daily chapel services, Wednesday evening faculty sermons focusing on the Christian life, two Sabbath Day services, classroom prayers as often as the professor deemed fitting, multiple reading assignments of specifically “religious” works (such as Owen’s *Spiritual Mindedness*), and so on. It is not surprising to hear students testify, recalling their days at Old Princeton, that “religious truth filled the very air” and that unless the student was given to genuine piety he just did not fit in.

One measure taken from the beginning to promote genuine piety was the “Introductory Lecture” at the opening of each new school year, a lecture that addressed the life of the Christian and the preparation for ministry. The 1911 Lecture given by B.B. Warfield was entitled, “The Religious Life of Theological Students,” a subject he characterized as “the most important subject which can engage our thought.”

Warfield's lecture is widely recognized as insightful on several levels. In the latter half of his lecture he zeroes in, for example, on the vital importance of private prayer and regular attendance at public worship, and he presses the application at some length with penetrating insight. But the most outstanding contribution of his lecture is his firm insistence from the outset that for the theological student there can be no separation of learning and devotion. It is of course possible to divorce theological studies from religious concerns, as Warfield acknowledges. But what a monstrous, distorted pursuit that would be. "Nothing could be more fatal" to the theological student. "There can be no 'either-or' – either a student or a man of God. You must be both." Neither the intellectual nor the affectionate aspects of personal preparation can ever be ignored.

That the religious aspect of student life must be pursued is readily acknowledged by all sides, and Warfield asserts that "before and above being learned, a minister must be godly." Even so, he insists that the intellectual preparation so necessary for theological students must be no less a religious pursuit. He utterly rejects the all-too-common assumption that religious devotion and theological studies are separate pursuits.

Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. "What!" is the appropriate response, "than ten hours over your books on your knees?" Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed.

Warfield points out the absurdity of such an idea, but the notion is common, perhaps even prevailing. "It is barely possible that there may be some among you

who think of them too much apart – who are inclined to set their studies off to one side, and their religious life off to the other side, and to fancy that what is given to the one is taken from the other. No mistake could be more gross."

For any Christian man his given vocation ought to be pursued "heartily, as to the Lord." But the theological student in particular is one whose very "tools of the trade" are themselves immediately suited to religious development. For the theological student intellectual pursuits must be at the same time religious pursuits or he has failed already.

It is surely not all right with the spiritual condition of that man who can busy himself daily with divine things, with a cold and impassive heart.... Whatever you may have done in the past, for the future make all your theological studies "religious exercises." This is the great rule for a rich and wholesome religious life in a theological student. Put your heart into your studies; do not merely occupy your mind with them, but put your heart into them. They bring you daily and hourly into the very presence of God.

In brief, Warfield insists, the work assigned in the theological seminary must itself become "a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in your Maker and your Savior." For Warfield, divinely revealed truth is the very stuff on which the Christian is made to thrive; how could it be otherwise?

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