

The Cornerstone Journal of Pastoral Theology and Ministry
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Theme: Exalting Christ: A Tribute to the Life and Ministry of Steve Fernandez

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FEATURED ARTICLES

Exalting Christ: The Legacy of Steve Fernandez

Ryan L. Rippee*

Introduction

“We want Christ to come here! Not somebody that’s known around the country, around the world. We want Christ to come here! Let him come through the doors! He’s who we need! He’s what our people need....By God’s grace he can raise up men who can preach this. May God, if he so chooses, grant that he can use this for his glory, [be]cause he uses crooked sticks to draw straight lines.”¹ Steve Fernandez uttered these words in 2004 before an audience of pastors, professors, students, and friends, who were gathered to celebrate the inauguration of The Cornerstone Seminary in Vallejo, California. Born of his desire to train Christ-exalting, Spirit-sent men who would be faithful to preach the Word and glory in the cross, the seminary stands as an enduring legacy of Fernandez’s pulpit ministry.

Fernandez did not come from a Christian home, was not part of a movement or denomination, and was not connected to anyone with influence. Nothing in his life would say, on a superficial level, that God was going to use him in any great way. He was neither polished nor eloquent, and yet he was greatly effective in persuading and motivating men to proclaim the glories of Christ. One thing was clear from his life and ministry: Fernandez was captivated by the splendor and majesty of his Savior, and endeavored to preach Christ in his absolute supremacy and all sufficiency.

As we consider his life and ministry, we are going to see five distinguishing characteristics that are greatly needed in our current generation. First, Steve was awed by Christ’s glorious supremacy and all-sufficiency. This wonder served as the foundation of everything he sought to accomplish. Second, he was constrained by Christ’s eternal, infinite love, which fueled his ministry.

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¹Steve Fernandez, “Christ’s Infinite Fulness” (Sermon presented at the Inaugural Service, The Cornerstone Seminary, Vallejo, CA, September 27, 2004), accessed October 17, 2013, http://www.cbvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=8394.

Third, he was committed to Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered exposition of Scripture as the inerrant, all-sufficient Word of God. Fourth, he was impassioned to spread the glory of Christ to all peoples. Finally, he was saturated with a loving shepherd's heart for the people under his care. Fernandez was a man who was determined to glorify God by exalting the person and work of Christ, and in this we find an example of pastoral ministry that convicts, heals, comforts, encourages, and transforms those he served to the glory of Christ.

Biography

Born on November 14, 1948 to Carroll and Annie Fernandez, Stephen Lawrence Fernandez was the second oldest (the oldest brother) in a family of nine children: Susan, Stephen, Mary, Matthew, the twins John and Mark, Jeffrey, Brian, and Paul. The Fernandezes were a family of Portuguese ranchers who raised cattle on a ranch in Franklin Canyon between the cities of Martinez and Hercules, California. Their ancestor, Bernardo Fernandez, had arrived in California in 1853 and settled in the area and through his mercantile business and real estate investments eventually helped to found the city of Pinole, California.

Steve's initial encounters with the gospel didn't go well. One day when Steve was in the cafeteria at Hayward State University, a young man got up on a table and started proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Everyone started booing and throwing food. Steve joined in, throwing his lunch at him and cussing him out.

In 1970, Fernandez's brother Matt was converted and began to share the gospel with his family. After six months of strong opposition and out of a desire to refute Matt's devotion, Fernandez passionately grabbed a Bible and began reading through the Gospel of Matthew. Upon reaching Matthew 7:25–27, the Spirit opened Fernandez's heart to believe the gospel. He was converted and "this same passion to prove his brother wrong was transformed by God's saving grace into a passion to preach the gospel of Christ to the world."² Fernandez, along with his brothers, started a Bible study at their ranch. Within months, as many as sixty friends and neighbors gathered in their home on Monday nights to worship and learn about Jesus.

In October of 1971 Pastor Phil Howard planted Valley Bible Church in neighboring Pinole, California. Shortly thereafter, through pastor Frank Griffith, Howard heard about the Fernandez group and went to see the ministry for himself. Although Howard was first suspicious, a kindred relationship formed and Fernandez came under Howard's tutelage. It did not take long for Fernandez to sense a calling to pastoral preaching ministry.

²Karen Fernandez, Adam Gordon, and Troy Joseph, *Christ Exalted: A Life Well-Lived*, Funeral Program, April 6, 2013.

After finishing up his degree in philosophy at Hayward, he enrolled at Dallas Theological Seminary. At the same time, the seeds of Grace School of Theology and Ministry were sown in the leadership training classes led by Frank Griffith and Phil Howard. Fernandez was a student in the first two years of Expository Greek classes. In 1976, Fernandez came on staff at Valley Bible Church as the associate pastor and wanted to formalize the school, so he created a catalog and established a two-year program.³ He would continue to teach systematic theology, Bible exposition, and preaching classes at the school for the next twenty-five years. These early years of training gave him an enthusiasm for expository preaching and the doctrines of God's sovereign grace that served as lynchpins of his entire life in ministry.

In 1977, Fernandez was burdened to plant a church and so began praying. His prayers were answered three years later in October of 1980 when he was sent out with the blessing of Valley Bible Church to Vallejo, California to plant Community Bible Church (CBC). Commenting on the need to be Christ-called and Spirit-sent, Fernandez said, "When I came to Vallejo to start the church, they gave me salary for one week. That'll get you praying. 'Lord, if you don't want this, you stop it. Don't let people get behind me. Don't let there be any resources.' The rest is history."⁴ The first service was on October 19, 1980 and attended by about ten families in the American Legion Hall, Post 550 on Admiral Callahan Lane.

Despite the lack of resources and money, and even though the Legion Hall often smelled of beer and crab from the previous night's feed, the Lord added to their number and it became a spiritual refuge for many who heard the gospel and were transformed by Christ. From the beginning, Fernandez was committed to systematic discipleship, including the writing of curriculum and the commitment to home groups. The first home fellowship group began in Vega's home, along with children's ministries.⁵

In those early years, Steve's desire was to reach the culturally diverse population of Vallejo, and so Steve and others began praying that CBC would reach the "tribes, tongues, peoples, and nations" around them. In the providence of God and in answer to prayer, one Sunday in 1984 over twenty young Filipinos showed up at the corporate gathering. Among this group was Ray Palompo, who would become the youth pastor and elder at the church and later be sent out to plant Island Grace in Hawaii. In 1985, the youth

³Frank Griffith, interviewed by author, Brentwood, CA, November 19, 2013.

⁴Steve Fernandez, "Faith and Vision for Christ Exalting Ministry" (Sermon presented at the Angelo Tolentino's Commissioning as a Missionary, Community Bible Church, January 9, 2011), accessed November 1, 2013, http://www.cbvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=43275.

⁵Including a study of John called *Basic Discipleship*, a study of systematic theology called *Basic Bible Doctrine: A Study for Discipleship*.

ministry started a summer volleyball tournament. As youth were converting to Christ in large numbers, their friends, parents, and families followed. Thus, in the first thirty years, CBC grew to about one thousand faithful attendees.

Not everything was smooth sailing, however. In 1988, CBC experienced a church split. Although the painful ordeal almost broke CBC and its leaders, Fernandez's wife Karen, reflecting on that time, wrote, "God greatly used this trial in Steve's life to shape the future of his preaching, as well as the direction and life of the local church and its impact on the lives of its members as well as ministry partners around the world."⁶ Over the next few years, Fernandez became convinced not only of Christ-centered preaching, but also developing a passion for global missions. At this same time, in the providence of God, the church received an influx of young adults. Much like his own experience, Fernandez now had a crop of young men to equip for the advance of the kingdom.

Throughout the 1990s, Fernandez began to focus on his writing ministry. Largely based upon his sermon outlines, his publications were expositional in nature and always made connection to the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ. During these years, Fernandez also grew in his burden to equip and train pastors and leaders globally as well as locally. Over the remainder of his life, he had opportunity to preach and train men in the Philippines, Uganda, South Africa, Australia, Germany, Honduras, India, Myanmar, Spain, and Mexico. In line with this burden, he established the missions agency, Exalting Christ Ministries International, in 2002.

Although he had been teaching at Grace School of Theology and Ministry for twenty-five years, Fernandez had a burden to establish a seminary to meet the growing needs of like-minded churches in the San Francisco Bay Area. Believing that preaching is the primary means God uses to build his church, advance the gospel, and glorify Christ in the world, the seminary has been staffed with professors who are, and always have been, fruitful in preaching and pastoral ministry. As the first president and one of the core faculty, Fernandez gave his last years imparting a passion and vision for the supremacy of Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered preaching to the life of the church and the advance of the gospel.

As CBC continued to grow and thrive, the church was faced with a shocking new challenge when in September of 2013, Steve Fernandez was diagnosed with the most lethal type of brain cancer—Glioblastoma.

Again, Karen writes, "For the last seven months of his life, Steve battled a cancerous brain tumor. Even in this, Steve's aim was to point to Christ. He knew that God had given him this tumor so that through it, Christ would be exalted. And He was."⁷ Steve Fernandez went home to be with the Lord on

⁶Karen Fernandez, *Christ Exalted*.

⁷Karen Fernandez, *Christ Exalted*.

March 31, 2013. At his funeral service, attended by well over 1000 people, his longtime co-laborer and friend Philip Foley preached from Ephesians 3:8, summing up the goal and pattern of Fernandez's preaching: "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Awed by Christ's Glorious Supremacy and All-Sufficiency

Fernandez was convinced that every true believer is gripped with an awe and wonder of the glory of Christ. Addressing the Cornerstone Seminary graduating class of 2010, he preached 1 Peter 2:9–10 and explained what it means to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."⁸ First, Fernandez argued, "[Christ] is the one who exalts ill-deserving sinners to an inconceivably privileged status as God's treasured and prized people." Second, "He effectually calls people by the power of God into his grace and into this standing." Third, "He gives to his people and they enjoy from Christ all that they have entirely by his mercy." Fourth, "His people now exist by grace and mercy as God-centered, Christ-centered people whose purpose is to exalt and magnify his matchless perfections and excellencies." He charged the graduates, "Our purpose is to exalt and tell forth the joyous reality of the perfections and excellencies of his being that constitute and make him wondrous and glorious; that which we've experienced."

For Fernandez, a wonder of Christ's excellencies was essential for preaching—and it was a feature that marked his own sermons. Dr. Michael Canham, a professor at The Cornerstone Seminary and a member of the church, described him this way:

Steve never got over what Jesus had done for Him in saving Him out of the drug culture of the 60s, etc., and what always impressed me is that he always preached as if Jesus had just saved him yesterday. There was a certain child-likeness to his preaching; he was still in that first-love stage that seemed to intensify even more (rather than dimming) the older he got. It was a powerful way of communicating the ongoing truth of Romans 1:16.⁹

⁸Steve Fernandez, "The Christ We Preach" (Sermon presented at the Graduation Service, The Cornerstone Seminary, June 20, 2010), accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.cbvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=39375.

⁹Michael Canham, email to author, Brentwood, CA, November 14, 2013.

Fernandez was oft to quote the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, “Christ is his own attraction.”¹⁰ Because of Christ’s supremacy, there is a beauty, a majestic glory to him that stuns and captivates. To Fernandez, it is a self-vindicating glory, for he is the one who attracts and converts. Furthermore, his supremacy is seen consummately in the incarnation. In an exposition of Colossians 1, Fernandez writes of the threefold glory of Christ’s incarnation: (1) The glory of the *constitution* of his person as the supreme God-man; (2) the glory of his *condescension* from his exalted position, revealing the supremacy of his humility and mercy; and (3) the glory of the *consequences* of the incarnation for his people, revealing the glory of his person and work.¹¹ Elsewhere Fernandez ties the supremacy of Christ to the Spirit’s work:

There is simply no substitute for preaching Christ. Christ possesses, in His person and work an infinite beauty and glory. He possesses a glory that the Spirit of God is impassioned to exalt and magnify. Jesus said of the Spirit, “He will glorify me, for He will take of mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are mine; therefore I said that He takes of mine and will disclose it to you” (John 16:14–15). The Spirit’s passion is to exalt and glorify Christ. There is not a more Christ-centered, Christ-exalting person in the universe than the Spirit. The Spirit came into the world for this very purpose.¹²

Fernandez was not only transfixed by the supremacy of Christ, but also Christ’s all-sufficiency. He was convinced as a pastor that his people needed to have their confidence restored in Christ’s ability to deliver and make whole, regardless of the degree that sin had wrecked a life. Therefore, he was adamant that the integration of psychology with Christianity and the deliverance model of spiritual warfare were issues central to the gospel because each concerned how people were delivered from their sin. Because they both undermined the gospel, they diminish the sufficiency and therefore the glory of Christ.

In response to the attack on Christ’s sufficiency, he wrote the book, *The All-Sufficient Savior*, publishing it one chapter at a time.¹³ In it, he desired to present Christ as “a vast reservoir or an ocean of supply for what ails those

¹⁰Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Vol III*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1855–1917), 257.

¹¹Steve Fernandez, *Mery and Majesty: The Supreme Glory of Christ*, (Vallejo, CA: Cornerstone Publishing, 2002), 8–25.

¹²Steve Fernandez, *Exalting Christ: Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World* (Vallejo, CA: Exalting Christ Publishing, 2011), 14–15.

¹³Steve Fernandez, *The All-Sufficient Savior: Exalting Christ in His Soul-Healing Power* (Vallejo, CA: Exalting Christ Publishing, 2009).

in great emotional and spiritual need.”¹⁴ Thus, he addressed the subject of emotional healing, “a central element of the work of Christ, both in the new birth and in sanctification, is to effect a great change in ruined and damaged emotions.”¹⁵ He addressed the subject of the brokenhearted, “the prominent feature of [Jesus] presence and work in the world is the healing, restoring, and delivering of broken and downtrodden people.”¹⁶ And he addresses the subject of depression:

There is one compelling reason that has moved me to deal with these matters. Ultimately, it is not an issue of counseling philosophy or whether psychology can be integrated with Scripture. The issue is far more significant than this...the issue is people’s conception of the greatness and power of Christ. He is the glorious, all-sufficient Savior who delivers from the bondage and brokenness of sin.¹⁷

Fernandez’s life was one beholden to Christ, and was determined in every sermon to make a beeline to the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. A sermon on 2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6 is exemplary.¹⁸ Commenting on the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 4:4), Fernandez says, “What we do see in conversion is the light of the gospel, it’s the glory of Christ...We see the full spectrum of all of the glorious perfections of God in conversion. They are emblazoned upon us.” And later:

This sight of the sufficiency of Christ through the word preached is the only thing that converts, and according to Paul here, it is the only thing that sanctifies and transforms. This is why you can preach principles all day long, steps all day long without Christ, and your church doesn’t ever seem to mature. It is the sight of Christ that matures people.¹⁹

Constrained by Christ’s Eternal, Infinite Love

“Gripped by the fact that Christ loved [the apostle Paul], died to redeem and pardon even him, it is now his personal experience,” Fernandez wrote, “He

¹⁴Fernandez, *The All-Sufficient Savior*, 15.

¹⁵Fernandez, *The All-Sufficient Savior*, 48.

¹⁶Fernandez, *The All-Sufficient Savior*, 61.

¹⁷Fernandez, *The All-Sufficient Savior*, 129.

¹⁸Steve Fernandez, “Christ Glorified in His All-Sufficiency” (Sermon presented at the Exalting Christ Conference, Vallejo, CA, September 10, 2009), accessed November 3, 2013, <http://www.exaltingchristministries.org/downloads/2009-Session-3.mp3>.

¹⁹ Fernandez, “Christ Glorified in His All-Sufficiency.”

has been captured by Christ.”²⁰ Preaching on 2 Corinthians 5:14–21, Fernandez continued a pattern he started decades before. Every first Sunday evening of the month, CBC celebrated communion. In every communion service, Fernandez preached on the cross work of Christ. Fernandez believed Christ’s work was rooted in the doctrines of God’s sovereign grace and was manifested in two major doctrines: justification (what God has done *for* us) and regeneration (what God has done *in* us). Communion was the ordinance given to the church so that they would remember his love and marvel at his work. Later in his sermon, Fernandez asserts:

That’s what preaching is. Announce this. There is nothing for them to do. I don’t care how high they have sinned, or how deep into the bowels of hell they’ve gone with their evil. I am ready right now to forgive them, because my Son removed their offense. Preach it and announce it. That’s what he says in [verses] 19 and 20.

Fernandez loved the theology of the Reformers and the Puritans. He also loved the manner in which they conveyed their theology to the flock, and believed that “heart religion” rooted in the eternal love of the Father was the only foundation for true revival preaching. “The fact that election so abases man and exalts God’s love and mercy may account for the fact that in nearly every great movement of God, unconditional election and God’s free mercy was at the center of what was preached.”²¹ At the Cornerstone Seminary, it was one of the presuppositions of “soul-piercing” preaching:

Preaching is to be done with an awareness of the deadness and hardness of the unregenerated human heart...it is to be done with an awareness that God must move on the heart (2 Thessalonians 2:17; 3:4–5). It must be done with the understanding that even in Christians God must work for ‘it is God who is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure’ (Philippians 2:13). The preacher must consciously aim to go beyond the head to the heart.²²

²⁰Steve Fernandez, “The Great Exchange: Christ Made Sin for Us” (Sermon, Community Bible Church, December 6, 2009), accessed November 18, 2013, http://media.sermonsonline.com/cbcvallejo_35297_32K.mp3.

²¹Stephen Fernandez, “Election: God’s Unchanging Love for His People,” ed. John H. Armstrong, *Reformation and Revival Spring 1998* (April 1, 1998), 89.

²²Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit: A Biblical Theology of Christ-Centered Expository Preaching,” Unpublished Class Notes (The Cornerstone Seminary, 2012), 93.

Fernandez believed that one of the greatest demonstrations of God's love is displayed in the doctrine of justification. He taught that a believer's understanding of justification affects their concept of God's grace and mercy, their concept of assurance, and most importantly their understanding of the glory of Christ.

A person's understanding of how God, by Christ's blood and obedience justifies an ill-deserving sinner determines the degree that Christ is glorified. If our works are entirely excluded from justification, then Christ is entirely and rightly glorified...and if He is rightly glorified, He will be rightly worshipped with a heart-affection and a soul-adoration that He alone deserves.²³

For Fernandez, the positional truth of "Christ for us" was a non-negotiable of faithful preaching. He called it the "objective work of Christ," and expected that the forensic aspects of Christ's atonement would produce real life change in the heart of a Christian as they live out who they are in Christ. "There is no greater incentive to obedience than the realization that, though we are totally ill-deserving, we are fully and forever accepted because of God's free mercy and infinite love. In other words, there is no greater incentive to loving obedience than love itself."²⁴

Not only was legal union with Christ indispensable to biblical preaching, so too was vital union with Christ. Because Fernandez saw how a faulty view of regeneration had adversely affected life and ministry in the church,²⁵ he was committed to preaching monergistic regeneration.

Regeneration [is] the radical transformation of a person's nature, accomplished by the direct and immediate exertion of God's creative power, in conjunction with the gospel truth, by which the fundamental disposition, impulses and desires of the heart are

²³Steve Fernandez, *Free Justification: The Glorification of Christ in the Justification of a Sinner* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008), 6.

²⁴Fernandez, *Free Justification*, 32.

²⁵For example he addresses manipulation and pressure tactics in evangelism, external signs and tokens of salvation (e.g. praying a prayer, raising a hand, walking an aisle), carnal Christian theology, secular counseling techniques and the deliverance model of spiritual warfare in his booklet; Steve Fernandez, *Once Saved Always Changed: What Does It Really Mean to Be Born Again?* (Vallejo, CA: Exalting Christ Publishing, 2001), 41–46. For an in depth analysis of the deliverance model of spiritual warfare, see Stephen Fernandez, "Deliverance and Spiritual Warfare: A Biblical Examination of the Deliverance Model of Spiritual Warfare," ed. John H. Armstrong, *Reformation & Revival* 4, no. 1 (December 1, 1995).

made holy, so that the new tendency and life direction of the heart is away from self and sin and toward God and holiness.²⁶

Teaching on 2 Corinthians 4:3–6, Fernandez tied the consequences of regeneration not only to a new conduct, but also to an illuminated mind that sees the beauty and glory of Christ. A nature is given which now sees glory and beauty where it saw none before, and then delights in the moral excellencies of Christ.²⁷

Fernandez taught his preaching class that those whom the Spirit uses are those who are clear on the content and committed to message of the gospel. They must be “clear-headed” about sin and grace and justification.²⁸ To him, the dominant theme of preaching needs to be the freedom of God’s sovereign grace in the cross. “That which is perhaps the greatest source of assurance that the child of God is loved with an eternal and unchanging love must be freely proclaimed. God honored such preaching in the past. He will honor it again.”²⁹

Committed to Christ-Centered, Spirit-Empowered Exposition of the Scriptures as the Inerrant, All-Sufficient Word of God

Fernandez was not an eloquent orator. He was not overly concerned with structure. In the details, therefore, many people found him hard to follow. For example, his main points would often be lengthy sentences such as this one on Philippians 1:21, “He considers Christ worthy of exaltation as the only sensible response to the joy and happiness he now has in Christ as well as the further joy he will experience at death.”³⁰ At times, he would become repetitive and his content was not known to be strong in specific application. He was notorious for his abrupt conclusions. As his mentor wryly described, “I’d say as a homiletician, [he was] the world’s worst concluder: just crash landing.”³¹ Yet to his flock, many of these oratorical weaknesses were endearing. Whether it was his spastic body movements, his proclivity to weep in the pulpit, or his driving intensity, person after person has attested to the

²⁶Steve Fernandez, *Once Saved Always Changed: What Does It Really Mean to Be Born Again?* (Vallejo, CA: Exalting Christ Publishing, 2001), 47.

²⁷Steve Fernandez, “Grace and Power: The Glories of Salvation in Christ,” Unpublished Class Notes (The Cornerstone Seminary, 2006), 34–35.

²⁸Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 32.

²⁹Stephen Fernandez, “Election: God’s Unchanging Love for His People,” ed. John H. Armstrong, *Reformation and Revival Spring 1998* (April 1, 1998), 102.

³⁰Steve Fernandez, “Exalting Christ in Life and Death Part 2” (Sermon, Community Bible Church, January 31, 2010), accessed October 15, 2013, http://media.sermonsonline.com/cbcvallejo_36326_32K.mp3.

³¹Phillip Howard, interviewed by author, Hercules, CA, November 15, 2013.

quality of his genuineness, his candid speech, and his self-effacing illustrations.

Indeed, he did not desire to be known as merely an orator for “an orator is concerned about how he sounds. Today they are called communicators. A messenger is concerned about what he says. An orator is concerned about style and how he comes across...[Paul in 1 Corinthians] 2:1 is saying ‘I wasn’t trying to impress you with my style.’”³² However, this does not mean that *method* was unimportant to Fernandez. He was an expositional preacher and, because of this, he wanted to arrive at his method from exegesis. In a sermon series that he preached both for CBC and the seminary that later became a part of his class notes for “The Theology of Christ-Centered Expository Preaching in the Power of the Spirit,” Fernandez outlines his method from 1 Corinthians 1:17–2:5.

Method of Preaching

Since there was a controversy in the Corinthian church about effective ministry (1 Cor 1:17, 21, 25, 2:1–5), the core issue to Paul was the God-ordained method of preaching (1 Cor 1:21, 24–25, 2:5). Paul’s point is that the straightforward preaching of Christ is “wiser than men and...stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25). Thus, to Fernandez, the three marks of preaching from 1 Cor 1:18–25 that God uses to the impact the world are: (1) A conviction that God honors a ministry centered around the preaching of Christ and him crucified; (2) a confidence that God has promised to exercise his power through Christ-centered, cross-centered preaching; and (3) a commitment to preach Christ in spite of pressures to change to a more culturally accepted method.³³

The Corinthians wanted Paul to use rhetoric and eloquence in his style, but Paul responds in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 by attributing the impact of any preaching to the sovereignty of God. For Fernandez, this meant that Christ must be preached plain and straight—right into the culture.³⁴ “Wisdom is Paul’s term of choice in his controversy with the Corinthians. It is his term for the gospel and all its blessings. It is his summary term for Christ (v. 24). In short, it is Christ and the gospel viewed as that which helps man, and solves the dilemma of life in a cursed world. It is Christ viewed as man’s solution—the Savior who pardons, frees, and liberates.”³⁵

³²Steve Fernandez, “The Power of the Spirit and Preaching Christ” (Sermon presented at the Stephen Williams’ Commissioning as a Missionary, Community Bible Church, July 10, 2011), accessed October 4, 2013, http://www.cbcvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=46827.

³³Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 49–59.

³⁴Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 61–71.

³⁵Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 70.

Paul concludes his argument in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 by answering the question of how genuine results are achieved. Since they do not come from personal wisdom or skill, preaching must be as a message bearer rather than an orator, and the preacher is dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit. For Fernandez, this meant three things: (1) there must be a conviction that the Spirit grants success to those who remain faithful to God’s ordained method of preaching Christ (1 Cor 2:1); (2) we must center on that which the Spirit honors: The person and work of Christ (1 Cor 2:2); and (3) we must be confident in the Spirit’s power to bring results that spread the Gospel in the world (1 Cor 2:3–5).³⁶

Fernandez assumed that Biblical preaching by its very nature is proclamation. As such, it demands passion and earnestness in the delivery. To him, it is not only what is preached that is important, but the manner in which the message is preached as well. His preaching has been affectionately labeled “explository preaching.” One of his fellow pastors and elders said, “It was a rare combination of exposition, theology, and application passionately presented.”³⁷ His zeal was contagious. Many of his students and friends described the uniqueness of his preaching to be his intense, loving passion for his Savior, and this passion shaped his model of preaching as well. As one friend said, “He truly preached as a dying man to dying men.”³⁸ In Fernandez’s mind, passion wasn’t mere volume or emotion. It was “a zeal for God and the good of souls that is self-evident, an overwhelming weight of argument, a fervency of spirit, blood-earnestness in every part of the sermon, a pervading solemnity, a seriousness without being somber.”³⁹ Writing on apostolic preaching in Acts 14:1, Fernandez remarks, “It wasn’t the content only that God used mightily in apostolic preaching. It was the way they preached. It was ‘in such a manner.’ The problem isn’t preaching, it is bad preaching! It is dead, lifeless, contentless, vapid preaching.”⁴⁰

Christ-Centered Preaching

Fernandez was clear on the nature of Christ-centered preaching:

What Christ-centered expository preaching is not: An attempt to force Christ into texts when He is not there, an approach to Scripture that undermines a literal grammatical historical interpretation of Scripture: It is not a new hermeneutic.⁴¹

³⁶Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 73–78.

³⁷Brian Shealy, emailed to author, Brentwood, CA, October 22, 2013.

³⁸Doug Thompson, emailed to author, Brentwood, CA, October 24, 2013.

³⁹Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 90.

⁴⁰Steve Fernandez, *Exalting Christ: Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, 28.

⁴¹Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 13.

What Christ-centered expository preaching is: A recognition in doing the work of expository preaching that divine revelation, of which Scripture consists, is progressive and telic in nature. That is, it is accumulative and its goal is Christ. This in turn means that earlier revelation is only understood or applied by the latter, fuller revelation of Christ, a recognition of the central role of the entire broad, biblical context in interpretation. That the broad, biblical context is vital in the understanding and application of Scripture, a recognition of Christ's own assertion that He is the theme and goal of revelation (Luke 24:27, 44–47; John 1:45, 5:39; Acts 3:18, 24, 10:43), a recognition that any interpretation and/or application without Christ is sub-Christian.⁴²

In Fernandez's mind, Christ-centered preaching is simply keeping with God's commitment to magnify his own name and glory through the Lord Jesus Christ. Since all of the Scriptures testify about him, the focus of expository preaching must necessarily point to the reality of Christ's glorious person and saving work.

Spirit-Empowered Preaching

In a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 1:5, Fernandez unpacks what he means by Spirit-empowered preaching.⁴³ To begin with, the elements that are always present in a true conversion are the Word of God and the Spirit. "There are two extremes that lead to powerless, fruitless preaching. One is the Spirit without the Word; the other is the Word without the Spirit."⁴⁴ The preached Word of God is the main thing, according to Fernandez, and if the preacher wants more of the Spirit, he must have more of the Word. Prayer is also crucial for Spirit empowered preaching, and the pastor must prayerfully seek to have their preaching empowered by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, not only in the preparation and study of the sermon, but also in the event of preaching itself. "It is a filling of the Spirit specifically connected to powerful, Christ-honoring preaching...The term, as Luke uses it [in Acts 4:31], emphasizes a filling in which there is, as it were, a taking possession of, or a gripping of the man in the event of preaching...This distinguishes it from *plerao* in Ephesians 5:18, which doesn't always necessarily involve a direct sense of the Spirit's work and empowering presence."⁴⁵

⁴²Steve Fernandez, "Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit," 14–15.

⁴³Steve Fernandez, "The Spirit and the Proclamation of the Word" (Sermon, The Cornerstone Seminary, September 26, 2004), accessed October 24, 2013, http://www.cbvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsitesite_action=view_sermon&sermonsitesite_sermonid=6903.

⁴⁴Fernandez, "The Spirit and the Proclamation of the Word."

⁴⁵Fernandez, "The Spirit and the Proclamation of the Word."

Fernandez's instruction to his students is also useful:

God, through the Spirit, always honors Christ-centered, cross-saturated preaching (John 16:14–15). If the Spirit is to work, Christ must be “placarded.” He must be proclaimed to believers (Colossians 1:27–29) and set forth to non-believers (Galatians 3:1). If Christ is not set forth, there is no basis for the hearing of faith for the non-believer (Romans 10:17) and no object of faith and basis of transformation for the believer (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is no basis of conviction and heart-work by which the Spirit works. In other words, we are to placard Christ to the nonbeliever, and proclaim Christ to the believer, confident that Christ has His own irresistible power of attraction and that the Spirit was sent to manifest this very thing.⁴⁶

Sufficiency of Scripture

“When Scripture speaks, God speaks!”⁴⁷ A phrase borrowed from B.B. Warfield, Fernandez uttered this assertion both in the pulpit and in the classroom. He was convinced that the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God, and because of this, they are the sole source for hearing God's authoritative voice. Furthermore, “The power of the Spirit is necessary for the life of the church and the advancement of the gospel in the world...[According to] 1 Cor 2:1–5, the Spirit releases his power and grants his success to those who remain faithful to preach God's testimony in the Word about the person and work of Christ.”⁴⁸

As important as the doctrine of inerrancy was to Fernandez, in the field of bibliology, the sufficiency of Scripture held pride of place. He believed that Scripture alone is the means by which he accomplishes salvation and transformation of his people. Nowhere is it affirmed more clearly than in the Cornerstone Seminary catalog:

Another vital article of faith is the sufficiency of Scripture (*sola scriptura*). The Lord Jesus Christ, through the all-sufficient Scripture working through the Spirit, is able to save and sanctify His people entirely, without any supplementation from man's wisdom. This great truth of Scripture's complete sufficiency safeguards the

⁴⁶Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 8.

⁴⁷Steve Fernandez, “The Bible: God's All-Sufficient Word,” Unpublished Class Notes (Grace School of Theology and Ministry, 1998), 21.

⁴⁸Steve Fernandez, “Why I Am a Spirit-Pursuing, Power-Seeking, Cessationist” (Sermon, The Cornerstone Seminary, June 15, 2008), accessed October 13, 2013, http://www.cbcvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=24771.

sufficiency and supremacy of Christ as the all-sufficient deliverer and soul-healer of His people. It is at this point that man-made doctrines that diminish Christ and His glory have entered in and ravaged the church.⁴⁹

Fernandez understood the ministry of preaching to be critical to the life of the church: “There is, of course, much more to the ministry of a local church than preaching. But preaching—and therefore Christ in and through the preaching—is what fuels and sustains all these other ministries of a church.”⁵⁰ For him, it was a very specific method of preaching: “I mean a prayer-saturated, earnest, biblical, soul-gripping, Spirit-empowered, proclamation of Christ and His matchless glories. I mean Christ-exalting, Spirit-inflamed preaching. In short, I mean preaching where Christ is exalted in the glory of His person and work.”⁵¹

Impassioned to Spread the Glory of Christ to All Peoples

In Fernandez’s thinking, Christ-centered expository preaching is relevant to the spread of the gospel in missions, because the gospel of Christ is designed by God to reach all peoples irrespective of culture.⁵² In a sermon on Luke 24:44–49, Fernandez argued for three realities that drive missions.⁵³

First, a conception of missions given by Christ that comes from Scripture (vv.44–45): “He establishes the fact and reliability of the truthfulness of Scripture, in general, as undergirding a right comprehension of missions (v. 44)...[and] he grants a comprehension and understanding of Scripture as centered on him and his redemptive purpose in the world (v. 45)...He declares that [Christ] is the theme of the entirety of Scripture.”

Second, a conviction that the person and work of Christ is the only hope of all peoples (vv. 46–47). Third, a commitment to preach Christ to all peoples (v. 47). For Fernandez, missions and preaching went hand in hand, “The reaching of all peoples is specifically and intentionally centered in Christ through the Gospel (Eph 3:6)...The message of Christ’s glory and justifying grace is to be preached to all peoples (Eph 3:8)...The preaching of

⁴⁹*The Cornerstone Seminary: To Exalt and Proclaim, 2010–2013 Catalog* (Vallejo: The Cornerstone Seminary, 2010), 13.

⁵⁰Steve Fernandez, *Exalting Christ: Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, 12.

⁵¹Steve Fernandez, *Exalting Christ: Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, 31.

⁵²Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ in the Power of the Spirit,” 8.

⁵³Steve Fernandez, “Great Realities That Drive Missions” (Sermon, The Cornerstone Seminary, February 4, 2007), accessed November 2, 2013, http://www.cbvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=15960.

Christ to all peoples is God's sole means of gathering all peoples (Rom 16:25–27).”⁵⁴

So with that in mind we ask the question: Is true biblical preaching ineffective in today's postmodern world? I am convinced it is not. The Scriptures (and church history as well, I might add) declare that Christ, proclaimed and exalted in the preached Word, is the primary means of God's culture-impacting power. They affirm that God has ordained that Christ-centered, Christ-exalting, biblical preaching is the primary way that the Spirit's power is released for the spread of the gospel in the world.⁵⁵

Over the many years of his ministry, culminating in the establishment of the Cornerstone Seminary, CBC trained and sent out dozens of men into preaching ministries around the world. Fernandez was clear on the kinds of men God uses to spread the Gospel and plant other churches. In one of his seminary classes on world missions, he gave a list of distinguishing marks from Acts 11:19–30:⁵⁶

1. They have a passion for disciple making through evangelism (vv. 19–21, 26).
2. They are men of ordinary ability used in an extraordinary way (v. 20).
3. They proclaim Christ (v. 20b).
4. They depend on the power of God and it is evident in conspicuous ways (v. 21b).
5. They prepare and train others in order to multiply the ministry. They encourage and instruct (vv. 23, 26).
6. They partner with other ministries (vv. 27–30).

⁵⁴Steve Fernandez, “Christ: The Center of Missions for All Peoples, Part 3” (Sermon, The Cornerstone Seminary, March 13, 2005), accessed October 28, 2013, http://www.cbcvallejo.org/sermonaudio/?sermonsite_action=view_sermon&sermonsite_sermonid=7508.

⁵⁵Steve Fernandez, *Exalting Christ: Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, 8–9.

⁵⁶Steve Fernandez, “Church Planting and the Spread of God's Glory to All Peoples,” Unpublished Class Notes (The Cornerstone Seminary, 2012), 57.

7. They are men of faith, trusting Christ to provide for their basic needs, un-diverted from their primary call of preaching, teaching and multiplying (vv. 19–20).

Most importantly to Fernandez, the preacher of the word must be a man of prayer. In a sermon titled “Christ-Glorifying, Gospel-Driven Prayer,”⁵⁷ he connects prayer to the spread of the gospel in preaching. Using John 14:8–15 as his text, he fleshes out three convictions regarding prayer. First, “the person who prays has seen and is gripped by Christ’s glory as co-equal in majesty to the Father (vv. 8–11).” Second, “there is a persuasion that Christ can work in a greater way through them to accomplish the spread of the Gospel (vv.12–13).” For Fernandez, “greater works” can only be accomplished because Christ has been exalted to the right hand of the Father and the Spirit has been poured out. Therefore, prayer is an inescapable necessity. Third, “there is a pursuit in prayer of the exalting of Christ and the glory of God through the ministry God has given us (vv. 13–15).” This kind of prayer, Fernandez argues, has a specific focus for works of ministry: it seeks God’s glory through Christ, it sets its confidence in Christ rather than men, and its supreme compelling is a love for Christ’s name and glory.

Ray Palompo, a fellow elder and church planter sent out from CBC reflected, “Steve taught me to go as deep as possible. Study and prayer are essential in rightly preaching God’s word. Theology and meditation are necessary to make a deep man and to preach a deep message. He urged me to pray to be a better preacher and pray for fruit, never being satisfied with where I was in life as a preacher.”⁵⁸

Equipped with a Loving Shepherd’s Heart for the People under His Care

Fernandez staunchly held that Christ-centered expository preaching is relevant to personal needs, because it is preaching that points to the all-sufficiency of Christ:

In many churches, biblical preaching has been replaced, and with it, Christ. And when Christ is replaced, His glorious all-sufficiency, by which He delivers and liberates men, is replaced as well. The one is necessarily bound up with the other. The end result is people are not delivered or helped which means—and this is my whole

⁵⁷Steve Fernandez, “Christ Glorifying Gospel-Driven Prayer,” (Sermon, Exalting Christ Conference, Vallejo, CA, September 16, 2010), Accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.exaltingchristministries.org/2010-downloads>.

⁵⁸Ray Palompo, emailed to author, Brentwood, CA, October 8, 2013.

concern—Christ is not glorified and exalted. The whole matter has to do with the glory and exaltation of Christ.⁵⁹

Fernandez loved the flock. Though he was not known for application in his sermons or imperatives in his outlines, he had a masterful way of relating the sufficiency of Christ to real life situations. Preaching on Colossians 1:28–29, he assures the flock, “When you are in a bad way and a bad time, you need people, not steps and principles. How much truer when it comes down to trouble no one can sustain you in. You need Christ...You don’t need principles you need Christ. *He* is powerful and *he* gives peace.”⁶⁰ He was never half-hearted or uncertain in his burden to apply the truths of Scripture to the hearts of his flock, and he would regularly plead for sinners to “Come to Christ!”

This emphasis was not just seen by those within his church, but also from those looking in from the outside. Many pastors and professors have attested to his genuine concern for their life and ministry. Take, for instance, the words of Anthony Carter, pastor of East Point Church in Atlanta, Georgia, “I have rarely heard, or even more seen, a preacher whose compassion for God’s people matched and meshed with his passion and joy in Christ. Steve loved Christ and Christ’s church, and it showed.”⁶¹

Conclusion

I believe that Fernandez is a magnificent example of how the Spirit works through the preached Word. God the Father has seen fit to use him as a conduit through which the Spirit has displayed the glories of Christ. Not only that, the Lord used Fernandez to motivate many men to trust that God can do far beyond what they think in their preaching. One of his favorite passages to preach was 1 Corinthians 2:2–5 and is characteristic of his own pulpit ministry:

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Many today want to replace expository preaching with a more culturally-acceptable approach, seen in topical sermons aimed at felt needs, the rising “success seminar” approach of some within the prosperity gospel

⁵⁹Steve Fernandez, *Exalting Christ: Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, 6.

⁶⁰Steve Fernandez, “Preaching Christ for Maturity and Growth.”

⁶¹Anthony Carter, emailed to author, Brentwood, CA, November 19, 2013.

movement, and the conversational dialogue approach of post-evangelicals. The result is the same as what the apostle Paul diagnosed in Corinth: the wisdom that seems right to man actually fills churches with false converts. The antidote is exemplified in Fernandez, whose preaching was characterized by the authoritative, Spirit-empowered, Christ-centered, God-glorifying message of the gospel as the chief means for the advancement of the kingdom.

Dr. George Fox, who worked together with Fernandez on the board of Grace School of Theology and Ministry, wrote a lengthy evaluation of Fernandez's preaching ministry. He concluded with this insightful reflection:

I see a parallel between Steve and the apostle Paul. Paul acknowledged that he was “unskilled in speaking” (2 Cor 11:6)—that is, that he was not trained in the rhetorical skills of the Greek orator. He confessed that he was not called to preach “with words of eloquent wisdom” (1 Cor 1:17). He averred that he “did not come proclaiming to you (Corinthians) the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom” and that his speech and message “were not in plausible words of wisdom” and that he “was with them in weakness and fear and much trembling” (1 Cor 2:1–4). But he was absolutely assured that the message he proclaimed was not dependent merely on words, but that it came also “in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full *conviction*” (1 Thess 1:5). What gripped you with Steve as he preached was not his eloquence, his elocution, even his exegesis of the text, although he was always faithful to that; not his organization or outline; not the fine distinctions he might draw from the meanings within the text. What gripped you and held you spellbound was his evident, ebullient, enthusiastic love for the Word and His Lord. You got caught up in that “conviction,” and it sustained you and satisfied you. When he was done preaching you were not tempted to exclaim, “What a great sermon!” Rather, in tones of awe you were apt to whisper, “What a great Savior! What a great Scripture!” Isn't that the acid test of great preaching and a great preacher? So while brother Steve may not have been a great preacher in the classical sense, was he not a great preacher in the biblical sense? Which is more important? Which is weighted for eternity? Which bears lasting fruit? Which will merit the Master's “Well done, good and faithful servant?” Ultimately, which best exalts and glorifies Christ?

Fernandez has left a legacy of exalting Christ. May God the Father continue to give pastors to the church that will be faithful to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ in the power of the Spirit, and may they never get over the

Exalting Christ: The Legacy of Steve Fernandez

“amazing” and “incredible” all-sufficiency of Christ. God uses crooked sticks to draw straight lines.

Pastor-Theologians Who Exalt Christ

Derek J. Brown^{*}

Steve Fernandez, Michael Jordan, and Jesus

I was only a few months into my role as middle school ministry director when Cliff McManis, my supervising pastor and mentor, drove me seventy-five miles north to Vallejo: a mid-size town on the San Pablo Bay, just northeast of San Francisco. We had been invited to The Cornerstone Seminary's inaugural celebration. Steve Fernandez, founding pastor of Community Bible Church and president of the new seminary, would bring the message on that night of joy, anticipation, and gratefulness for what the Lord had done.

Steve's sermon was out of John 1:1. After twenty years, it is difficult to recall many details from the sermon. I do remember, however, that Christ was the focal point of the message and Steve was passionate about his topic. Indeed, Steve was so fervent about preaching the glories of Christ that he wouldn't let Christ take second place to any man, including the greatest basketball player of all time. Again, the specifics are hazy, but I do remember some comment about Jesus dunking over Michael Jordan and Steve showing us exactly—on stage—how the Lord would hammer it home against M. J. From what I've heard, an overflowing passion for Jesus and animated preaching were typical for Steve. While that night in Vallejo would be the only time I saw Steve in person—I would eventually move to Kentucky for seminary and not return to the Bay Area until 2014 after Steve's death—I get the privilege of hearing about Steve on a regular basis.

About six years ago I started teaching at The Cornerstone Bible College and Seminary. Four years ago, I became the academic dean of the school. My colleagues include Steve's personal friends and relatives, so I get to hear the good stuff: stories of powerful preaching and hilarious sermon gaffes, his love for the church and his extraordinary ability to develop strategic, Christ-centered relationships for the sake of the gospel. Most important is the unanimous testimony of family and friends who knew Steve best: he was a man who, like Paul, longed to exalt Christ in life and in death (Phil 1:20).

The Cornerstone Bible College and Seminary is the fruit of Steve's passion for Christ. We desire to honor Steve's legacy by exalting Christ in all our teaching, training, and discipleship. Our prayer is that our Father would use us to equip pastor-theologians who exalt Christ.

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I The Current State of Pastoral Ministry¹

While it may be difficult to believe in our current cultural setting, there was a time when the pastor was viewed as a town's leading intellectual. Pastors of what seems like a lost era were doctrinally grounded and biblically saturated, to be sure, but they were also well read in other important branches of study—literature, economics, politics, philosophy, and science—and were therefore able to apply biblical truth to these areas of inquiry with keen spiritual and intellectual skill, helping their people think theologically about major trends within the church and the greater society.

Most importantly, the pastor was a *theologian*. For the pastor to be a theologian meant that he was the person to whom one would turn for insight in perplexing doctrinal issues. It was the pastor who penned theological treatises that savored of both intellectual rigor and devotional wisdom. And it was the pastor who had command of any wider theological trends that may influence his people.

Today, however, the pastoral office is, at a popular level, no longer viewed in such categories. At worst, the title “pastor-theologian” is a contradiction, for to be a pastor is to be one whose primary work is people and their spiritual well-being. To be a theologian is to labor away from people among books, and mainly in the area of academic scholarship. The pastor-theologian, despite what history may tell us, appears to be an ecclesiastical impossibility in our current age.

This is due, at least partially, to the fact that the larger contemporary church has loaded the pastoral role with responsibilities and expectations that hinder if not prohibit the work of theology. The pastor is seen chiefly as a “leader, organization builder, administrator, coach, inspirer, endless problem solver, spiritual pragmatist, and so much more.”²

¹Sections I and II of this article were adapted from my article, “3 Reasons Every Pastor Needs to Be a Theologian,” at Southern Equip, May 8, 2018, <https://equip.sbts.edu/article/3-reasons-every-pastor-needs-theologian/>.

²Owen Strachan, “Of Scholars and Saints,” in *The Pastor as Public Theologian* by Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 70. Over two decades ago Haddon Robinson recognized the shift in how people generally viewed the pastoral office. Quoting Kyle Haselden, Robinson comments, “...the pastor comes across as a ‘bland composite’ of the congregation’s ‘congenial, ever helpful, ever ready to help boy scout; as the darling of the old laides and as sufficiently reserved with the young ones; as the father image for the young people and a companion to the lonely men; as the affable glad-hander at teas and civic club luncheons.” (*Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, second edition [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001], 18).

For a pastor to consider how he might engage in important doctrinal discussions and cultural issues, pursue some form of theological writing, and make scholarly contributions to the larger Christian academy is to indulge in pointless fantasy: his role and his time preclude these kinds of endeavors.

How the Enlightenment Changed Pastoral Ministry in Europe

But the popular reshaping of the pastoral role is also a symptom the massive rift that has slowly but surely formed over the past 300 years between the church and the academy. Due to the Enlightenment's (c. 1685–1815) detachment of biblical authority from rational inquiry,³ the contribution of the Christian pastor in any realm other than religion has slowly but surely diminished. As the Enlightenment's suspicion of authority pervaded Europe, Christian theology came to be viewed to function chiefly within the realm of "faith," while other areas of inquiry—especially science—functioned within the realm of "reason." Faith deals with that which is private and non-falsifiable. Reason trades on that which is public and empirical. Autonomous reason, unaided by divine revelation, would be valued as the primary means by which all people could arrive at universal knowledge.⁴

Theology, therefore, tended to be treated less as objective truth about the Creator and his ways and more as a collection of improvable propositions that have no authoritative bearing on other areas of study. The separation of faith and reason led inevitably to the detachment of the church and the academy. "Over the space of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson observe, "the universities [in Europe], which had been largely conceived and reared in service of the churches, gradually became institutions of the state."⁵ The sociological fruit of this institutional rending was that the pastor was now marginalized in terms of intellectual contribution to the greater society. The scholar, however, was lionized.

According to Hiestand and Wilson's account of this shift in Europe, however, theological study as a university discipline was preserved from total annihilation in Germany. "The study of Scripture and theology within the universities risked dying altogether, had both subject matters not been

³M. J. Inwood, "Enlightenment," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford 1995), 236. Inwood notes this basic tenant of Enlightenment philosophers: "Beliefs are to be accepted only on the basis of reason, not the authority of priests, sacred texts, or tradition" (236).

⁴ See W. Andrew Hoffercker, "Enlightenments and Awakenings: The Beginning of Modern Culture Wars," in *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*, ed., W. Andrew Hoffercker (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), 255.

⁵Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 44.

repositioned within the German universities during the eighteenth century. The Germans, rather than dismissing the Bible, transformed the study of the Bible into an academic discipline—a precise textual science.”⁶ Nevertheless, the preservation of biblical and theological studies in Germany did not mean that these disciplines were pursued according to the biblical categories of inspiration and inerrancy. Enlightenment principles were assumed, and German scholars engaged Scripture as a “culturally important artifact” that was to be studied according to the same methodology as any other document of antiquity. “Ultimately, an academic view of Scripture eclipsed an ecclesial view of Scripture; the study of the Bible and theology within the university context has never been the same.”⁷ Broadly speaking, the pursuit of biblical studies and theology in the European university is conducted apart from any vital attachment to evangelical conviction. While exceptions to this rule exist, they are few and far between.

How The Pastoral Role Changed in North America

While not dismissing how the Enlightenment served to undermine the pastoral role in North America, Hiestand and Wilson note that the factors that led to the separation between the church and the academy are slightly different than in Europe. The three major features of colonial and post-colonial life that sharpened the divide between pastoral ministry and the work of theology were (1) urbanization; (2) the Revolutionary War; and (3) the development of divinity schools.⁸

Before the small and scattered towns of the fledging American colonies started to see significant population growth, it was usually the pattern that each town had one church with one pastor, with the church at the center of the town’s spiritual and social life. Because of this societal structure, the pastor’s engagement in and influence on the town’s religious and civic life would have been significant. The pastor would have likely been the most educated person in town, and training for the ministry would have taken place primarily within the ecclesial setting as young men learned theology and ministry skills from the pastor himself.⁹

The early nineteenth century, however, saw the establishment of several divinity schools in North America. Whereas theological education in colonial America previously was the domain of the local church, with the development of divinity schools the primary sphere for pastoral training was now located in an institution outside the church. “By the mid-nineteenth

⁶Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 45.

⁷Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 45.

⁸Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 46–49.

⁹Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 47.

century, the pastor theologian in North America had been replaced by the professor theologian.”¹⁰

The fracture between the role of the pastor and the work of the theologian has only widened and deepened since the separation began to take shape in Europe and North America over four centuries ago. But this development is neither healthy for the church nor institutions that specialize in theological education. As pastors increasingly view their role as managers, spiritual coaches, corporate executives, and social coordinators, and professional theologians drift further from the needs of the church into more refined areas of expertise (intelligible to only a handful of highly-trained scholars), both institutions will suffer, and so will the people who are instructed by them.

The developments over the past three centuries in both Europe and America have worked to undermine the pastoral role in two ways. First, the Enlightenment has questioned the very basis of evangelical theology and supplanted the pastor with the scholar. The pastor no longer is viewed as one who possesses vital knowledge about God, the nature of reality, anthropology, and human origins. These subjects are the domain of the academic who works from naturalistic assumptions rather than supernatural ones. The pastor offers non-provable spiritual claims that may or may not provide benefit to humanity, while the scholar produces empirically verifiable facts that serve immediate usefulness to the world at large. Thus, apart from serving as empathetic life-coach, the social necessity of the pastoral role is weakened because the substance of his labors is no longer seen as truth, but as mere “faith.”

Secondly, concerning developments in America, although there are many institutions in this country that are grounded in evangelical commitments and populate their faculty with scholars who share these same commitments, the pastor, by and large, is now sharply distinguished from the Christian scholar with the former’s role viewed less and less as a church’s local theologian and more and more as its organizational manager, spiritual guru, and weekly motivator. If you want some Bible teaching and spiritual pep talks, go to your pastor. If you want answers to snarly theological problems and cultural issues, contact the scholar.¹¹

¹⁰Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian* 49.

¹¹J. I. Packer recognizes this unfortunate distinction between pastor and professional theologian when he observes, “In this [academic] world of sustained intellectual activity, as in all circles of academic exchange, breadth, balance, acuteness of statement, and dialogical solidity of argument are the values primarily sought, so that the bearing of particular positions on the life of the people of God becomes a secondary interest. In other words, present-day theology is not pastoral and catechetical, and is not trained on the down-to-earth realities of life with Christ according to the Scriptures, and only deals with them incidentally, at a distance, and

But the current sociological and institutional distinction of the pastor and theologian undermines the goal of Christian ministry because it removes the means for spiritual growth from the church (i.e., theology), and the purpose for theology from the academy (i.e., growth in Godward affections and conduct).

II

Re-Establishing the Office of Pastor-Theologian in the Local Church

Having briefly surveyed historically how the pastoral role became detached from the work of theology, it is now time to consider the task of reinstalling pastor-theologians back into the local church. I say, “local church” and not just “church” as a universal entity because a reference only to the universal church doesn’t necessitate a change in much of the current ecclesial landscape. Professional evangelical theologians who labor primarily in the Christian academy serve the universal church as they instruct and serve Christians in their capacity as professor, but a sharp distinction between the work of the professional theologian and the pastor remains in place unless we designate the local church as the “native home of theology.”¹² In other words, the only place a pastor-theologian can labor is within the local church. But why attempt to re-establish the pastor as theologian in the local church? I will offer three reasons.

The Pastor-Theologian Model is Biblical

Because of its detachment from theology, the American church in many cases has grown spiritually weak, socially compromised, and susceptible to hazardous doctrinal trends. Likewise, due to a decreased interest in and connection with the genuine needs of Christ’s church, the Christian scholar is in danger of producing material of little spiritual and theological benefit for the most important institution in the world, the body of Christ. And what is most concerning about the present situation is that this cycle is self-perpetuating: unless something foundational changes in the culture of the church and the academy, the rupture between the pastor and theologian can *only* worsen as time goes on.

But for the sake of Christ’s bride, pastors—the ones tasked with the oversight of the church—cannot throw up their hands in resignation. We can, one church at a time, one pastor at a time, recapture the glorious office of the pastor-theologian for the glory of God and the eternal good of his people. We will be aided in this endeavor by first reminding ourselves that

usually in a somewhat fragmented way.” *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in our Walk with God*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 12.

¹²Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 77.

the model of pastor-theologian is *biblical*. It's not enough to point to historical precedent and start framing our vision around early church or seventeenth-century ideals. We have to first be convinced that God calls the pastor to be, first and foremost, a theologian and that Scripture provides the necessary framework within which he can ply his craft.

The Old Testament lays the foundation for the pastor-theologian model. Throughout the old covenant documents, the shepherding role is portrayed largely in terms of feeding God's flock through teaching and the steady provision of knowledge. "For the lips of the priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of hosts" (Mal 2:7). Such a role for the nation's spiritual leadership would be expected given the central place knowledge had in the life of the Israelite. The wise were characterized by their possession of knowledge (Prov 1:7; 2:10; 8:9; 11:9; 13:16; 24:4) while the foolish were so called due to their lack of it (Prov 1:29; 13:16). Economic prosperity notwithstanding, knowledge was the highest-valued commodity in Israel (Prov 8:9; 20:15), and neglect of knowledge would lead a person to temporal and eternal ruin (Prov 10:14; 12:1; 19:27). Indeed, Isaiah attributes the most devastating event in Israel's history to a lack of knowledge. "Therefore my people go into exile for lack of knowledge" (Is 5:13), because a deficiency in knowledge lead to idolatry: "Every man is stupid and without knowledge; every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols" (Jer 10:14; cf. 51:17; Is 44:19).

Therefore, in contrast to the shepherds in Israel who neglected their calling to instruct God's people and fed only themselves (Ezek 34:8) and exhibited a woeful lack of knowledge (Is 56:10), God promised to raise up future New Covenant shepherds who would fill hungry spiritual bellies with divine truth. "And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer 3:15). When the Good Shepherd commenced his ministry in Israel, he came preaching and teaching (Matt 4:17; Luke 4:43) while gathering a group of disciples to whom he would entrust divine truth (John 14–16) so that they could feed God's people upon Jesus' departure. Jesus' last recorded exhortation to Peter prior to his ascension dealt specifically with Peter's task to provide Christ's flock with spiritual food (John 21:15–19).

After Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles would make the ministry of the Word their chief work within the church (Acts 6:2), giving themselves to preaching, teaching, and handling theological controversy (Acts 15:1–35). Even before we get to Paul's specific instructions to pastors on how they must conduct and prioritize their ministry, the very nature and structure of the New Testament books indicate that the work of theology is of primary importance for pastors. The New Testament gospels and epistles are characterized by careful, patient argumentation (Luke 1:1–4; Rom 1–8), painstaking exegesis (Hebrews), theological synthesis (Rom 9–11), attention to

textual detail (Gal 3:15–17), and engagement with vital Christological issues (John 1:1–3; Col 1:15–18). Throughout the New Testament you find the apostles engaging with doctrinal controversy (Gal 1:1–4:30), settling of complex eschatological concerns (1 Thess 4:13–5:11; 2 Thess 2:1–12), reflecting on past covenantal structures for the sake of gospel clarity (Gal 3:15–29), grappling with apparent ontological conundrums in the area of sanctification (Rom 6:1–7:23), possessing a keen awareness of false doctrine (Col 2:1–23), and profitably using non-Christian literature to bolster their arguments (Acts 17:22–33).

It's become commonplace for Bible teachers to note how Paul's epistles are often divided into discernable doctrinal and practical sections, with the doctrinal sections laying the foundation for the practical segment. Ephesians, for example, is divided almost in half with theology dominating the first three chapters and practical instruction characterizing the latter three chapters (although there is some overlap).

But we shouldn't brush this observation off as some rudimentary principle we teach to new believers. No, the New Testament epistles provide the template around which the pastor is to build his approach to ministry. The pastoral life is a life of intense biblical and theological rigor integrated harmoniously with heart-felt passion for Christ and love for his sheep. Even without the pastor's job description outlined in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, the nature of New Testament content by itself should drive a pastor to see his role mainly in terms of theological shepherding. The pastor's work is, in large measure, a labor of knowledge acquisition and distribution. Yet, throughout the Scripture and particularly in the New Testament, this intellectual rigor is blended seamlessly with personal worship (Rom 11:33–36), deep concern for the spiritual welfare of believers (Gal 4:19; 1 Thess 2:11–12) and a longing for the salvation of unbelievers (Rom 9:1). The pastor-theologian is a whole man engaging whole people, as we will discuss in detail in the next section.

Given the state of contemporary pastoral ministry, however, it is necessary to return to Scripture to emphasize the pastor's calling as a theologian. Sadly, many churches are presently pastored by men who do not view their role in these terms and therefore give scant attention to careful exegesis, the study of systematic and historical theology, and the work of distinguishing between beneficial and harmful doctrinal trends. As a result, their preaching, teaching, and writing is riddled with theological error, shallow spiritual platitudes, and Christless self-help clichés.¹³ Though some of these churches appear to be thriving—they boast large budgets, massive

¹³This is not a generalization based on a personal hunch. See Colton Carter, “4 Reflections after Listening to 18 Hours of Sermons in America's Biggest Churches,” in *9 Marks Journal* (March 2020), 10–17.

attendance, and much activity—many of the people languish spiritually (Rev 3:1). The idol of self has replaced Christ because the knowledge of God is no longer a priority (Jer 10:14; 14:18; cf. Hos 6:6).

Yet, this discussion on the necessity of theological engagement does not imply that a pastor must be skilled in every conceivable branch of technical theology or broader areas of learning, although he should have some interest in these fields. Rather, to be a theologian is to first be concerned with the study, preservation, and proclamation of historic Christian doctrine at the local church level (1 Tim 1:3; 4:6; 6:3; 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 1:9; 2:1; 4:2). The pastor is tasked with shepherding the flock among him (1 Pet 5:2), so his work of theology is first and foremost for his people. This labor will be expressed in preaching, teaching, discipleship, counseling, and writing as the pastor thinks carefully and rigorously how to apply the truth to his people in their present setting. But the very nature of this work requires that the pastor be well engaged with broader theological discussions and trends so that he can guard his people from what is wrong and unhelpful and inform his people of what is true and useful. We see this modeled by the authors of the New Testament epistles as their teaching dealt directly with contemporary false doctrine and false teachers (Gal 1:8–9; 3:1–2; 4:7; 2 Pet 2:1ff).

Practically, then, the pastor-theologian will keep his mind attuned to the ideas that are percolating at an academic level through regular reading, conference attendance, intentional research, and other means. Yet, this kind of study and research is no mere intellectual hobby for a pastor, even if he has a personal bent in the direction of academic study. A theologically indifferent pastor is like a ranch foreman who has no interest in the hunting behavior of wolves. He may prefer to avoid these subjects, but precious lives are at stake, so he must find a way to remain current with what's out there in the greater theological horizon.

The Pastor-Theologian Model is Historical

Second, we must see that the pastor-theologian model is *historical*. Although the pastoral role is no longer viewed, by and large, as the primary place where a theologian would ply his trade, the truth is that this recent trend is contrary to historical precedent. “Throughout most of the church’s history,” Hiestand and Wilson comment, “the pastoral vocation was a primary vocation for theologians and biblical scholars. One need only to think of history’s most important theologians to be reminded that the pastoral office was once compatible with robust theological scholarship.”¹⁴ But not only was the pastor viewed as a theologian; he would conduct his labor of theology within

¹⁴Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 22.

the context of the local church and his ministerial duties. Owen Strachan explains:

[Early church pastors] did not separate from the people and the ministry to learn theology but instead tilled the rich soil of Scripture in the context of pastoral work. . . .it would have been unthinkable for these early pastors to give up the grind of weekly Bible exposition in order to sequester themselves in theological meditation to mine more deeply into the Bible's doctrine. On the contrary, reading the Bible for sermon preparation was itself an opportunity for real theological work, a glorious exegetical grind.¹⁵

Yet, when it was necessary, these pastor-theologians would engage rigorously with contemporary theological and cultural issues, expending significant energy and time to write, teach, even attend conferences in order to set things in order and give doctrinal aid to the greater church.

With varying degrees of consistency, this model of pastor-theologian held sway in the early and medieval church and through the Reformation. The Enlightenment, as we saw, successfully dismantled the connection between the pastor and the theologian for much of Europe and North America. But for most of church history, this was not the case. To recapture the ideal of pastor-theologian, therefore, is not only to reinstate the biblical model; it is to return to the historical one as well.

The Pastor-Theologian Model is Necessary

Third, we must see that the pastor-theologian is *necessary*. At root, a pastor is a preacher and teacher of Christian doctrine for his local congregation. He shepherds his people, in large measure, by attending to biblical exposition in the pulpit, the lectern, and the counseling session. His primary labor of theology, therefore, will be located in his weekly sermon preparations and in his teaching, preaching, writing, and counseling ministry. He will also take careful note of recent scholarship in order to protect his people from dangerous theological trends and to remain well informed of useful new resources for his people.

But the pastor-theologian is also necessary for the greater church. Beyond his labors among his immediate flock, the pastor-theologian should be encouraged to take his pastoral experience, intellectual rigor, and broad knowledge of various biblical and theological topics to the academy as well. So long as academic specialists are allowed to constantly refine and narrow their areas of expertise, they are in danger of losing a sense of the true nature and purpose of theology.

Indeed, some of the strangest theological statements I've heard have

¹⁵Owen Strachan, "Of Scholars and Saints," 71.

come from theologians who have so narrowed their scholarly interests that they've lost their grip on the whole counsel of God's Word or so sequestered themselves in their technical reflections that they have little awareness of the spiritual needs of ordinary Christians in the local church setting. The pastor-theologian, working primarily in and for the local church, can take his skill as a generalist and his insight as a shepherd of people to the guild to help Christian institutions of higher education produce better resources for the greater church.¹⁶

III

The Pastor-Theologian: Recapturing the Vision of a Well-Balanced Ministry

But what does it look like to be a pastor-theologian? In this section we will consider what shape a ministry takes when a man is growing into a shepherd-scholar.

Despite the downward trend of so much contemporary pastoral ministry I have sketched above, there have been some positive developments among evangelical leaders the past four decades. John Piper is one example of a pastor who has labored intentionally to re-connect the twin roles of shepherd and theologian into a single pastoral office. For Piper, the pastoral office should be characterized by rigorous thinking, particularly over biblical texts,¹⁷ but also over theological synthesis and application.¹⁸ This intellectual rigor, however, is not an end in and of itself. Rather, deep theology and clear thinking are pursued for the sake of Godward affections and glad obedience.¹⁹ For the pastor, it is the task of regular preaching that keeps his

¹⁶Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 96. While my focus in this article is on the pastor, I should note that I do see great value in biblical and theological scholarship and in providing skilled scholars with the opportunity to devote themselves to sustained, in-depth study and academic production. For a well-argued and balanced case for evangelical scholarship and its motivation, see Andrew David Naselli, "Three Reflections on Academic Evangelical Publishing," in *Themelios*, 39.3 (2014): 428-54. But the biblical vision of ministry I've outlined above requires me to give preeminence to the church and the pastoral office. I believe, therefore, that professional Christian scholars will only fulfill their calling if they are (1) deeply rooted in the local church and engaged in vital ministry there; (2) deferential to the local church (not the academy) as the primary (not derivative) Christian institution; (3) laboring chiefly for the benefit of the church.

¹⁷John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville: B & H, 2002), 73-79.

¹⁸John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sister, OR: Multnomah, 1995), 10-11.

¹⁹John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 33-37.

theological pursuits in their proper order. It is not enough to carefully exegete Romans 9:1–23 for multiple weeks: God must be *proclaimed* from this text, not just analyzed.²⁰ It is vital for pastors to maintain this balance, especially those who have natural drift toward scholarship.

Many pastors, especially those who love the glorious vision of God's being and beauty and plan of salvation, have a scholarly bent that threatens to over-intellectualize the Christian faith, which means they turn it mainly into a system to be thought rather than a way of life to be felt and lived. Of course, it is a system as well as a life. But the danger is that the whole thing can be made to feel academic rather than heart-wrenchingly real.²¹

But it's also the case that groundless happiness doesn't glorify God, either. There is a zeal that is not according to knowledge (Rom 10:2), that neither honors the Lord nor edifies his people.²² Hence, the faithful pastor is one who seeks to ground his people's affections in biblical truth. The aim of rigorous theology and careful exegesis is a deep love for God and enjoyment of who he is for us in Jesus Christ. Merely stocking people's minds with truth without helping them cultivate a genuine enjoyment of God leads inevitably to pride and a sterile, loveless Christianity that easily deceives the professing believer that they are growing spiritually simply because they are growing intellectually (1 Cor 8:1; Rev 2:4).

Unfortunately, in the attempt to reset the pastoral office into its theological footings, some men have overcorrected and now fail to give adequate attention to the affections and the necessity of good works in how they measure the spiritual growth and health of their people. But the mere ability to hear and mentally collect divine knowledge doesn't necessarily equate to spiritual well-being (James 1:22).

The implication for the gospel minister, therefore, is that *he* must cultivate this kind of life and approach to biblical and theological study. It is not enough for an aspiring pastor-theologian to see the necessity of developing a well-balanced ministry for his people and to recognize that heart-change is the aim of pastoral preaching, teaching, and discipleship. In order for there to be a well-balanced *ministry*, there must be a well-balanced *man*. Recapturing the pastor-theologian model for the good of the local church, therefore, is

²⁰John Piper, "The Pastor as Scholar," in *The Pastor as Scholar and The Scholar as Pastor: Reflections on Life and Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 44–45. Piper's study of Romans 9:1–23 in preparation to write his scholarly monograph, *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), is one of the impetuses that led him to pastoral ministry.

²¹John Piper, "The Pastor as Scholar," 49.

²²Piper, "The Pastor as Scholar," 49–53.

first a call to recapture the pastor-theologian himself.

A pastor-theologian is one who is, first, qualified to be a pastor according to the character qualities listed in the pastoral epistles (1 Tim 3:1-8; Titus 1:5–9). But it is possible for a man to be godly yet not have the requisite skill with which to carry out a well-balanced ministry that combines scholarly rigor and deep love for God and his people. He must first, as Albert Martin notes, “strive to maintain a real, expanding, varied, and original acquaintance with God and his ways.”²³ Martin continues,

As glorious and memorable, or as undramatic and almost imperceptible, were our original saving dealings with God and His ways, these dealings will not suffice to sustain a ministry that is marked by the unction of the Spirit of God in a life of growing intimacy and expanding acquaintance with the triune God of the Bible...Our expanding acquaintance with God and His ways must not be sterile or wooden.²⁴

In order for a pastor’s theological labors to remain spiritually beneficial to his people and the greater church, he must be actively pursuing a heart-felt walk with Christ. But for the pastor-theologian, this heart-felt walk with Christ is to be pursued *through* study, not in opposition to it. Martin explains,

...it is possible that a man of God may experience a good measure of a humble walk with God along with the necessary intellectual exercises involved in such a walk, and yet fall short of his maximum potential for usefulness because of intellectual sterility, laziness, or a lack of general intellectual discipline. There is a sense in which a man may indeed be determined in his heart to love God wholly, but who is not prepared with equal diligence to love God with all his mind.²⁵

Crafting, planning, and implementing a deliberate strategy for theological growth, therefore, is essential for the pastor-theologian. (I will talk specifically about strategies below.)

Theological Excellence and the Problem of “Intellectual Respectability”

To heed the call to be a pastor-theologian, however, does not mean that faithful shepherds are seeking the approval of a larger guild of scholars. The

²³Albert Martin, *The Man of God: His Calling and Godly Life* (Montville, NJ: Trinity Pulpit Press, 2018), 236.

²⁴Martin, *The Man of God*, 239.

²⁵Martin, *The Man of God*, 283.

pursuit of what Iain Murray calls, “intellectual respectability” is a futile venture that inevitably leads to theological compromise.²⁶ As Carl Trueman has noted,

It remains true (as James Barr pointed out years ago) that evangelical academics are generally respected in the academy only at precisely those points where they are least evangelical. There is a difference between academic or scholarly respectability and intellectual integrity. For a Christian, the latter depends upon the approval of God and is rooted in fidelity to his revealed Word; it does not always mean the same thing as playing by the rules of scholarly guild.²⁷

Specifically, evangelical pastor-theologians must be careful that they do not mistake the assumption of naturalistic, historical-critical dogmas for rigorous thinking. What do I mean?

As we noted above, the Enlightenment not only occasioned the separation of twin roles that God designed to reside in the same office, but it also challenged the very foundations of evangelical theology so that historic Christian doctrine was no longer broadly assumed to be true. These epistemological reverberations are felt to this day. The intellectual air we breathe is infused with settled doubt over the veracity of Scripture and the validity of Christian theology so that even evangelical theologians show signs of infection. For example, some evangelical scholars imply by their arguments that the refusal to accept an evolutionary framework for

²⁶Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change from 1950–2000* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 173–214. See also John Frame “Inerrancy: A Place to Live,” in *The Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* vol 57, number 1 (2014): 36. Frame comments, “Respectability is a major issue here. Our desire to raise the quality of our academic standards is a godly desire. Our desire to be academically respectable usually is not, though it is hard to separate the good desire to meet higher standards. The apostle Paul does say that a church elder should be ‘well thought of by outsiders’ (1 Tim 3:7; cf. 1: Thess 4:12). But the quest for respectability, a frequent quest in the history of Christian thought, is often motivated by ungodly pride. Avoiding that is where the armor of God comes in, where we need to walk in the Spirit.” See also Naselli, “Three Reflections,” 433–38.

²⁷Carl Trueman, “The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind,” in *9 Marks Journal* (January/February 2010): 10–12.

understanding human origins is unscientific,²⁸ or that the idea of an inerrant Scripture is untenable in light of historical-critical scholarship.²⁹

If such is the case among even some professing evangelical theologians, pastors will be ever tempted to yield to what the larger academy deems reasonable and rational. A faithful pastor-theologian, therefore, will be one who settles it in his mind—and resettles it every day—that he beholden to Scripture as the supreme source of theological knowledge and that his mental labor is for the glory of God and the benefit of the church, not the accolades of the academy. Rejection, ridicule, and ostracization from professing evangelical and non-evangelical theologians alike will be the normal portion of the faithful pastor-theologian. While it may not ring with sophistication, the path to theological excellence is through the cross and a deep-seated, Spirit-wrought commitment to please Christ above all, come what may (see Gal 1:10).

Pride, therefore, cannot be allowed to take root in the life of an aspiring pastor-theologian.³⁰ The danger of emphasizing the biblical call for a shepherd to steep himself in God-centered theology is that knowledge, if not joined with humility and love, has the *tendency* to puff up (1 Cor 8:1). This propensity is not the fault of the knowledge itself: genuine knowledge of God is the greatest of all gifts (Jer 9:23–24). The fault lies with our sinful hearts that are prone to take *any* good gift—gifts that are given for the express purpose of bringing glory to God—and twist it to exalt ourselves. But Scripture warns us repeatedly that the pursuit of personal glory and the praise of man disables us from rightly understanding and interpreting Scripture. In other words, if you're pining after the approval of other theologians and a guild of world-renowned scholars, you will likely find yourself in a doctrinal ditch, bringing ruin to yourselves and to your hearers, just like the religious leaders in Jesus' time.³¹

²⁸Denis O. Lamoureux, "No Historical Adam: Evolutionary Creation View," in *Four Views on Historical Adam*, eds., Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 37–65.

²⁹Kenton Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

³⁰Just over sixty years ago J. I. Packer noted that Christians may still be tempted to reject the teaching of God's Word due to pride. "And when men become Christians, they are still prone in their pride to lapse into the assumption that there is no rationality or wisdom in merely taking their Creator's word; they are still apt to demand that their reason be permitted to make its own independent assessment of what He says and to have the last word in deciding whether it is credible or not." See *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 138

³¹Jonathan Edwards offers this sharp warning to any Christian who pursues divine knowledge for the sake of applause. "Seek not to grow in knowledge chiefly for the sake of applause, and to enable you to dispute with others; but seek it for the

The Pharisees and scribes possessed every resource they needed to fulfill their role as Israel's pastor-theologians. They had the written Word of God, they had the time and a generally peaceful setting with which to study its contents, and they had the opportunity to teach that Word to the people in their nation. When the Messiah stood in their presence, however, they did not recognize him or grasp that this Man was presently fulfilling the very Scripture they had given their lives to studying. "You search the Scriptures," Jesus told them, "because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40).

What was the problem? Jesus follows his observation about their study habits with a jarring statement: "I do not receive glory from people" (John 5:41). While at first glance this statement seems out of place, it answers the question of why they had refused to come to Jesus: the religious leaders sought glory from people. They loved the praise and accolades of men. Elsewhere, Jesus characterized the scribes and Pharisees as people dominated by the need for man's approval: "They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others" (Matt 23:5–7; cf. Matt 6:1–12).

Jesus, conversely, was characterized by declining personal glory for the sake of pursuing his Father's fame. For this reason, Jesus was unattractive to the religious leaders and would be quickly replaced by another Messiah if that Savior exalted himself and coddled the Pharisees' desire for personal glory. "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him" (John 5:43). The root problem for these religious leaders was that their pursuit of man's approval clouded their eyes and kept them from rightly understanding Scripture. In other words, pride made faith in Jesus impossible: "How can you believe," Jesus asks rhetorically, "when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God" (John 5:44)? The answer, of course, is that they were unable to believe in Christ so long as they treasured the praise of men.

benefit of your souls, and in order to practice. If applause be your end, you will not be so likely to be led to the knowledge of the truth, but may justly, as often is the case of those who are proud of their knowledge, be led into error to your own perdition. This being your end, if you should obtain much rational knowledge, it would not be likely to be of any benefit to you, but would puff you up with pride. *1 Corinthians 8:1*, "Knowledge puffeth up." See "The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth," in *Works*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 162–63.

While Jesus' comments were directed at the Pharisees' unconverted condition, the principle holds true for Christian pastors as well: our faith in Jesus and thus our ability to rightly interpret and apply Scripture will be obstructed by any cultivation of our pride. God only leads the humble in what is right (Ps 25:9) and only looks upon the one who trembles at his Word (Isa 61:1–2). Our desire for prominence among a cadre of international scholars—or simply among the pastor-theologians in nearby churches—must be crucified again and again if we hope to grow spiritually, feed Christ's flock, and persevere in the ministry. Jonathan Edwards aptly warns us: "Pride is the main handle by which [Satan] has hold of Christian persons and the chief source of all the mischief that he introduces to clog and hinder a work of God. Spiritual pride is the main spring or at least the main support of all other errors. *Until this disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases.*"³² Dealing with our sinful bent for personal glory is not a discipline we begin in latter stages of our work: it is the beginning, middle, and end of pastoral ministry. Without Spirit-wrought humility leading to a love for Christ and a love for his sheep, our theological efforts will come to nothing (James 4:6).

But it should be obvious by now that none of our discussion on the problem of intellectual respectability implies that the pastor-theologian will be excused for intellectual sloppiness. Poorly reasoned doctrinal positions, superficial engagement with opposing theological opinions, hurried exegesis, and unsubstantiated arguments cannot be waived simply because one is a pastor. The very idea that the pastoral office justifies mental carelessness and theological ineptitude is itself a sign of the times. We will do well to remember that the word "pastor" in the phrase "pastor-theologian" is intended to identify the primary beneficiary of the theologian's intellectual labor (i.e., Christ's sheep), not serve as a hedge for a lazy man who is unwilling to apply mental rigor to his calling.³³

Indeed, the church only suffers when pastors neglect this aspect of their calling. Consider the troubles spawned by the Keswick movement.³⁴ These

³²Jonathan Edwards, "Undiscerned Spiritual Pride," in *Works*, 1:399; emphasis added.

³³One way that pastors can relate positively to the academy is by allowing current scholarship to sharpen their own thinking and theological arguments, even if that scholarship is trending in an unorthodox direction.

³⁴Andrew David Naselli defines the Keswick movement in the following way: "Keswick is a small town in the scenic Lake District of northwest England. Since 1875, it has hosted a weeklong meeting in July for the Keswick Convention.... 'the early Keswick movement' refers to a movement from 1875 to 1920 that was (1) conservatively evangelical; (2) based on and distinguished by the belief that the majority of Christians are living in defeat and that the secret to living the victorious Christian life is consecration followed by Spirit-filling; and (3) stimulated by annual

problems, in large measure, were the fruit of the movement's emphasis on "experience at the expense of doctrine,"³⁵ as Andrew David Naselli explains:

Robert Pearsall Smith helped set the tone when he led a higher life meeting: "We did not come to Oxford to set each other right, or to discuss doctrines." Hannah Whitall Smith used the same tone by opening her most influential work—which addresses the deeply theological issue of progressive sanctification—with a disclaimer that downplays theology and appeals to experience.³⁶

Naselli then quotes a Keswick historian who claims that, "Keswick is interested in the practical application of religious truth rather than in doctrinal or dogmatic theology. The [Keswick] Convention is not interested in academic discussions of theology and ethics, or even in adding to the store of Bible knowledge of those who attend, but simply and only in helping men to be holy."³⁷ While a statement like this may initially sound attractive to well-intentioned Christians who want to grow in holiness but don't want to become mired in overly-technical doctrinal discussions and debates, it actually serves to undermine the Christian's pursuit of sanctification. Naselli continues, quoting J. I. Packer, "Perhaps this...is the very unconcern that has caused the trouble. After all, Pelagianism is the natural heresy of zealous Christians who are not interested in theology."³⁸ To emphasize application at the neglect of doctrinal foundations removes the basis of and guidance for the practical component of Christianity.

What is required of the pastor is not that he yield to assumed academic dogmas that run counter to Scripture, but that he become a clear thinker who is growing in his capacity to view all of life through the lens of Scripture (2 Tim 2:7; Rom 12:1–2). A faithful theologian is one who thinks hard and carefully over Scripture and its application within the parameters provided by historic Christian doctrine. A theologian, then, is not someone who embraces naturalistic assumptions about Scripture: he is simply someone who thinks

conventions at Keswick, England, and literature by its propagators." See "Keswick Theology: A Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement" in *DBSJ* 13 (2008): 17–18.

³⁵Andrew David Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came From, Where It's Going, and Why It's Harmful* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), 87.

³⁶Naselli, *No Quick Fix*, 87.

³⁷Steven Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1952), 42, 108; quoted in Naselli, *No Quick Fix*, 88.

³⁸J. I. Packer, "Keswick and the Reformed Doctrine of Sanctification," *Evangelical Quarterly* 27 (1955): 167; quoted in Naselli, *No Quick Fix*, 88.

hard about the Bible from historic evangelical foundations and applies its truth to all of life.

IV

A Pastor-Theologian in Practice: John Calvin and the Doctrine of Justification

John Calvin called the doctrine of justification “the main hinge on which religion turns.”³⁹ But it is not enough for the pastor to know the basics of this doctrine. His calling requires that he go continually deeper into this doctrine, teasing out its implications against the backdrop of current and historic challenges—not so that he can impress with intellectual sophistication, but so that his people’s spiritual vision remain uncluttered by the often-subtle distortions of the heretic.

In this way we can see how vital it is for the twin roles of pastor and theologian to remain firmly fixed in one office. The heart of the pastor desires that his people walk in the joy and freedom of the gospel (Gal 4:18-20; 5:1). But his people’s joy depends upon the clarity with which they behold Christ *in* the gospel. If that faith in Christ is darkened by even the smallest distortion in their understanding of justification, their faith will be hindered, and the Spirit will be stifled from working in their lives. And when this Spirit is stifled, the believer is left powerless against the flesh (Gal 5:16–21) and unable to produce the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23).

This kind of spiritual obstruction is precisely what was occurring in the Galatian churches (Gal 3:1–5). Paul’s response, therefore, was a passionate yet carefully argued defense of justification that offered both simple articulation of the doctrine’s basic tenants (Gal 2:16) as well as in-depth analysis of Old Testament texts and covenantal structure (Gal 3:7–4:31) in order to move the Galatians back to believing in Jesus Christ alone for their right standing with God. It was not enough for the apostle to merely repeat the fundamental truths of justification: he had to meet the Judaizer’s challenges head-on and overturn their false teaching with deep theology and a lengthy argument that settled once and for all that the Galatians were children of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ.

But Paul’s theological rigor had a practical goal for the Galatians. His inquiry into the Old Covenant and his defense of justification by faith led naturally to his discussion of walking in the Spirit and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. The endgame for Paul’s foray into exegesis, textual analysis, and theological synthesis was the happiness and holiness of the Galatians. Freedom, joy, love, personal character, humility, and perseverance in well-doing follow in the wake of sound theology (see Gal 5:16–6:10).

³⁹John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.1.

The challenges to justification have not subsided since Paul's passionate epistle to the fledgling churches in modern-day Turkey. The challenges continued throughout the early church, as we see Paul expositing the doctrine at length in Romans and defending related soteriological elements in his other epistles. While there were flashes of insight and careful articulation of the doctrine of justification in the post-apostolic, imperial, and medieval church,⁴⁰ it was the Reformation that sparked exponential growth for the doctrine as Martin Luther and then John Calvin labored to articulate the biblical truths of justification in the context of the Roman Catholic sacramental system.

Like Paul, the Reformers' theological rigor had a pastoral goal. Europe had been under the spiritual burden of the Roman Catholic Church's sacramental system for centuries. The practical fallout of this merit-based soteriology was a laity whose consciences were loaded with the unrelieved fear of divine judgment due to the ineffectiveness of the system to provide assurance of peace with God. Even for Luther, his meticulous pouring over biblical texts and theological treatises was a matter of spiritual life and death, not scholarly one-upmanship. Calvin, quoted earlier, recognized that the spiritual health of the church is dependent upon her grasp of the doctrine of justification. Their insights into the doctrine were compelled by pastoral concern and shaped by intellectual intensity.

Consider the depth of insight into justification that Calvin discovered as he wrestled with Roman Catholic doctrine while plundering Scripture and the theological resources he had at hand. For example, in his aim to not allow faith to be mistaken as an evangelical work that earned us God's favor, Calvin added life-giving nuance to his argument for justification. Michael Horton comments,

At the same time, Calvin was concerned to keep faith from being perceived as the "one work" that we can perform in order to merit our justification. In itself, faith is nothing; its efficacy lies in its object, the person to whom it clings. Faith itself is imperfect, "for the mind is never so illuminated, but that many relics of ignorance remain; the heart is never so strengthened, but that much doubting cleaves to it." Faith is partial and weak, so if we are justified by faith itself, our case would be as hopeless as if we merited faith by our works.⁴¹

⁴⁰Nate Busenitz, *Long Before Luther: Tracing the Heart of the Gospel from Christ to the Reformation* (Chicago: Moody, 2017).

⁴¹Michael Horton, *Justification*, vol. 1, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 2018), 214; Horton is quoting from Calvin's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*.

This insight, though seemingly abstruse, has serious pastoral purchase. If faith itself (rather than Christ) is our righteousness, we are undone. How can we have any assurance if God looks upon our faith as meritorious? Our faith is often weak, half-hearted, and easily swayed. Without Calvin's insight about the nature of saving faith, believers are ever-tempted to rely upon themselves, even if they make an evangelical profession.

Along with the need to articulate with clarity the nature of faith and how it functioned in salvation, the controversy with the Roman Catholic Church required Calvin to emphasize the doctrine of union with Christ. Calvin's recourse to this biblical category enabled him to maintain the soteriological connection between justification and sanctification while making important distinctions between them. Against the Roman Catholic Church, Calvin argued that justification was strictly forensic and occurred at the moment of faith.⁴² When a person puts his faith in Christ, in the courtroom of heaven, God declares the sinner righteousness with regard to his law, not by a legal fiction, but because Christ's righteousness has been imputed to the sinner's account, not infused into the sinner's soul.⁴³ This declaration of righteousness is fixed and unchanging.⁴⁴ Sanctification, the inevitable result of justification but distinct from it, consists of inward renewal that occurs over the sinner's lifetime but will not be completed until the believer dies and enters heaven.⁴⁵ Both elements of salvation are essential—leave one out and you don't have Christianity. But confuse or conflate them, and you likewise end up with something less than the gospel.

The doctrine of union with Christ draws these two aspects of salvation under one coherent theological category. Understood within the framework of union with Christ, each doctrine can be distinguished and simultaneously upheld in its theological and practical fullness.⁴⁶ How a sinner partakes in these two benefits of Christ also remains the same due to our union with Christ. Horton explains,

Union with Christ does not provide a basis for God's discerning in us a righteousness imparted; rather, on the basis of justification we

⁴²Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.2, 16, 19.

⁴³Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.2–4, 11.

⁴⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.16; III.13.3.

⁴⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, III.14.9.

⁴⁶J. Todd Billings says it well: "On the one hand, this 'sum' of the gospel points to a thread that runs through much of Calvin's doctrinal work: the double grace of union with Christ is a simple, yet expansive description of salvation, for it incorporates forensic and transformational images of salvation together, without absorbing one category into the other." See "John Calvin's Soteriology: On the Multifaceted 'Sum' of the Gospel," in the *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11.4 (October 2009): 428.

partake of Christ's vivifying life. The same act of faith that looks to Christ alone for justification looks to Christ alone for sanctification and glorification. The Christian life does not have two sources: one forensic and found in Christ alone and one moral and found in us.⁴⁷

By maintaining that justification and sanctification come to the believer through the same conduit—namely, faith in Christ—we avoid the Galatian problem of starting with the Spirit by faith (justification) but pursuing growth in holiness (sanctification) by works (Gal 3:3). But we can't stop probing into this doctrine quite yet. In order to keep justification from mixing with sanctification under the heading of union with Christ, we must also clarify the order by which union with Christ occurs and its relation to justification. Horton continues, "Forensic justification through faith alone is the fountain of union with Christ in all of its renewal. We are justified through faith, not through union with Christ."⁴⁸ Is this unnecessary, overly-nuanced theological hair-splitting that creates a distinction without a difference? Not if, according to Paul, it is essential to maintain that God justifies the *ungodly* by faith (Rom 4:5). Horton again:

According to classic Reformed treatments of this connection, Christ alone—his incarnation, obedient life, death, resurrection, and ascension—is the *basis* both for justification and union, but the act of justification is logically prior to union. Nevertheless, Calvin concludes, once justification has provided the legal ground, all the gifts of God's grace are freely given in union with Christ.⁴⁹

Justification—God's declaration that the believing sinner is righteous on the basis of Christ' life, death, and resurrection—is the legal ground for union with Christ and our reception of all his benefits, including sanctification. When the sinner places faith in Christ, God imputes to his account the perfect righteousness of Christ. The sinner, though still ungodly at the moment of justification, now possesses the legal right to enjoy all the spiritual blessings that union with Christ has to offer. But if we don't maintain the proper order of justification by faith *as the grounds of* union with Christ, it is possible to view union with Christ, *with* the benefit of sanctification as providing the legal basis for our justification. Once sanctification is allowed to contribute to our right standing with God, we are left vulnerable to a doctrine of justification similar to the Roman Catholic Church where justification is conflated with sanctification and the believer's assurance is cut

⁴⁷Horton, *Justification*, 1:215.

⁴⁸Horton, *Justification*, 1:215.

⁴⁹Horton, *Justification*, 1:219.

at the root. Entrance into right standing with God comes by faith in Christ alone. Lose this, and you've lost everything else.

With this important nuance, Calvin could answer the Roman Church's claim that his view of justification makes good works superfluous and of no importance in the life of the Christian. "On the contrary," Horton explains, "[justification] frees us to obey God and serve our neighbor without the ear of punishment for our short-comings. Justification in no way depends on the impartation of Christ's righteousness through union, yet the two are inseparable."⁵⁰ Calvin observes,

This alone is of importance: having admitted that faith and good works must cleave together, we still lodge justification in faith, not in works. We have a ready explanation for doing this, provided we turn to Christ to whom our faith and direct and from whom it receives its full strength.⁵¹

When pastor-theologians protect *sola fide* from the encroachment of works in relation to justification, they are not merely upholding a confessional standard; they are supplying believers with source of unflagging joy and love to serve his neighbor and pursue good works for the benefit of others. This order of free justification providing the basis and impetus for good works is *the* structure of New Testament religion, and Calvin knew that compromise at this point left the church defenseless to a myriad of other deadly theological intrusions.

The care with which Calvin engaged the theological controversies of the day and the insights he produced from his close attention to Scripture amidst these controversies demonstrates the necessity for pastors to embrace their calling as theologians. Spiritual vitality and eternal destinies hung upon what many today would view as an unnecessary distinction between justification and sanctification. Calvin knew this, and the deeper he went into the battle, the more clearly he saw that robust, detailed theology derived from Scripture and careful synthesis was the *answer*, not the problem.

Within the last forty years, the doctrine of justification has seen a fresh set of challenges. While this article is not the place to answer these challenges in the depth and breadth they require, it is essential to remind ourselves that the same kind of spiritual confusion that afflicted the Galatians and the medieval church threatens to afflict us and darken our sight of Christ and the gospel. Following the example of Calvin, pastors must embrace their calling as theologians and face these challenges head-on. The academic ruminations of scholars inevitably make their way into popular Christian literature and living. Imperceptibly, Christians without courageous pastor-theologians to

⁵⁰ Horton, *Justification*, 1:216.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1; cited in Horton, *Justification*, 1: 216.

feed and warn them will imbibe seemingly harmless ideas that undermine evangelical faith and eventually undo their assurance altogether. Calvin teaches pastors to take our post as the church's theologian and labor diligently for the good of the flock.

V

Growing as a Pastor-Theologian

Now that we've considered the necessity of the pastor-theologian, developed a vision for what a well-balanced ministry should look like, and tasted of the spiritual fruit that is produced by careful pastoral attention to theological issues, we are now ready to think practically about how to tend to our calling. How do we grow as pastor-theologians?

Because we are all at different places along the spectrum—some of us are so people-oriented we find it hard to conceive of our role as involving rigorous theological work, while some of us have a bent toward study that sometimes leads us away from the hard work of shepherding the flock—we have to enter this phase of the discussion with some healthy self-knowledge. To what side of road are we more likely to run off into the ditch?

We also need to reckon with our gifts and present stewardship. By returning us to the pastor-theologian model, I am not suggesting that all pastors will engage the work of theology in the same way or in the same proportion. God has granted some men gifts that enable them to reach beyond their local congregation. Writing gifts, a capacity for in-depth academic research, and other related skills may enable some pastors to produce theological material for the greater church and Christian academy while they faithfully shepherd their own flock. Others will labor theologically chiefly for their local church without making contributions to a wider audience. And a host of other providential factors will come in to play as well: church size, location, and available staff are just a few aspects of local church life that will determine how much time and energy a pastor can devote to outside theological engagement.

Not every pastor is called to be a widely-known theological leader,⁵² but every pastor is called to be a theologian—a shepherd who thinks deeply and carefully over Scripture and biblical doctrine, who has a solid and growing grasp of systematic and historical theology, who is aware of important theological trends, and who is able to accurately convey and apply the whole counsel of God to his people. That's all of us. So, how can we grow in this grand calling? I will offer ten encouragements.

⁵²Douglas Sweeney, "A Call and Agenda for Pastor-Theologians," at The Gospel Coalition, April 26, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-call-and-agenda-for-pastor-theologians/>.

Walk Closely with the Lord

Of first importance in our growth as pastor-theologians is our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. We labor in vain if we labor without Christ, and all our efforts will turn to sand if we neglect our relationship with Jesus. “Apart from me,” Jesus reminds us, “you can do nothing” (John 15:6). Again, this kind of exhortation may not ring with intellectual savvy, but the pastor-theologian is shaped by a cross, not an academic culture. Theological study will go awry and ministry effectiveness will vanish if a pastor doesn’t give first attention to himself and his walk with God (1 Tim 4:15–16). Many in our day are offering tools and processes to enhance our productivity—many of which are genuinely helpful—but there is a biblical order to productivity that cannot be circumvented by the latest smartphone app or daily routine. “We are likely to accomplish much,” Charles Spurgeon observes, “when we are in the best spiritual condition.”⁵³ In other words, first concern yourself with your walk with the Lord and pastoral productivity will occur naturally and in the right proportion. Above all, treasure Jesus in your pastoral and theological labors.

Embrace a Life of Strenuous and Constant Labor

While sexual scandals and financial malfeasance inevitably throw the pastoral ministry into disrepute, lazy pastors are just as guilty for besmirching the shepherding office. “Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys” (Prov 18:9), Solomon warns. One reason why some pastors resist the idea of rigorous theological engagement is because it requires a lot of hard work. But we can’t abide such an excuse. The pastor is called to set an example for the flock in his conduct (1 Tim 4:12), and work-ethic is certainly included in this calling. As a *Christian*, the pastor should desire to exercise diligence in his work and to pursue excellence in his craft (Prov 12:24; 13:4; 21:5; 22:29; 28:19). As a *pastor*, he should desire to labor assiduously among God’s people because the nature of his work has eternal implications for himself and his people (1 Tim 4:16).

As we’ve noted already in this article, much of pastoral ministry is intellectual work: study, meditation, reading, writing, teaching, preaching. The pastor is tasked with the protection and promulgation of sound doctrine which requires that he toil long in Scripture and in other books, thinking carefully over biblical texts, theological problems, and pastoral application. These responsibilities require serious mental effort, but the pastor-theologian must be up to the task. Drawing from Old Testament precedent, Paul described the pastoral life as a life of strenuous effort. “For this end we *labor and strive*” (1 Tim 4:10; emphasis added), he told Timothy. The apostle characterized the pastoral role, particularly the elements of teaching and preaching, as “labor” (1 Tim 5:17; cf. 5:12; 1 Thess 2:9; 3:5). If you are not

⁵³Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 7.

ready to work hard in preaching and teaching, you are not ready to be a pastor-theologian, which means you are not ready to be a pastor.

Hearing this admonition, however, some pastors will be tempted to replace intentional diligence with reactive busyness and fool themselves (and their people) that they are working hard when they are really just yielding to tyranny of the urgent. Rather than attending to their God-given priority of theological shepherding, they fill their schedules with meetings, phone calls, administrative requests, and other demands that make them to appear diligent but that actually shield them from the strenuous mental labor required for their role. The pastor-theologian, while never neglecting personal, hands-on care for the flock, carefully balances his schedule and commitments so that he can give adequate, distraction-free time to study, pray, read, and meditate over Scripture and sound doctrine.

Go Deep into the Bible

The primary quarry to which the pastor-theologian must give his time and energy is the Bible. The Scriptures are the Word of God and therefore demand our utmost attention. While we must thank God for and make good use of the many resources he has provided to help us understand the Bible, nothing can replace sustained time spent in the text. Scripture refers to this sustained time the text as “meditation,” and it is the methodological key to unlocking Scripture’s truth and enabling us to obey it. “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, *so that* you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success” (Josh 1:8; emphasis added; cf. Ps 1:2). Paul instructed young pastor Timothy to think over what the apostle had written because it was through the process of thinking that God would provide illumination and insight (1 Tim 2:7).

Yet, how easy it is to neglect intense, careful, focused study of Scripture because we are drawn away by secondary resources too quickly. John Piper reminds us, “If we are going to feed our people, we must ever advance in our grasp of Biblical truth....But several strong forces oppose our relentless and systematic interrogating of Biblical texts. One is that it consumes a great deal of time and energy on one small portion of Scripture.”⁵⁴ In truth, we may find it *easier* to read commentaries or other books than to dwell long over biblical texts in the attempt to discover their meaning. We may sense a need to relieve the burden of unresolved questions as quickly as possible, so we turn to outside helps rather than wrestling with the text until we can see for ourselves what it’s saying and how it synthesizes with other biblical texts. But it is difficult to see how such quick recourse to other resources can deepen our first-hand conviction one what Scripture teaches.

⁵⁴Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 74–75.

Counter-intuitively, this robust, first-hand acquaintance with Scripture doesn't inhibit freshness or creativity in our preaching, teaching, and theological labors.⁵⁵ Actually, we will find that dealing primarily with the Bible will make our thinking clearer, sharpen our ability to engage with variant interpretations, enable us to develop useful pedagogical outlines and categories from the Scriptures themselves, and help us provide our people with deep insight into God's Word. It is for this reason that Martin Luther said, "He who is well acquainted with the Scripture is a distinguished theologian."⁵⁶ Growing as a pastor-theologian, therefore, begins with a renewed commitment to Scripture as our primary source for the knowledge of God.

Read

But immediately after emphasizing the importance of spending time in the text to see God's Word for ourselves, we must underscore the necessity of theological reading. The Scriptures exhort us to find and secure teachers to help us understand God's Word and grow in wisdom: ironically, to neglect these resources would be unbiblical. Furthermore, books supplement our deficiencies in knowledge that we can't supplement on our own while also protecting us from interpreting Scripture in isolation from the greater church. Given our limited time and the focus to which we must dedicate to the study of Scripture and our pastoral work, it a mark of wisdom to locate the best resources to supply what is lacking in our knowledge. Good books help us to better understand Scripture, but they also inform us of wider societal trends and theological developments within the church and academy.⁵⁷ Useful books help us think carefully through nettlesome doctrinal and ecclesiastical issues while also providing us rich illustrations for our preaching, teaching, and writing. We ignore theological reading to our pastoral peril.

But to make progress in our reading, we must craft a plan that outlines what we will read and when we will read. The pressures of pastoral life will ever tempt us to neglect theological reading for immediate concerns. While we cannot ignore hands-on care for the sheep, we must also be wary of allowing the whims of each day to dictate our schedules. There are emergencies in ministry, and our shepherding work will always require regular

⁵⁵See John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 99.

⁵⁶See Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 93.

⁵⁷Used judiciously, social media can provide insight into theological and ecclesial trends as well. Debates over eternal Trinitarian relations, the nature of the church, and Christian Nationalism in the last few years have all been largely conducted and promoted on social media. But social media is also fraught with dangers as well, as I outline below.

personal engagement with our people. But to become a pastor-theologian, we must apply dogged intentionality to maintain a steady course of biblical study, meditation, and theological reading. “Practice these things,” Paul exhorted Timothy, “immerse yourself in them, that all may see your progress” (1 Tim 4:15).

With regard to content, my recommendation is to begin with prayerfully⁵⁸ considering in what areas you should be reading. Determining factors may include current and future teaching, burgeoning theological and societal trends, personal theological interests, and discipleship concerns in your local setting. Secondly, I would recommend reading in topic “stacks.” Rather than reading just one book on a given topic, choose three on that issue and make your way through each book. You will find that you learn and retain more if you spend sustained time immersed in that topic rather than reading just one book.

With regard to time, my recommendation is to carve out a portion of *each day* for supplementary theological reading. This time could be early in the morning, during the day, and in your evening hours. Begin small. Start with fifteen-minute sessions three times a day, and gradually increase the amount of each session or the number of sessions, or both! By beginning with shorter sessions, you will be able to see that you are able to fit theological reading into your demanding schedule.

Write

While individual gifting, opportunities, and time will determine whether and how much we write for publication, every pastor should be a writer at some level. Why? Because writing enables you to think more carefully over a given theological topic or biblical passage while forcing you to put your thoughts in logical order. This practice subsequently enables you to communicate the truth to your people with greater clarity and coherence which, in turn, enhances their learning. If you naturally enjoy writing, you may not have much trouble following this recommendation. If you don’t consider yourself a gifted writer and you find it difficult to write, you may be tempted to ignore this counsel. Please don’t. Writing will have the immediate effect of sharpening your thinking. Sharper thinking leads to better communication and better communication leads to better shepherding.

Start today by committing to write out your sermons in longform. Even if you only take an outline to the pulpit, the practice of writing your sermons

⁵⁸I do not suggest prayer as the starting point of your knowledge acquisition as some sort of pietistic default. Rather, given the immense selection of material we presently have available, we are in desperate need of God’s guidance and wisdom to determine which books deserve our limited time and energy. Please see my article, “Pray about What Books to Read,” at FromTheStudy.com, April 19, 2016, <https://fromthestudy.com/2016/04/19/pray-about-what-books-to-read/>.

in full will help you think more thoroughly through the content and structure of your sermon. As you are forced to ponder over the theological problems and pastoral implications caused by the text and develop sound conclusions in response to those difficulties, your preaching will become clearer and easier to follow and your people will be blessed as they are able to better absorb the truth you are conveying.

But don't stop there. Cultivate the habit of personal writing as well. If you are stymied by a theological conundrum posed by a book you are currently reading, open your laptop and start writing. This practice will strengthen your mind and your ability to think systematically through theological issues rather than relying on others to do the work for you.

Get Organized and Keep Good Notes

John "Rabbi" Duncan (1796–1870) was a missionary to Jews and a professor at New College Edinburgh during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. While greatly loved by his students, he was, as his biographer described him, "a great possibility [rather] than a great realization."⁵⁹ This reference is to Duncan's inability to discipline his study and acquisition of knowledge. He possessed "an omnivorous intellectual appetite and his powers of retention were vast,"⁶⁰ and was well known for his broad learning. He loved and excelled in the Hebrew language and possessed an ardent desire to share what he was learning with others. Nevertheless, these gifts were undermined by a significant flaw: "There was a lack of any plan in his acquisition of knowledge."⁶¹ His biographer continues,

He had a fatal tendency to miscellaneous. He was often carried away intellectually with some engrossing mental problem or absorbed spiritually with some enquiry into the state of his own soul. Furthermore, he was utterly unmethodical in everything but the arrangement of his thoughts. The greatest defect of his character, however, was, as Dr. Moody Stuart points out, weakness of purpose. "You could not name any living man whom you could so easily turn aside in judgment from what he had approved, or in execution from what he had intended." This irregularity in work was fatal to his potential power as a professor and scholar.⁶²

I don't offer this observation about Duncan in order to disparage his accomplishments among his students. Duncan had a profound effect on

⁵⁹John M. Brentnall, *Just a Talker: Sayings of John ("Rabbi") Duncan* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1997), xxix.

⁶⁰Brentnall, *Just a Talker*, xxviii.

⁶¹Brentnall, *Just a Talker*, xxix.

⁶²Brentnall, *Just a Talker*, xxix.

those who took his classes, and his students profited from his instruction both spiritually and academically.⁶³ It's also important observe that Duncan was a professor, not a pastor. Given these caveats, the cautionary principle still holds for us who labor primarily in the church as pastor-theologians: we limit our short- and long-term usefulness if we fail to impose order onto our study habits and procurement of knowledge. If we desire to maximize our usefulness and multiply our efforts, we must apply ourselves to (1) organization; and (2) note-taking and retrieval.

Pastor-theologians, regardless of our so-called personality-type, must develop a methodology for how we pursue knowledge and store that knowledge for later use. Our pursuit of knowledge cannot be driven by the newest societal or theological trend, the latest book, or most recent periodical. It's true that theological work, as we've noted above, requires acquaintance with what is currently percolating at an academic and societal level, so these current trends, new releases, and fresh publications will be of interest to us as we seek to understand the times (1 Chron 12:32). But we will dilute our well of knowledge if we are constantly dipping into every contemporary development. Prayerful, intentional planning of what topics to pursue and the consistent implementation of an effective method of how to pursue them will be essential practices in the life of the pastor. Practically, this means that we plan out our preaching and teaching schedule months in advance and start collecting resources for those teaching assignments. We sketch out a long-term plan for research and writing projects and begin to compile books and articles for that project. We establish immovable times in our weekly schedule for study, meditation, sermon preparation, reading, and writing. But we also keep good notes.

Maintaining a sound note-keeping system is vital for the pastor-theologian because it enables us to steward our study and reading time well. Ask yourself: how much time have you spent studying and reading, gleaning a wealth of insight from what you read and from your own Spirit-illuminated reflections on the material, only to lose those insights because you never troubled yourself to write them down and store them in a way that makes them easy to recover? You may have been edified and helped by what you read, but no one else will be blessed by the insights you discovered because you are now unable to retrieve them. While we can be grateful for how the Lord grants us spiritual insights through our reading and study, we should also ask ourselves if this is the best way to steward our time and resources. Maintaining an accessible, easy-to-use note-keeping and retrieval system is a simple way to strengthen this area of stewardship.

Personally, I find Evernote to be what works best for me. Other folks I know use the Notes program on their Mac. Some people use Microsoft

⁶³Brentnall, *Just a Talker*, xxxii.

OneNote, while still others use Google Keep. The point of this section is not to advocate for a particular note-keeping system—you may prefer file cabinets and file folders. Rather, my aim is to help you see the necessity of *having* a workable system, regardless of its specific structure. The notes and insights you record today may make it into your sermon next week, but they will also be available for that counseling session three weeks from now, or that article two years from now, or that class on theology you'll be asked to teach five years from now. Make the most of your time studying, reading, and meditating over Scripture and sound doctrine by getting organized and taking excellent notes.

Kill Distractions

Much is being said today about the necessity of mitigating the distractions in our lives in order to be more productive.⁶⁴ While the temptation to be diverted from our work has existed since the beginning of time, our contemporary setting—with the development of personal technology and ease-of-access to the internet—poses a unique challenge to our ability to sustain undistracted attention on our tasks. With just one click on my laptop or tap on my smartphone, I can immerse myself in something other than the work I have in front of me, whether the diversion is an article, YouTube video, pending Amazon order, ministry email, or text message. Studies are emerging that confirm something we already suspected to be true: the ease with which we can re-direct our attention away from our work to frivolous entertainment through our personal devices has actually disabled our ability to think well. We have become conditioned to expect a distraction every couple of minutes—a text alert here, a desktop notification there—so we have lost our capacity to rivet our attention on a given task for any serious amount of time.

We should recognize the problem this increasing addiction to distraction poses for pastor-theologians. The very nature of our work requires sustained thinking time, and it appears axiomatic to me that quality of insight is directly related to the time with which we are able to maintain undistracted focus on a given biblical text, theological problem, or pastoral difficulty. Given how personal technology is conditioning our minds to expect diversions every few minutes, it is not an overstatement to say that your growth as a pastor-theologian will be largely dependent upon your commitment to kill distractions during your study time and to cultivate the severe discipline of concentration.

The first step here would be to take control of your workspace—presumably, your study at home or at the church office—and corral the

⁶⁴For an excellent book on this topic, see Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Portfolio, 2019).

personal devices most likely to introduce distractions into your day. The goal of this effort is to develop patterns of sustained concentration. For many of us, this effort to form new habits of thinking will be much like engaging in an exercise regimen. We've become mentally sluggish and flabby, so our intellects can only "run" for a few minutes at a time without needed a "breather" from YouTube or Twitter. We must start building endurance so that our minds can engage a topic, text, or troubling theological idea for multiple minutes—even hours—without stopping for a break.

The reason we need undistracted time to think is because the quality of our reflections decreases when they are punctuated by constant interruptions. Clear, deep, thorough, penetrating ideas are not formed by short bursts of mental activity. Like a fine piece of woodwork, it takes time to craft high-quality insights. Studies have shown that it takes up to twenty-three minutes for the mind to fully re-engage with the subject matter after it has been interrupted.⁶⁵ This observation is important for our concerns because it reminds us that useful insights do not emerge from the mind by fiat: they are the fruit of thoughts compounding on each other over time, where steady rumination over distinct pieces of knowledge eventually lead to an illuminating synthesis. If the process of reflection is constantly interrupted, genuine progress from particulars to synthesis is impeded and the quality of our insights is inevitably reduced. Text message notifications, email alerts, phone calls, and door knocks derail the mind and, much like a train, our minds require much time and effort to get fully back on track.

Practically, I recommend turning off all desktop and phone notifications during your study times. In order to remain available for emergencies, I set my phone to allow a few important people to reach me at any time. While I am studying, I ask the Lord to help me remain focused while I commit to not checking my inbox, browsing the internet, scanning social media, watching any videos, or engaging in any text messages. I set specific times to write and return emails, look at social media, and use the internet for non-study-related needs, and I do my best to keep to those times. As I work on exegesis, theological reading, sermon preparation, or writing, I keep to that task for the entire time I have allotted. When that time is completed, I am free to move on to other tasks.

While a pastor must be careful to not indulge his penchant for study by avoiding other shepherding responsibilities and personal relationships, he must also recognize that he cannot give adequate attention to his calling as

⁶⁵Gloria Mark, "The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress," Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, (Florence, Italy, April 5–10, 2008).

the church's theologian without much time alone with God and undistracted meditation on his text or topic. We must kill distractions.

Find a Specialty

Some suggest that pastors should pursue a PhD in their venture to grow as theologians.⁶⁶ While I wouldn't discourage a man from pursuing a PhD if he believed it would enhance his pastoral work—I sought my PhD specifically for the purpose of straddling the church and the Christian seminary for the benefit of both institutions, and I am glad I did—I do not think such a move is essential for making progress as a theologian. And for some men, the pursuit of a terminal research degree is simply not providentially possible.

Rather than viewing the PhD as a necessary asset for a budding pastor-theologian, I recommend that pastors of all educational backgrounds develop a specialty or a set of specialties over time in order to sharpen their scholarly capacities. As pastors, our primary labors will be in expositing the Scripture and taking up important theological issues for our local congregation when the need arises. As Peter Leithart notes, “the pastor theologian's most important theological publication is the sermon delivered to the local congregation.”⁶⁷ This is generalist work. The pastor must have a firm grasp on the whole of Scripture while possessing a working knowledge of every major theological loci and historic Christian doctrine. He will need an adequate understanding of biblical history, biblical backgrounds, languages, historical theology, apologetics, biblical theology, systematic theology, and counseling. Beyond this, the pastor will also need to acquaint himself with current cultural issues to protect and inform his people. In other words, the needs of his congregation will demand that he constantly broaden his knowledge across an array of topics.⁶⁸

While there is safety in generalist work—you avoid developing lop-sided, overly-narrow insights and impractical approaches to shepherding—there are also advantages to going deeper in one or two topics over your lifetime. The first advantage of developing a specialty is that it can make you useful to the

⁶⁶Hiestand and Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian*, 104–05.

⁶⁷Peter J. Leithart, “The Pastor-Theologian as Biblical Theologian: From the Church for the Church,” in *Becoming a Pastor Theologian* eds., Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2016), 19.

⁶⁸Specialties may also develop through unique, church-related issues that arise over the course of a man's pastoral ministry. The biblical counseling movement, for example, was born out of a pastor's need to provide effective counseling to his people in a context where modern psychology held preeminence, even within evangelical churches, when it came to helping people overcome their problems. See Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), xi–xxii, and David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010).

greater church. By going deep into, say, Christology, you are developing a skill in a particular branch of Christian knowledge that enables you to genuinely engage that topic at an academic level—thus protecting your flock, feeding them rich insight into sound doctrine, and potentially making a scholarly contribution—while also distinguishing yourself as an expert in that field so that you can serve other churches and local schools with your specialty. All the while, you will bring the knowledge and experience of a pastor to bear on your area of expertise, thus serving academy by keeping the musings of professional theologians grounded in real life.

For those pastors with PhDs, your specialty will likely emerge from the focus of your dissertation. For example, I wrote my dissertation on inerrancy, so it was easy for me to keep digging in the mine I opened during my doctoral studies. To this day I continue to read and study much in the area of the doctrine of Scripture. This effort has led to teaching the subject at a seminary level and publishing on the topic at a popular and academic level.

For those pastors without PhDs, your choice of specialty will be based on other considerations. Perhaps you used your electives to focus on a particular subject during your MDiv, or you've had a long-standing interest in a specific branch of theology. Fan that interest into flame and make it a lifelong, ever-deepening pursuit of Christian knowledge. Your people and the greater church will benefit from your intensive labors, and you will derive much joy from going deep into a few topics while maintaining a broad acquaintance with other fields of biblical study.

Don't Just Do Theology

Throughout this article I've pressed the idea that pastor-theologians should be characterized by a strong work ethic and undistracted focus on his labors. I would be remiss, however, if I left you with the impression that a pastor-theologian who exalts Christ is someone who only does theology. A pastor-theologian is a well-rounded shepherd who fulfills all his responsibilities—domestic and ecclesial. Cultivating a happy, Godward home life, caring reasonably for your health, participating in life-giving recreational activities that refresh and prepare you to re-enter your labors, engaging with neighbors and the greater community, reading non-theological books, appropriating God's good gifts of food, friendship, and wholesome entertainment are all aspects of a well-rounded pastor-theologian.⁶⁹

Embrace Suffering

Finally, pastor-theologians must embrace suffering. In God's design, deep spiritual knowledge comes from meditation over Scripture coupled with affliction. We need the furnace of suffering to refine our thinking, establish

⁶⁹See also Carl Trueman, "The Importance of Not Studying Theology," in *Themelios* 35.1 (2010): 4–6.

our obedience, and sharpen our reading of Scripture. This was the Psalmist's observation: "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word....It is good that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes" (Ps 119:67, 71). There is a learning of God's statutes that only suffering can provide. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Christianity's foundational theologian was a man acquainted with great suffering (2 Cor 11:21–12:10). Nor is it a coincidence that history's best and most insightful theologians were those who suffered most.

While it isn't pleasant to consider this aspect of the pastor-theologian's task, it is nevertheless necessary. We must be careful that we don't develop the expectation that life as a pastor-theologian will be a life tucked away in our study, hidden from the trials of life, delivering un-tested theological axioms to an eager audience each week. Yes, we must make time to be alone with God and with our books, but our study will be stunted if we are not ready to embrace suffering as the normal portion of a faithful shepherd. "Endure suffering," Paul told Timothy just before he signed off for the last time, alone in prison, soon to make his way to the gallows (2 Tim 4:5). Timothy's pastoral and theological work needed the added flavor of affliction.

VI Conclusion

The call to be a pastor is a call to be a pastor-theologian. As we've noted, this dual calling has been split in two due to various factors arising in both post-Enlightenment England and North America. The slow but sure distance that formed between shepherds and academic theologians, however, has benefitted neither the church nor the academy.

While academic specialization has produced some gains, the separation of theology from the church has gutted the pastoral office of its intellectual component so that shepherds are largely viewed as managers, motivators, and marketers rather than the church's resident theologian. As a result, sermons are shallow and books are superficial, and people die for lack of knowledge. To be a pastor-theologian who exalts Christ, therefore, we must reunite these twin roles into one office, taking our cue from the New Testament authors and the history of the pre-Enlightenment church. The labor will be immense, but the goal is achievable. Our God has equipped us with everything we need for life, godliness, and a fruitful ministry (2 Pet 1:3–11; Heb 13:20–21). By the power of the Holy Spirit and faith in the gospel, let us renew our commitment to be true pastor-theologians for the good of Christ's church.

A Bibliology that Exalts Christ

Michael M. Canham*

I

Introduction

“Please open your Bibles . . .” Those words would open virtually all of the sermons Steve Fernandez preached at Community Bible Church (CBC) in Vallejo, CA. For over three decades, from the church’s founding in 1980 until Steve’s homegoing in 2013, his passionate, Christ-centered, “explository” preaching (with sermon outlines that no one could follow) and published training manuals were a source of tremendous blessing not only to his beloved church family, but fellow pastors, missionaries, church planters, and theological equippers worldwide. Steve saw no conflict or tension between being Christ-centered and Scripture-saturated in his own ministry, and his successors at both CBC and The Cornerstone Seminary (which Steve launched in 2004) have faithfully modeled Steve’s joint-commitment to Christ-centeredness and the supreme authority of Scripture.

I was privileged to sit under Steve’s preaching during the final years of his ministry at CBC and the opening years of mine as a Cornerstone faculty member, and I am deeply humbled and privileged to be asked to contribute an essay in Steve’s honor on the doctrine of Scripture. Clearly, the space limitations of the present essay preclude an exhaustive treatment of this doctrine,¹ nor does the present treatment make any claims to break “new ground” in this area.² Rather, the goal of the present essay is to present a *summary* of bibliology that would serve as a tool which Christ-centered, biblically-saturated preachers, church planters, theologians, and other disciples can use to equip and disciple the next generation of Christian leaders and believers (cf. Eph 4:11–12; 2 Tim 2:2), both here in the US and internationally. In keeping with Steve’s passionate Christ-centeredness, this essay will focus especially on *Jesus’* own teaching regarding five selected

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¹ John Feinberg’s recent bibliology is 700 pages plus. Happily for the reader (but sadly for me), the editor of this journal did not allow me that much space.

² Breaking “new ground” is always a risky venture when it comes to theology. If no one has ever said it before, there’s probably a good reason!

bibliological topics: the (1) inspiration; (2) inerrancy; (3) canonicity; (4) sufficiency; and (5) Christ-centeredness of Scripture.

II The Inspiration of Scripture.³

Two key texts (2 Tim 3:15–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21) are foundational to the doctrine of inspiration. The first of these is 2 Timothy 3:15–17, and this text contributes several vital elements to a doctrine of inspiration. First, inspiration is *transformational*, or we could say *regenerational* (v. 15). The Scriptures are able to make one wise *unto salvation*. There is a fundamentally life-giving quality to the Word of God (see also 1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18, 21; cf. John 6:63; 20:31 [“these are *written* so that . . . you might *have life*”]). If “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom 10:17), then the best way one can guarantee salvific results in both his evangelistic and preaching ministry is by keeping his words biblically precise and specific.

Second, inspiration is *plenary* (i.e., “*all Scripture*”), in that it attaches to the Scriptures in their *entirety* (regardless of purpose, genre or testament). Biblical inspiration admits of no *degrees*: Romans 1–9 is no more inspired than 1 Chronicles 1–9. Biblical narratives are just as inspired as Paul’s epistles, and the OT (sadly neglected in too many contemporary pulpit ministries) is just as inspired as the NT—indeed the OT was the Bible from which both Jesus (e.g., Luke 24:27) and Paul (e.g., Acts 17:2–3) preached!⁴

³ Portions of this section were originally presented in Michael Canham, “Biblical Inerrancy and Christ-centeredness” (Exalting Christ Pastor’s Conference, September, 2015).

⁴ While for Paul “the Scriptures” certainly *included* the NT (cf. 1 Tim 5:18 and below), clearly “the Scriptures” in the immediate context of 2 Tim 3:16 are the OT Scriptures on which Timothy was nurtured (3:15). In light of this, “preach[ing] the Word” (4:2) calls for an expository ministry that is more canonically balanced than is typically found in conservative evangelical circles. A critic of Christ-centered preaching—particularly from the OT—has recently argued that “new covenant expositors” ought to preach Christ “primarily and most frequently from the New Testament,” since the OT is the “first covenant . . . that is now faulty and obsolete,” while the NT is the “better covenant, a new covenant which is new in time . . . and . . . quality.” This claim is based on Colossians 2:16–17 and Hebrews 8:4–6, 7, 13; 10:1, each of which contrast the “shadows” of the old covenant with the “substance” of the new covenant (Richard L. Mayhue, “Christ-Centered Preaching: An Overview,” *MSJ* 27:2 [Fall 2016] 158–159). However, Mayhue wrongly equates the Old/New *Testaments* with the Old/New *Covenants* (cf. Exod 19–20; Jer 31:31ff). Indeed, the NT Greek term *diatheke* (“covenant”) is never used canonically to refer to either Testament; the equation “old/new covenant = old/new testament” does not appear until nearly a century after the NT was complete. Tertullian first equated *diatheke* with “testament.” See Gregory Cosswell,

Third, “all *Scripture*” attaches inspiration to the *writings* rather than the *writers*. It is imprecise and technically inaccurate to say that “*Paul* (or Peter, or Isaiah, etc.) was inspired,” since these men produced other writings that were not preserved (hence not inspired; e.g., 1 Cor 5:9; 3 John 9). If Paul’s “previous epistle” to the Corinthians were ever to be found (1 Cor 5:9), it would neither change our doctrine of inspiration nor expand our definition of the canon. Inspiration also attaches to the *autographs* (i.e., the original manuscripts), not to copies or translations of the originals (except in a derivative sense).⁵

Fourth, 2 Timothy 3:16 stresses *God* Himself as the fundamental author of Scripture (“God-breathed,” *theopneustos*). Human authors are finite in their knowledge and competence and may be mistaken. As Americans are reminded during every political election cycle, some writers deliberately lie in the interests of advancing their own agenda. God, however, *cannot* lie (Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18; cf. Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Rom 3:4), and He suffers from *none* of the limitations which accrue to human writers (whether they be of finiteness, depravity, or both). As One who is omniscient, God possesses *infinite* knowledge, which means He cannot possibly be mistaken or otherwise proven wrong by subsequently discovered “knowledge.” As an infinite God

“The Two Testaments as Covenant Documents, *JETS*, 62.3 (2019): 673. The contrast in Colossians and Hebrews is between *covenants*, not *testaments*. Neither Paul nor the writer of Hebrews would countenance any view of the OT which sees it as “faulty,” “obsolete,” or “passing away,” (cf. Heb 8:7, 13) especially given the key role of the OT in the author’s construction of his argument, especially in Hebrews 1–2, and Jesus’ own high regard for the eternal inviolability of the OT Scriptures in passages like Matthew 5:17–20 and John 10:35.

⁵ I first encountered the expression “derivative inspiration” in Larry Pettegrew’s use of it to explain “that a copy or translation is the Word of God to the degree that it reflects and reproduces the original text” (“Historical Overview—the King James Only Position,” in Michael Grisanti, ed., *The Bible Version Debate* [Minneapolis, MN: Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997] 15n. 4). In the same note, Grisanti cites as an illustration Luke 4:16–21, where Jesus uses a copy of Isaiah in his preaching, thus “plac[ing] His stamp of approval on the copy as truly representing God’s Word.” (I would even add “translation” to Pettegrew’s *copy* if Jesus was preaching from the LXX (as opposed to the MT) scroll of Isaiah, which is plausible if not probable.

Similarly, Wayne Grudem makes an important distinction between mistakes in the originals and mistakes in copies/translations of the original: “. . . if we have mistakes in the copies (as we do), then these are only the *mistakes of men*. But if we have mistakes in the *original manuscripts*, then we are forced to say not only that men made mistakes, but that *God himself* made a mistake and spoke falsely. This we cannot do” (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 97 [italics original]).

communicating with finite humans, God communicated only a small portion of what He knows to the human agents who actually wrote Scripture. When it comes to the Scripture's *meaning*, God knows *more* of what that entails than the human authors ever did.⁶

Fifth, Scripture is *practical*, in that it is intended to be *applied* to one's Christian growth and experience ("and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training *in righteousness*" [italics added]). The *regenerational* transformation of Scripture already referenced in 3:15 extends also to *sanctification* in 3:16–17. It's worth noting that while 2 Timothy 3:16 is often used as a "proof text" for inspiration, that is not actually *Paul's* purpose here. Paul *assumes*⁷ rather than proves inspiration because he's really after something else—the life-changing function of Scripture in the sanctification of the believer. This is seen in the words "in righteousness," which modify all four preceding nouns.⁸ Thus Paul's argument here could be graphically summarized as in the chart below:

⁶ Hermeneutically, this is vital to remember in any discussions pertaining to the question of authorial *intent* when it comes to determining the *meaning* of Scripture, and the phenomenon of progressive revelation (in which later biblical writers understood *more* than earlier biblical writers; cf. 1 Peter 1:10–11). This last is especially relevant when it comes to understanding how the NT writers used the OT (e.g., Matthew's understanding Hosea 11:1 to be referring to Jesus doesn't require that Hosea himself understood this when it comes to determining the *meaning* of Hosea 11:1). Linking Jesus to Hosea 11:1 is Christooexegesis, not Christooisesis. In my judgment, easily the best treatment on the New Testament use of the Old is that of Abner Chou (*The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018]).

⁷ Consider by way of parallel Genesis 1:1 ("in the beginning God . . ."), which *assumes* rather than *proves* the existence of God (since the existence of God is universally recognized though sinfully suppressed (cf. Ps 14:1; Rom 1:19ff).

⁸ I'm indebted to one of my own ministry "heroes" (I'm sure he would hate that term) and mentors, Dr. Mark Minnick, who first directed my attention to this emphasis in 2 Tim 3:16 in my first Bible class ("Principles of Christian Growth"), taught at Bob Jones University in the Fall of 1984. He is also to be credited with the "Divine Design of Scripture" referenced toward the end of this essay. I've marinated on this in the nearly forty years since, but that class got the ball rolling! Dr. Minnick pastors Mt. Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, SC, where he has served since 1980.

Scripture is profitable for . . .

Teaching in righteousness	Scripture tells us what is right	POSITIVE
Reproof in righteousness	Scripture tells us what is not right	NEGATIVE
Correction in righteousness	Scripture tells us how to make it right	NEGATIVE
Training in righteousness	Scripture tells us how to keep it right	POSITIVE

Note that there are two positives and two negatives, which reflects both dimensions of genuine sanctification.⁹ They also provide the balance, keeping our *preaching* ministries (which Paul moves on to in 3:17–4:5) properly balanced between the extremes of being exclusively positive or exclusively negative. The two negatives are also sandwiched between the two positives, indicating that even when confrontation or correction is necessary, it should be linked back to the *positive* truth of the Scripture.¹⁰

True *doctrine* can never be separated from holy *living*, either in our *practice* or in our *preaching* (cf. Ezra 7:10, where “doing” *precedes* “teaching”). Righteousness is not just *imputed* but *progressive*; not just *positional* but *practical*—and in that order.¹¹ And preachers who believe that their responsibility is limited to merely *explaining* the text (“Let the Holy Spirit do the *application*”) need to be reminded that (1) the four applicational verbs which follow Paul’s admonition to “preach the Word” (4:2) correspond to the four nouns in 3:16;

⁹ I.e., abstaining from sin (negative, cf. 1 Thess 4:3–8; note the central role of Scripture in providing victory over temptation, Ps 119:9–11; Matt 4:1–11) and pursuit after holiness (positive, cf. 1 Thess 4:9–12). Note also “put off” and “put on” in texts like Eph 4:22–32.

¹⁰ While there are exceptions (e.g., Galatians; Laodicea), Paul (in his epistolary introductions) and Jesus (in his letters to the churches in Rev 2–3) nearly always move from *commendation* first to *correction* later (when necessary). I observed a similar pattern in Steve Fernandez’s own sermons, which were positive (i.e., truthful) expositions of scriptural doctrine and *then* he would move to correcting those who would wander from it (either in doctrine or in conduct).

¹¹ In terms of Romans, chapters 3–5 (*imputed* righteousness [in justification]) is immediately followed by Romans 6–8 (*applied* righteousness [in sanctification]). In soteriological terms, this is moving from salvation in the past tense (e.g., Eph 2:8–9) to salvation in the *present* tense (e.g., 1 Cor 1:18). Distinct, but inseparable. Or, as Steve Fernandez would have put it, “Once Saved, Always *Changed*.”

and (2) Paul's epistles themselves nearly always built *practice* (i.e. application) on top of *doctrine* (i.e., explanation).¹²

Sixth, the *goal* of Scripture is to equip believers for ministry (3:17ff), whether "pastoral" specifically ("the man of God") or that of believers generally (cf. Eph 4:11–12; 2 Tim 2:2).

The second key passage from Peter (2 Pet 1:20–21) adds several additional insights that are also necessary in formulating a doctrine of Scripture as I detail below in points seven through eleven.

Seventh, the Scripture is designated as "prophecy" (1:20a), which carries with it a claim to infallible *perfection* (cf. OT designations and tests of prophecy, e.g., Deut 13, 18), as well as the *preservation* of direct revelation from God (in Scripture itself).¹³

Eighth, Peter specifies that Scripture did not come by means of human origin, volition, or initiative (1:20b–21). In other words, Peter didn't get up one morning and decide to write 2 Peter. The initiative to write and the origin of the content both came from the Holy Spirit; the writers (or prophets) spoke (and wrote) as they were "carried along" by the Holy Spirit. This was certainly true of the prophets who produced OT Scripture (cf. "Thus saith the Lord" or its equivalent over 3500x in the OT). Inspiration was thus both *active* (the prophets spoke) and *passive* (as they were carried along by the Spirit). Inspiration also appears to have been intermittent, rather than a permanent enablement resting upon the biblical writers.

Ninth, Peter highlights the specific role *men* had in the process of producing Scripture. Earlier, we stated that inspiration attaches to the *writings* rather than the *writers*, and Peter doesn't use the term "inspired" here (*theopneustos* in 2 Tim 3:16 is a *hapax legomena*). But God did not simply hand

¹² Cf. Rom 1–11 with 12–16; Gal 1–4 with 5–6; Eph 1–3 with 4–6; Col 1–2 with 3–4; 2 Thess 1–2 with 3). The epistolary exceptions to the doctrine-to-practice order are those epistles in which doctrine and practice are *intwoven* (as in 1–2 Cor; Phil; 1 Thess and the Pastorals). But these are not really exceptions; doctrine and practice are both there, and the latter presupposes the foundation of the former. The interweaving in these other epistles demonstrate the inseparability of doctrine and practice (cf. 1 Tim 4:16a).

¹³ It's beyond the scope of this present essay to interact with Wayne Grudem's "fallible NT prophecy" hypothesis, which presupposes and argues for a fundamental *discontinuity* between OT and NT prophecy (in terms of infallibility). Grudem is another of my biblical heroes, and his defense of biblical inerrancy, along with the application of that commitment to his own academic ministry, is stalwart and resolute. However, I find his advocacy of "fallible" NT prophecy to be unpersuasive and problematic. The evidence of the NT use of the prophecy word-group underscores rather a fundamental *continuity* between OT and NT prophecy (both in terms of infallibility and in prophecy's direct linkage in both testaments to inscriptionation).

down the Scriptures from heaven already written with His own fingers (cf. the Ten Commandments). He used men moved by the Spirit to produce them. Thus, in this derivative (indirect) sense, we could speak of the writers as “inspired,” but only when they were composing the sacred writings. There is thus a dual authorship when it comes to Scripture. Paul stresses the *primary, divine* authorship (2 Tim 3:16), Peter references the *secondary, human* authorship (2 Pet 1:21). The *written* Word of God (Heb 4:12) thus parallels Jesus Himself, who as the *living* Word of God (John 1:1; 1 John 1:1) possess both divine and human natures.

Tenth, the Holy Spirit is identified as the specific member of the Godhead responsible for the Scripture—He is the “God” of Paul’s “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). This text tells us that the Holy Spirit *inspires* the Word; elsewhere we learn that the Holy Spirit *illumines* the Word (1 Cor 2:6–16, esp. vv. 10–14) and empowers the *preaching* of the Word (1 Thess 1:5; 2:13). The parallel between Christ (the living Word) and the Scriptures (the written Word) referenced just above further underscores the indispensability of the Spirit’s work here. The only way Christ could be fully human and yet be sinless is because of the superintending work of the Spirit (cf. Luke 1:35). For the same reason, the Scripture is fully *human* (as to its secondary authorship), and yet fully *divine* (as to its infallibility and inerrant content). This latter is never true of any human author. But these men wrote as they were carried by the Holy Spirit, and it is His involvement that guarantees an infallible, inerrant product.¹⁴

Eleventh, as to the *mode* of inspiration—*how* God did it—we must make two remarks. (1) There is no one way in which God inspired His word; indeed, Hebrews opens by asserting that God “spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets . . . in many ways” (1:1). Occasionally He directly dictated (as in Moses on the mount, Exod 19:3ff). Often, He revealed Himself through direct speech (the prophets), dreams (e.g., Daniel) and visions (Ezekiel; John). Most of the OT writing prophets were preachers first; with their sermons being inscripturated later (e.g., Isaiah). And other times the Spirit sovereignly guided the authors as they researched and organized written and oral testimony already extant (as in Moses and the *toledoth* in Genesis or Luke in his careful investigation as a historian, Luke 1:1–4). (2) We must also confess that many other aspects of the mode are inexplicable. Jude was writing another treatise when the Spirit redirected him to compose his brief epistle in rather short order (v. 3). Other epistles may have taken longer to write.¹⁵

¹⁴ The centrality of the Spirit in the production of Scripture does *not* justify the contemporary “demotion” of bibliology as a theological locus to a subset of pneumatology. Such a suggestion is for the Birds (or at least Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013], 638).

¹⁵ One of my doctoral mentors (Dr. Richard Gaffin) told us with a smile that “as

The OT prophets in particular dated their ministries from the reigns of their kings; Isaiah's doing this around four kings (1:1) leads to the conclusion that his ministry spanned a period of sixty years (ca. 740–680 BC). It's at least possible that his prophecy went through numerous "drafts" and expansions until reaching its final, inspired form.¹⁶ Fortunately, we don't have to know *how* God inspired the biblical books—or even how long the process took—in order to affirm *that* He inspired them.

The Definition of Inspiration

Pulling all of this together, we seek to arrive at a summary definition of inspiration.¹⁷ Adapting from several standard evangelical treatments, I offer the following:

Inspiration refers to the activity of the Holy Spirit, whereby He superintends the writers so that while conveying their message orally or recording it verbally according to their own styles and personalities, the result was God's Word written—authoritative, trustworthy, and free from error in the original autographs.¹⁸

Foundational Evidence: Christ's View of Scripture

Christ's view of the Scriptures is significant for determining the nature of biblical inspiration. His view ought to be determinative and the norm for other person's views—especially those who claim to be Christ-followers.¹⁹

Rome wasn't built in a day; neither was Romans written in a day." Similarly, 2 Corinthians may have taken some time to write (note the abrupt changes of tone when Titus returns (2:12ff) and when he transitions to speaking of the false teachers in chs. 10–13 (at least hinting at some fresh news; similarly, Philipians 3:2–4:3).

¹⁶ This is one possible explanation for the varying lengths of Jeremiah's prophecy in the textual tradition. And at least one conservative scholar (who correctly maintains Matthean priority) seeks to resolve the so-called "Synoptic problem" by suggesting that Matthew wrote and published his gospel "progressively" (B. Ward Powers, *The Progressive Publication of Matthew's Gospel* [Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010]).

¹⁷ Paul Enns (*Moody Handbook of Theology* 160) has identified five elements constituent to a precisely biblical definition of inspiration: It is (1) divine (cf. 2 Tim 3:16); (2) human (cf. 2 Pet 1:21); (3) inerrant (cf. John 17:17); (4) verbal (cf. Matt 5:19); and (5) written (meaning inspiration pertains to the original written documents).

¹⁸ Derived from Barackman, *Practical Christian Theology* 12; Enns, *Moody Handbook* 160; Erickson, *Christian Theology* 199; Geisler & Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* 39; Charles W. Smith, "Inspiration," 9.

¹⁹ This is the foundational argument of R. Laird Harris (*Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969] 45ff), and the best way to answer to the charge of "circularity" often directed against believers who cite the Scripture for

Jesus on the *Inspiration* of the Old Testament

(1) *Inspiration of the entire OT* (“plenary” inspiration [cf. the singular term *graphé*, Mark 12:10; 15:28; Luke 4:21]). Jesus Christ recognized the whole OT, as well as its three canonical divisions, as Scripture (Matt 5:17–20; 13:13–14; Mark 7:8–13; Luke 16:31; 24:27, 44–46; John 5:39; 10:34–35).²⁰

(2) *Inspiration of the parts of the OT*, i.e., individual verses (Cf. the plural “the Scriptures” [*taís graphaís*], Matt 21:42; Mark 12:24; Luke 24:27, et. al.). So, for example Matthew 4:4, 7, 10, where Jesus in His response to Satan’s temptation quotes three individual verses from Deuteronomy with a threefold *gegraptai* (“it is written”). Here, Jesus wonderfully models for us the proper use of Scripture in resisting temptation (cf. Ps 119:9–11). Other examples would include Matthew 12:18–21 (quoting Isa 42:1–4) and 21:42 (quoting Ps 118:22). In Matthew 22:43–44, Jesus introduces His quotation of

their view of Scripture. A full answer to this charge is outside the scope of this essay; so allow me three brief observations: (1) all reasoning is to some degree circular, including that of the critics. There is a valid entrance to the circle when the Scripture is tested in other areas and found to be trustworthy (i.e., the evidence for inerrancy below); (2) it is also misleading to speak of the Bible’s view of *itself*. Who ever said the Bible was only one book? There are 66 books, with forty separate witnesses writing over a period of about 2,000 years in three different languages. Many of these writers not only affirm the inspiration of their own writings, but that of other biblical writers as well (e.g., 1 Tim 5:18; 2 Pet 3:16; (3) Starting with *Jesus’* view (which is recorded in Scripture) gets us off the circle. Any Christian worthy of the name ought to affirm what Jesus Himself affirms about the nature of Scripture, as well as any other area of theology. Technically, we are pursuing His view of Scripture (and those who spoke for Him).

The approach and ordering of the evidence that follows comes from a number of writers. The most concise is Paul Enns (*Moody Handbook* 162–66), and I’ve already referenced Harris (*Inspiration and Canonicity*, 45–71). Similar treatments can be found in Sinclair B. Ferguson, “How Does the Bible Look At Itself?,” in Harvie M. Conn, ed. *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, 47–66; Robert P. Lightner, *A Biblical Case for Total Inerrancy*, 58–73; Robert Saucy, *Scripture* (Dallas: Word, 2001), 109–123; John W. Wenham, “Christ’s View of Scripture,” in Norman L. Geisler, *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), 3–36 (cf. his larger work *Christ and the Bible* [IVP, 1972; 3rd edition Baker 1994]).

²⁰ The Jewish canon (22 or 24 books, depending on whether Lamentations and Ruth were counted separately or joined with Jeremiah and Judges) is precisely identical to the Protestant canon of 39 OT books. The Jews divided the OT canon into three divisions: *the law* (the Pentateuch); *the prophets* (former and latter, constituting most of our historical books and prophetic books); and *the writings* (Psalms was the head of this division, which contained every OT book not already included in the first two divisions). Thus, when Jesus identified all three canonical divisions as Scripture (as He does in Luke 24:27, 44–45), He included all individual books contained within those divisions, whether or not those books made their own individual claims for inspiration (e.g., Esther, Song of Solomon).

Psalm 110:1 with the claim that David spoke these words “by the Spirit” (*en pneumati*; for an awareness of this on David’s part, see 2 Samuel 23:2). Once again, this specifies the Spirit’s role in the inspiration of Scripture.

(3) *Inspiration of the words of the OT.* Several of Jesus’ citations of the OT depended upon the precise words used in the OT text. For example, when Jesus quotes Exodus 3:6 in Matthew 22:32, His entire argument hinged on the present tense of the words “*I am* the God of Abraham.” In verse 44, Jesus’ argument rests on the words “my Lord” (Ps 110:1), as well as the word “gods” in Psalm 82:6 (quoted in John 10:34).

(4) *Inspiration of the letters of the OT.* Matthew 5:17–18 declares, “not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished” (cf. Luke 16:17, *pesein*, “drop out”). The term “smallest letter” refers to the Hebrew letter *yodh*, which looks like an apostrophe ('). The “stroke” refers to the minutest distinction between two Hebrew letters. An equivalent in our alphabet would be the distinction between the O and the Q, with only the little “tail” distinguishing between them. One letter can make all the difference between two words;²¹ Jesus is saying that all the details of the Old Testament right down to the very letter would be fulfilled (cf. also Matt 24:35).

Jesus on the *authority* of the OT

(1) *The Old Testament is authoritative historically.* Jesus treated as factual the following persons and accounts (a *partial* chart!);²²

	Events	Scripture
1	Creation of the universe by God	Mark 13:19; cf. John 1:3; Col 1:16
2	Adam and Eve	Matt 19:4–5; cf. Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:22; 1 Tim 2:13–14
3	Cain and Abel	Luke 11:51; cf. Heb 11:4; 1 John 3:12

²¹ In English, note the difference between “been” and “bean;” or “ball” and “bawl.” “I am *now* coming” vs. “I am *not* coming.” Or even the ordering of two words joined together in a compound word (e.g., *overhang* vs. *hangover*).

²² The initial references are from Jesus Himself; those following the “cf.” are corroborations from other NT authors (primarily Paul).

4	Noah and the Flood	Matt 24:37–39; Luke 17:26–27; cf. 2 Pet 2:5
5	Abraham	Luke 3:34; John 8:56; cf. Rom 4:3; Heb 7:1–3; 11:8
6	The institution of circumcision	John 7:22; cf. Gen 17:10–12; Lev 12:3
7	Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah	Matt 10:15; 11:23–24; Luke 10:12
8	The experience of Lot	Luke 17:28–32
9	Isaac and Jacob	Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28; cf. Acts 7:9–10; Heb 11:17–18
10	Moses the lawgiver and author of the Pentateuch	Matt 8:4; 19:8; Mark 1:44; 7:10; 10:5; 12:26; Luke 5:14; 16:29, 31; 20:32, 37; John 5:46; 7:19
11	Manna	John 6:31, 49, 58; 1 Cor 10:3–5; cf. Crossing of the Red Sea in 1 Cor 10:1–2
12	The existence of the tabernacle	Luke 6:3f
13	The snake in the wilderness	John 3:14
14	David eating the shewbread	Matt 12:3–4; Mark 2:25–26; Luke 6:3–4; cf. 20:41
15	David as a psalmist	Matt 22:43; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42
16	The splendor of Solomon	Matt 6:29; 12:42; Luke 11:31; 12:27

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17	Elijah and the widow of Zarephath	Luke 4:25–26
18	Elisha and Namaan the Syrian	Luke 4:27
19	Jonah and the fish	Matt 12:39–41; Luke 11:29–32
20	Isaiah as a single prophet	Matt 8:17 [Isa 53]; 15:7–8 [Isa 29]; Luke 4:17f; John 12:38–41 [Isa 53:6].
21	Daniel	Matt 24:15
22	Zechariah	Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51
23	The sufferings of the true prophets	Matt 5:12; 13:57; 21:34–36; 23:29–37; Mark 6:4 [cf. Luke 4:24; John 4:44]; 12:2–5; Luke 6:23; 11:47–51; 13:34; 20:10–12

Three observations follow from the chart above: *First*, several of the most “controversial” OT events are referred to, such as the creation, Fall, Flood, miracles of Moses and Elijah, and Jonah in the great fish. More than just alluding to them, Jesus *authenticated* them as historical events. Indeed, the theological point Jesus made *depends* on their historicity (for one example, see Matthew 12:38–42, referencing Jonah and Nineveh, and linking Jonah’s deliverance from the fish to the anticipated resurrection of Christ).²³ *Second*, virtually every one of the first 22 chapters of Genesis, and each of those prior to Abraham (chs. 1–11), has either a person or an event that is confirmed by an authoritative NT quotation or reference. If these people and events are authentic, then it may be argued *a fortiori* that the rest of the OT is authentic. *Third*, Jesus’ conviction concerning the historicity of the OT was shared by the apostles as well (e. g., Stephen in Acts 7:2–47; Paul at Pisidian Antioch, Acts 13:17–22).

²³ Cf. similarly Paul in Romans 5:12–21, where the authenticity of Christ’s imputed righteousness as the last Adam depends on the historicity of the person and fall of the first Adam.

(2) *The Old Testament is authoritative prophetically.* Typically, a contemporary event was noted, and observation was made (e. g., “this was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet”), and the relevant OT prophecy was quoted. See Luke 24:25–27, 44–47 (already examined), and *Matthew* especially (“That it might be fulfilled,” e.g., 1:22–23; 2:15, 17–18; 4:13–16; 11:10; 12:17–21; 13:14–15; 21:4–5; 24:15; 26:24, 31, 53–56; 27:9–10).

(3) *The Old Testament is authoritative doctrinally.* A dispute over *resurrection* was settled by appeal to teaching from the Law (Matt 22:29–32; Exod 3:2); the issue of the abomination of desolation in the eschatological future (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14) was clarified by appeal to Daniel 9:27; 11:31; and 12:11; in the apostolic era, appeal was made to Amos 9:11–12 to settle doctrinal differences at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:15–18). Paul used the Scriptures as the basis for his arguments with the Jews (Acts 17:2), and the Bereans diligently searched the Scriptures to determine the validity of Paul's gospel (Acts 17:11).

(4) *The Old Testament is authoritative ethically.* Christ frequently quoted from it in making statements regarding moral values and conduct (Matt 4:1–10; 7:12; 19:18–19; 22:36–40; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20, 31), including vindicating his authority to cleanse the Temple (Mark 11:17). Note that the two greatest commands (Matt 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31) sum up not the Gospel but the OT.

Jesus on the *Inspiration of the NT Writings*

Jesus specifically “pre-authenticated” the New Testament writings that were yet to be inspired. In Matthew 24:35, Jesus states that “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but *my words* shall not pass away.” This claim parallels Jesus’ nearly identical comment in Matthew 5:18 regarding the already-inscripturated OT. By equating the inviolability of His own words with those of the OT, Jesus here implies that His words are to be recorded. In His Upper Room discourse, Jesus referenced the future ministry of the *Holy Spirit* (cf. the discussion on 2 Pet 1:21 above) in the inspiration of the Scriptures the apostles would later commit to writing (John 14:25–26; 15:26–27; 16:12–15). The things Jesus was speaking to the disciples while on earth would later be brought to remembrance by the Holy Spirit (14:25–26; cf. 15:26–27). This revelation included things which were “to come” (16:13), things which the disciples could not then bear (16:12). These three works of the Spirit, promised in 14:26 and 16:13, cover the entire NT. The historical section (*gospels*) is the product of the Spirit’s work of bringing things which they have heard and observed to their minds. The *epistles* are evidence of the Spirit’s guidance and teaching. *Revelation* is the fulfillment of the promise of the Spirit to reveal things to come (cf. Rev 4:1).²⁴ Finally, we mention Acts 1:1–2, where

²⁴ I am indebted to the late Charles W. Smith for this particular observation

Acts continues the record of Luke's gospel, who recorded what Jesus "*began* to do and teach." Properly speaking, then, Acts is the book of the acts of Christ through the works and *words* of the apostles (cf. 2:42; 6:4; Eph 2:20). Thus, our Lord "pre-authenticated" the NT.

Jesus' view of the Scripture is *anticipated* by the OT writers, who were aware both of their own inspiration (cf. "Thus saith the Lord") and that of other OT writers (for examples, see on canonicity below). Jesus' view is also *corroborated* by later NT writers, who (1) shared Jesus' view of the OT specifically (2 Tim 3:15–16; 2 Pet 1:21); (2) were aware that they *themselves* were producing inspired Scriptures (John 21:24; 1 Cor 14:37; 1 Thess 2:13; 4:15; 5:27; 2 Pet 3:1–2; Rev 1:1–2; 22:18–19); and (3) were aware that *other NT writers* were producing Scriptures (1 Tim 5:18; 2 Pet 3:16; Jude 17–18; again, see under canonicity below).

III

The Inerrancy of Scripture.²⁵

A distinct yet inseparable question from that of the inspiration of Scripture is that of the *inerrancy* of Scripture—another matter which has been widely discussed.²⁶ Again, space considerations preclude anything more than a brief summary.

("Inspiration" [unpublished notes] 28–29).

²⁵ The following is adapted and summarized from two seminar papers presented at the Exalting Christ Pastor's Conference (2014 and 2015, respectively) jointly hosted by Community Bible Church (Vallejo) and the Cornerstone Seminary.

²⁶ For a fuller treatment of the issue of inerrancy, consult the volumes and the documents produced by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), which convened in 1978 and 1982 (See especially the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy). A more frustrating, recent commentary on this document is the volume *Fine Views of Biblical Inerrancy*, edited by J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett and published by Zondervan in 2013. Two of the contributors (Albert Mohler and Kevin VanHoozer) argue for the historic view of biblical inerrancy; two of the contributors argue against it (John R. Francke, [post-modern, emergent] and Peter Enns [who completely rejects it]); and a fifth (Michael Bird) believes that the debate is an entirely North American one (so it's irrelevant), while on the other hand Bird argues (quite persuasively) for the "veracity" of Scripture, which is essentially what inerrancy means. So apparently Bird was either for inerrancy before he was against it, or against it before he was for it.

Definition of Inerrancy

A key issue here is in defining both the extra-biblical *term* and the scriptural *doctrine* which the term represents.²⁷ I offer the following definition I've seen in several places:

Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly **true** in everything that they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality or with [history, science, geography, geology, or other disciplines or knowledge].²⁸

In other words, the key component in defining inerrancy is *truthfulness*. *Positively*, this means that the Bible is *entirely true*. *Negatively*, it means that the Bible is *never false*. How do we know that the Bible is inerrant? There are three reasons to believe in the inerrancy of Scripture.

First, the inspiration of Scripture *demand*s inerrancy. This is the argument from *theology*. If the Bible is *God's Word* (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21; “Thus saith the Lord” in the OT, etc.), then whatever one says about the *Bible* ultimately reflects upon the Divine Author. What the Scripture says, God says (e.g., Rom 9:17 Q: Exod 9:16).²⁹ The inerrancy of Scripture is a *logical* necessity from the inspiration of Scripture. Consider the following syllogism:

<i>Major Premise:</i>	God is true (Rom 3:4)
<i>Minor Premise:</i>	Scriptures are God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16)
<i>Conclusion:</i>	Therefore, the Scriptures are true (John 17:17).

But the inerrancy of Scripture is also a *theological* necessity from the inspiration

²⁷ A parallel here would be the term *homoousia* in the Council of Nicea. The *term* does not appear in Scripture, but the *concept* it represents (namely, that Jesus was of the *same nature* as the Father) most assuredly does.

²⁸ This wording comes primarily from Paul D. Feinberg (“The Meaning of Inerrancy,” in Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* 294), with some adapting from myself and wording I’ve seen in others (hence the bracketed specifications). It reflects the position of, and may be a quotation from, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy in 1978 and 1982 (which may explain the nearly *verbatim* agreement in several writers). These days I would add the word *morals* or *ethics* to that definition (particularly when it comes to abortion, same-sex “marriage,” and gender identity discussions).

²⁹ So B. B. Warfield’s classic argument “It says” = “The Scripture says” = “God says” (see chapter VII of *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* [P & R, 1948; SBT Press, 2014]).

of Scripture. To claim that the Bible is *inspired* but not *inerrant* is to deny one or more of the following: (1) God's *Omniscience*. There is nothing truthful that man can discover that God didn't already know. God cannot err in terms of what He knows; thus, He cannot have included things in Scripture that He didn't *know* were untrue); (2) God's *Omnipotence* (God is all-powerful. He can and did prevent error from being included in Scripture) and/or (3) God's *Goodness*. Even worse would be the idea that God *knew* something was wrong, was *able* to keep it from being included in Scripture but chose to include it anyway. This makes God a liar! But we've already cited the Scriptures above that render this hypothetical utterly impossible. Inerrancy is so much more than a necessary theological deduction.

Second, the Scripture itself explicitly *affirms* inerrancy. We referenced above Jesus' succinct statement "Your Word *is truth*" (John 17:17; cf. Rom 3:4), and our Savior made similar claims for the Scriptures elsewhere (e.g., Matt 5:17–20; 24:35; John 10:35; 16:12–13). This is in continuity with the inerrancy claimed by the OT (*esp.* Ps 19:7–9;³⁰ but also 12:6; Prov 30:6) and later NT writers for the Scripture (e.g., Luke 1:4 ["exact truth"]; John 21:24 ["his testimony is true"]). Even the classic texts on inspiration (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:19–21) appear in contexts which contrast the Scripture with the *false* (i.e., untrue) teaching that the writers were also confronting in the immediate contexts (cf. 2 Tim 3:1–9 [note the "but's" in 3:10, 13, 14]; 2 Pet 2:1–3:9). One cannot genuinely maintain the *inspiration* of Scripture without also affirming *inerrancy*, for an *errant* Scripture provides no effective antidote against the *error* of false doctrine. On the contrary, Scripture would become yet another example of *false* teaching to be opposed.³¹

Third, the evidence *proves* inerrancy, along three lines. (1) The Bible is *scientifically* accurate. While the Bible was never intended to be a science book,³² it is equally true that when the Bible speaks on matters which pertain to science, it speaks the truth—often long before such matters were "discovered" scientifically. A few examples: *the earth is round* (Isa 40:22); *the law of gravity* (Job 26:7); *atomic weight* (Isa 40:12); *stars cannot be numbered* (Gen

³⁰ Note that in Ps 19:7–9 a threefold pattern is repeated six times over: (1) A title of the Scripture (e.g., "the law of the Lord"); (2) an adjective (e.g., "is perfect"); and (3) a statement of what the Scripture *does* (e.g., "restoring the soul"); cf. an inspired exposition of all this in Ps 119. This sixfold pattern effectively communicates that the Scripture (#1) *does* what it *does* (#3) because it *is* what it *is* (#2). And what *is* the Scripture? It is "perfect" (7a), "sure" (7b), "right" (8a), "pure" (8b), "clean" (9a), and "true" (9b). One thread pulls all six of these adjectival descriptions together—each of them are claims to *inerrancy*.

³¹ I heard John Feinberg stress this point well in an ETS presentation I heard; he later discussed this in his *Light in a Dark Place* (Crossway, 2018; representatively, see 117–118; 128–129).

³² Which is a good thing, since the Bible would change every 20 years if it were.

15:5; Jer 33:22). Other examples include the fact that the earth revolves around the sun (Job 38:13–14); the moon reflects rather than radiates light (Job 25:5); air has weight (Job 28:25); lights make sounds (Job 38:7; Ps 65:8); light travels and does not abide (Job 38:19) and chemicals have weight (Isa 40:12).³³

(2) The Bible is *historically* accurate. It is in the area of history that the Bible has so often been attacked. Whenever critics perceived a “contradiction” between the biblical record and a secular historical source, often the benefit of the doubt would be granted to the secular source on the grounds that the biblical writer was either wrong, ignorant and/or so otherwise motivated by theological concerns that historical accuracy was sacrificed as irrelevant or secondary. Representatively, critics have variously asserted that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because writing hadn’t been invented yet (Graf-Wellhausen JEDP hypothesis), that Darius and Belshazzar (Daniel) never existed;³⁴ that Quirinius was governor a decade *after* Jesus’ birth, contrary to what Luke says (Luke 2:2), and that either John or the synoptics got the timing of Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple wrong because they put it at different times in Jesus’ ministry (John at the beginning; the three synoptics at the end; actually, Jesus cleansed the Temple *both* times—and perhaps many more!).³⁵ *All* of these charges have been disproven, mostly through subsequent archaeological discoveries.

³³ A fascinating book in my library developing the scientific superiority of Scripture is Kenny Barfield’s *Why the Bible is Number 1: The World’s Sacred Writings in the Light of Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

³⁴ As with so many others, this “discrepancy” arose from the *silence* of the secular historian(s) as to the person or event in question. Daniel references Belshazzar as the king in Daniel 5, while contemporary secular authorities claimed his father Nabonidus was actually the king at the time of the Medo-Persian takeover. Daniel was held to be wrong (because he made no reference to Nabonidus); the secular sources were held to be right (because they referenced Nabonidus instead of Belshazzar as the king). Of course, arguments from silence never constitute positive proof of anything, and historians by definition must be selective in what they do include in their accounts.

As it turned out, Belshazzar’s *co-regency* with his father Nabonidus was not discovered in the secular sources until the middle of the 20th century. Nabonidus, who hated ruling, was away from the capital at the time Daniel was consulted by Belshazzar (who had been left in charge); hence Belshazzar could only offer Daniel the *third* place in the kingdom as a reward (Dan 5:7, 16, 29), which is a bit like being promoted to first mate of the *Titanic* an hour after the iceberg was struck! That very night the city was conquered.

³⁵ On this “discrepancy,” Peter Enns dogmatizes—with neither documentation nor evidence to show why it must be impossible—that “[it] is a distortion of the highest order to argue that Jesus must have cleansed the temple twice” (*Inspiration and Incarnation* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005] 65) when reputable Johannine scholars

Especially significant in this regard is Luke's two-volume history of Christ and the early church. We have already noted above Luke's claim to inerrancy (Luke 1:4); in light of that claim it is remarkable that—more than any other NT writer—Luke anchored his historical narrative in the total context of imperial Roman history (cf. Luke 1:5; 2:1–3; 3:1–2; Acts 11:28; 13:7; 18:2, 12; 24:1–2, 27; 25:11, 13–15, 21). As F. F. Bruce aptly notes:

A writer who thus relates his story to the wider context of world history is courting trouble if he is not careful; he affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy.³⁶

And indeed, Luke has been subjected to multiple attacks over the centuries by critics who have set out to “prove” Luke wrong, only to be blocked at every turn by the actual historical record. One of these was an Oxford-trained atheist whose Ph.D. dissertation sought to prove that the Bible was unreliable historically, and he decided to use Luke as his test case. Several years into the process, with Luke constantly being vindicated by the historical evidence, William Ramsay finally surrendered and trusted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and went on to produce numerous commentaries on the historical background of the NT epistles. And, of course, there is the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ—easily one of the most historically substantiated facts in world history, with fifteen separate post-resurrection appearances (see Acts 1:3–4), including one before a group of 500 people (1 Cor 15). Truly the Scripture is historically accurate!

(3) The Bible is *prophetically* accurate. This is the most amazing evidence for biblical inerrancy, for only God Himself can predict the future with unerring accuracy. Consider the dozens of messianic prophecies dating back centuries before Christ that were fulfilled during His first advent, including when (Dan 9:24ff) and where He would be born (Micah 5:2), who He would descend from (Gen 49:10; 2 Sam 7:14ff), that His mother would be a virgin (Isa 7:14), and detailed matters concerning His life, substitutionary death (Ps 22; Isa 53); bodily resurrection (Ps 16:8–11; cf. Matt 12:38–42; 16:21ff; Acts 2:25–28), and His exaltation at the right hand of His Father (Ps 110:1). Then there are the humanly impossible prophecies, such as the naming of the kings

have argued precisely that (e.g., D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* [PNTC] [Eerdmans, 1991] 175–78; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* [NICNT] [Eerdmans, 1971] 188–191). Sadly, Enns' argumentation throughout this book—which led to his dismissal from the Westminster Seminary faculty—is replete with tunnel-sized holes like this one—truly a “distortion of the highest order” when it comes to the doctrine of inspiration.

³⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* (5th edition) (Eerdmans, 1960) 82 (cf. his lengthier discussion of Luke's historicity on pp. 80–92).

Josiah (1 Kings 13:1–2) and Cyrus (Isa 45:1ff)³⁷ hundreds of years before they were born, and Jesus’ prophecy of the destruction of the Temple in Matt 24:1ff—an “impossible” prophecy by human standards, but nonetheless fulfilled by the God of the impossible. The Bible doesn’t merely *claim* to be inerrant; it supports that claim with such an overabundance of evidence that one would have to be willfully blind not to see it.

IV

The Canonicity of Scripture

The canonicity of Scripture is an especially hot topic these days, due in no small measure to the influence of Bart Ehrman, the “scholars” of the Jesus Seminar, and other apostates. Many view the canon of Scripture as an open question (thus the Mormons add the Book of Mormon, the Jesus Seminar adds the Gospel of Thomas, and Prosperity Gospel preachers add their own divine revelations to the canon).

Others regard canonicity as a matter belatedly and arbitrarily settled by the fourth and fifth century church councils.³⁸ This latter perception is more likely to influence those in our churches, and unfortunately the canonicity question has too often been treated as a *church history* matter rather than a *biblical* matter. A number of authors have treated this matter extensively—with Michael Kruger providing the best of these.³⁹

³⁷ Note the centrality of the Cyrus oracle to the anti-idolatry polemic of Isa 40–48 (e.g., Isa 41:22–23) (see especially Oswald. T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980] 51–61).

³⁸ Hence competing definitions of canonicity—is the canon an “authoritative collection of writings?” Or a “collection of authoritative writings?” The difference between the two definitions lies with whether the *authority* is linked to the *collecting/ion* of the writings (Roman Catholic position) or to the writings *themselves* (the biblical position).

³⁹ Michael Kruger has written several works on this topic, but see especially his *The Question of Canon* (IVP, 2013). This book questions five common assumptions in present day canon discussions, by asking (and answering in the negative) five questions: (1) Must We Make a Sharp Distinction Between the Definitions of Canon and Scripture? [NO]; (2) Was There Really Nothing in Early Christianity That May Have Led to a Canon? [NO, there was something]; (3) Were Early Christians Averse to Written Documents? [NO]; (4) Were the New Testament Authors Unaware of Their Own Authority? [NO; see under inspiration above]; and (5) Were the New Testament Books First Regarded as Scripture at the End of the Second Century? [NO; much earlier than that]. Also helpful (more of a historical treatment) is F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (IVP, 1988); B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament* (reprint Baker, 1980). On the OT canon, see Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Eerdmans, 1985). But these days I’d recommend *starting* with Kruger.

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What was *Jesus*' view of the biblical canon? Thankfully, we've already covered that above. Jesus placed his stamp of approval upon the entire OT canon (e.g., Matt 5:17–20; Luke 24:24–26, 44–47)⁴⁰ and pre-authorized the NT canon (Matt 24:35; John 14–16; Acts 1:1). So, a *Christ-centered* view of canonicity accepts the biblical canon—no *more* and no *less*—as Jesus Himself accepted it—both retrospectively (OT) and proactively (NT). It remains for us to summarize two additional lines of evidence for the canon of Scripture as we now possess it.

Primary evidence: the self-attestation of Scripture. The key here is that biblical canonicity is a matter settled *by the Scripture itself*, not by church history!⁴¹ We've already introduced above some of the evidence that the biblical writers' themselves were aware that they were penning inspired Scripture at the time they did so.⁴² But they were *also* aware of the inspired (and therefore canonical) nature of other biblical writings that were produced shortly before they were quoted as Scripture. Consider the representative examples summarized in the chart below:

#	Text	Text Referenced	Remarks
1	Joshua 1:8	"This book of the law"	Moses' immediate successor Joshua (cf. Josh 1:1–2) references the Pentateuch as Scripture, which Moses had finished writing just before his death (cf. Deut 31:24ff; 34:1ff)

⁴⁰ Contrast Jesus with left-wing OT scholarship, which regards the entire OT canon as not being settled until the so-called "Council of Jamnia" around the year 90 A.D.

⁴¹ Since penning the first draft of this essay, I encountered a very helpful summary by Larry Pettegrew, *Theology I* (Sun Valley, CA: The Master's Seminary, 2002) 61–66. He references several self-attestation "principles": (1) Competency; (2) Chronological; (3) Credential; (4) Consistency; and (5) Conviction. See also a lengthier treatment in Norman Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* [revised] [Moody, 1986] 203–295).

⁴² So the thousands of "Thus says the Lord" in the OT; in the NT cf. 1 Thess 2:13; 4:15; 5:27; 1 Cor 14:37, etc.

2	Chronicles	Samuel/Kings	Large sections of Samuel/Kings (ca. 930+/550 BC) are used wholesale and often <i>verbatim</i> in Chronicles (ca. 425 BC). ⁴³
3	Isaiah 2:1–4	Micah 4:1–5	Isaiah (739–700 BC) and Micah (ca. 750–686 BC) were contemporaries; the verbal links between the two passages are so nearly identical that literary dependence is almost certain, even if the direction (Isaiah → Micah? Or Micah → Isaiah?) is impossible to specify precisely. ⁴⁴

⁴³ Of course, the dates assigned to all three formally anonymous books (Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles) depend significantly on who authored them—a matter over which there is little evidence or agreement. The estimated dates are based on the last datable event in the books themselves. For representative dates and discussions on the literary relationship, see Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (second edition) (Zondervan, 2000) 209, 230, 251–56; David M. Howard, Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Moody, 1993) 144–45, 171–72, 235, 238–49.; Eugene H. Merrill, et.al., *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (B & H, 2011) 307–10, 324, 336–39.

⁴⁴ See Mark Rooker’s Introduction to Isaiah (367–379) and Micah (453–458) in Eugene H. Merrill, et.al., *The World and the Word*. Rooker states that Micah “was a younger contemporary of Isaiah, who, like Isaiah, prophesied just before and after the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BC” (453). While it is hypothetically possible that both writers were quoting the same extrabiblical source, this does not strike me as probable: (1) Certainly both men, who were divinely commissioned to minister at the same time to the same group of people, would have known about and mutually affirmed each other’s ministry. Certainly their audience would have been aware of both of them (and eventually, their inspired books); (2) Isaiah frames his treatment as “the word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw” (2:1). This is essentially a “thus saith the Lord” formula, which certainly implies that Isaiah is recording divine revelation directly. (3) If Isaiah is quoting, then his opening words (2:1) make the citation more likely to come from another accredited prophet who also spoke by “the word of the LORD” (cf. Micah 1:1) than from an extra-canonical, uninspired source. (4) The corresponding words in Micah appear in a string of verses introduced with “And I said” (in 3:1)—another prophetic oracle

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4	Daniel 9:2–3	Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10	Daniel and Jeremiah were rough contemporaries, with Daniel’s ministry beginning (ca 606 BC) as Jeremiah’s was drawing to a close. In reading Jeremiah the prophet, Daniel realized the seventy years prophesied for the captivity are soon to be fulfilled, and prays to that end.
5	1 Thessalonians	Matthew	There are at least 39 exegetical links between the Thessalonians epistles (written 50–51) and Matthew (the Olivet Discourse primarily) that indicate rather clearly that Paul is referencing/using Matthew at this point (written 45–50). ⁴⁵

expression. Again, if Micah is quoting rather than authoring these words, for the same reasons as stated above it is more likely that Micah quoting a fellow, divinely accredited prophet (that his audience would also have known) than some hypothetical, extra-canonical source. Pulling all of this together, it seems it seems slightly more likely that Micah the younger was quoting Isaiah the older, but either way, one of them is quoting the other.

⁴⁵ Of course, this has negative implications for the reigning “synoptic problem” hypothesis of Markan priority, and supports the unanimous viewpoint of the church (until the rise of “higher” criticism in the 1700s) that Matthew was the first of the gospels to be written. If Paul is quoting it in the early 50’s, then Matthew had to be written by AD 50 at the latest. I’ve charted these connections in my doctoral dissertation, later extracted and presented to the Evangelical Theological Society national conference (see Michael M. Canham, *“Not Home Yet”: The Role of Over-Realized Eschatology in Pauline Church Discipline Cases* (Ph. D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2005); 185–91.

6	1 Corinthians 5:4	Matthew 18:20	Both of these are church discipline contexts; in 1 Corinthians 5:4 (ca. 54–55) the verb <i>synagō</i> (a Pauline <i>hapax</i>) and the reference to “the name of Christ” clearly point back to Matt 18:20 (the only other place in the NT where <i>synagō</i> appears with “the name” of Christ [“My name”]). ⁴⁶
7	1 Timothy 5:18	Luke 10:7	Paul (writing around AD 63) quotes Luke 10:7 (written late 50s/early 60s) <i>as Scripture</i> .
8	James	Sermon on the Mount	Nearly all commentaries recognize James’ multiple references to the Sermon on the Mount, ⁴⁷ the fullest exposition of which appears in Matthew 5–7. Assuming James to be the brother of Christ, recall (1) the early date of his epistle (AD 45–48); and (2) his unsaved status during Jesus’ earthly ministry (John 7:5). How did James know what was in the Sermon on the Mount? Hint: Matthew had taken notes!

⁴⁶ So Canham, *Not Home Yet* 242–244. I am indebted to Stewart Lauer, a fellow doctoral student at Westminster back in the 1990s, who first put me on to the strong linkages between Corinthians and Matthew, not just in 5:4 but pervasive throughout the first seven chapters of 1 Corinthians. Lauer’s own findings were subsequently published and defended in a 2010 PhD dissertation at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (*Traces of a Gospel Writing in 1 Corinthians: Rediscovery and Development of Origen’s Understanding of 1 Corinthians 4:6b*); abstract posted at <https://woodylauer.wordpress.com/> (accessed 08 December 2021).

⁴⁷ E.g., 1:2 (5:10–12); 1:4 (5:48); 1:5; 5:15 (7:7); 1:9 (5:3); 1:17 (7:11); 1:20 (5:22); 1:22 (7:24); 2:5 (5:3; cf. Luke 6:20); 2:8 (7:12); 2:13 (5:7; 6:14–15); 2:14–16 (7:21–23);

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9	2 Peter 3:15–16	Paul’s epistles (plural)	Peter (ca. 65) classes Paul’s epistles (ca. 50–67) with the “rest of the Scriptures;” even before Paul had written the last of them (2 Timothy, ca. AD 67).
10	Jude 17–18	2 Peter 3:3	Scholars debate over whether Jude (late 60s; mid 70s) was quoting 2 Peter (ca. 65), or whether it was the other way around. I argue that Jude was quoting; either way, one NT book is quoting another; and both books were written close to the same time (mid 60s to mid 70s [possibly Jude, if second]).

Each of the links identified above would justify a fuller, separate treatment which is beyond the scope and possibility of the present article, and it is conceded that some of these connections are more direct than others. But they all share two things in common: (1) In each case, the Scripture in the first column is quoting or otherwise directly referencing the Scripture in the second column. This link is obvious. (2) Notice, however, the *brevery of time* between the writing of the earlier Scripture(s) and when it was quoted or referenced by the later Scripture(s)! In the OT era, this may have involved a few generations on occasion (e.g., Samuel/Kings to Chronicles; Jeremiah to Daniel), but in at least two OT cases the chronological gap was nearly immediate (e.g., Pentateuch to Joshua; Isaiah to Micah) while in the NT the gap in each case was less than a decade. The implication of all this is simple: Scripture was canonical the *moment* it was written, and was *immediately* recognized as such by other biblical writers of the same era. It did not require the passage of centuries before such canonicity was recognized, let alone established.

One other remark. How do we know the biblical canon is *complete* or *closed*? A key passage here is the final warning in Revelation 22:18–19 against adding

3:10–12 (7:15–20); **3:18** (5:9); **4:4** (6:24); **4:10** (5:3–5); **4:11** (7:1–2); **5:2–3** (6:19–20); **5:10** (5:12); **5:12** (5:33–37). (**Bold** are references in James; those within the parentheses are to Matthew). These linkages alone make James’ epistle far more Christocentric than is generally recognized!

to or taking away from “the words of this prophecy.” Granted, the immediate reference is to the book of Revelation itself (“this book . . . prophecy,” cf. 1:3), and the language in Revelation 22:18–19 is similar to earlier warnings against such tampering with the Word of God, given while the Scripture was in the process of being written (e.g., Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:6). However, there is the unique canonical function of the Apocalypse as looking ahead to the *consummation* of Christ’s work in the present age (Rev 1:1, 3; 19; 4:1ff, etc.).⁴⁸ Put another way, the *closing* of the book of Revelation simultaneously constituted the *closing* of the NT (and therefore biblical) canon.

Corroborating evidence: the recognition of canonicity in church history. Once again, Jesus Himself regarded the tripartite OT canon (law, prophets, and writings) as *settled* by His time here on earth (cf. Matt 5:17–20; Luke 24:24–27, 44–46) and pre-authorized the NT canon. Jesus (and Scripture itself) *establishes* canonicity. Church history, however, provides *corroborating* evidence for canonicity. Entire volumes have provided helpful treatments on canonicity from this standpoint; space considerations restrict us to three summary observations.

First, there is a multitude of evidence from the church fathers who regularly quoted from the NT as scripture, and as early as the end of the first century (e.g., Clement of Rome [ca. AD 95] referencing Corinthians).⁴⁹

Second, there were at least four historical issues faced by the church during the second and third centuries that forced a careful, increasingly precise definition of canon: (1) Gnosticism (late 1st century through 3rd century), with its *false* canon (i.e. spurious writings, such as the Gospel of Thomas); (2) Marcionism, with its *truncated* canon, accepting only a redacted version of the Gospel of Luke and ten of the Pauline epistles (excluding the Pastorals) as canonical; (3) Montanism (ca. 180), with its *expanded* canon (extrabiblical revelation through “inspired” prophetesses regarded on the same level as Scripture; and (4) the attempted *destruction* of the canon with the official Roman persecution, which began with Nero in AD 64, but which intensified especially at the beginning of the third century with imperial edicts requiring

⁴⁸ Cf. Robert L. Thomas, “The Spiritual Gift of Prophecy in Revelation 22:18,” *JETS* 32:2 (June 1989): 201–16; esp. 215–16). For a different, more inferential approach to the closing of the canon that does not build off of Revelation 22:18–19, see Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place* 558–64. While acknowledging that texts like Revelation 22:18–19 (and their OT counterparts) “refer initially to a very small portion of God’s word,” Feinberg goes on to say that “it isn’t inappropriate to apply these passages to Scripture more generally. . . especially if one agrees that the canon of Scripture is closed” (*Light in a Dark Place*, 697).

⁴⁹ See discussions in the standard NT introductions (e.g., Carson/Moo, Guthrie, Hiebert) and the introductory sections in the more exegetically detailed NT commentary literature for the extensive external evidence from the church fathers relating to the authenticity of all the NT books.

Christians to turn over their sacred writings to be burned. The cumulative effect of all of these required the church to distinguish their inspired Scriptures from other spiritual works that may have been edifying but weren't inspired (e.g., *The Shepherd of Hermas*).

Third, Church historian Everett Ferguson has identified four stages of canonical *recognition* during the early centuries of church history:⁵⁰ (1) The Scripture principle, which was marked by the transition from the *oral* to the *written* form of the Christian message. This began early (probably 40s, with Matthew and James) and was substantially completed by the fall of Jerusalem (AD 70, with only John's writings [and possibly Jude] postdating this event. This stage ended with the death of the Apostle John in the late 90s. (2) The Canonical principle: Starting early in the second century, there is an explicit affirmation that the *number* of such (written, canonical) works is limited; (3) The Closing of the Canon (Origen, Eusebius). At this stage there was the endeavor to prevent more additions or deletions from an accepted list; and (4) the Recognition of a closed canon (fourth and fifth centuries).⁵¹

V

The Sufficiency of Scripture

While preparing this essay, I asked several of Steve's former students what he was the *most* passionate about when it came to bibliology. They uniformly replied, "The *sufficiency* of Scripture!" Steve believed that *this* area was the one where the contemporary evangelical church had departed the most from a sound bibliology—including many who otherwise affirmed inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture. The question is whether Scripture is *enough* for the believer? Or do we need something *additional* to excel in our Christian walk? There is also the related question of the hermeneutical relationship of *general* revelation to *special* revelation. Does general revelation (such as science, culture, psychology, etc.) carry greater authoritative or interpretive weight than special revelation (i.e., the Scriptures), or is it the other way around?

⁵⁰ See Everett Ferguson *Christian History* (Vol. One) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 112–22.

⁵¹ It is true that the canonicity of certain books was questioned (Eusebius termed these the *antilegomena*), but this was only *after* they had already been recognized as canonical. A few segments of the Christian church thought a few other books might be canonical (e.g., *Shepherd of Hermas*), but the vast majority rejected these. And *no one* accepted the NT *apocrypha*/ *pseudepigrapha* (generally gnostic or otherwise heretical) as canonical.

Definition of Sufficiency

A good working definition for the sufficiency of Scripture is the one provided by Matthew Barrett:⁵²

The sufficiency of Scripture means that all things necessary for salvation and for living the Christian life in obedience to God and for his glory are given to us in the Scriptures.

The operative phrases in this definition are “necessary for salvation” and “[necessary] for living the Christian life.” I would add a third component that will factor in the brief discussion below—the *supremacy* of Scripture. Scripture stands *over* all other sources of knowledge (which are derivative rather than intrinsic) and does not require or depend upon any of them for its own “self” attestation or sufficiency.

Scriptures on Sufficiency

Several of those already examined under inspiration (above) also apply to the sufficiency of Scripture (e.g., esp. 2 Tim 3:14–17; 2 Pet 1:19–21). Other texts specify that the Scriptures play an indispensable role in regeneration (1 Pet 1:23; cf. John 6:63; Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 3:15; James 1:18, 21) and spiritual growth of those newly reborn (1 Pet 2:2; cf. Rom 15:4), especially when it comes to resisting temptation (Matt 4:4, 7, 10; cf. Deut 8:3; Ps 119:9–11; 1 Cor 10:1–13). The noble Bereans compared Paul’s gospel with the Scriptures to determine the truthfulness of his message (Acts 17:11). In short, the Scriptures provide us with “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3, cf. v. 4).

Implications of Sufficiency

Space limitations preclude our being able to do more than sketch out five implications of sufficiency.

(1) The word of God is supreme in terms of its *authority*. It must not be added to (the sin of legalism), taken away from (the sin of liberalism), or otherwise distorted (the sin of cultism; cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:6; 2 Cor 2:17; Rev 22:18–19). In all things, the believer must determine not “[to go] beyond what has been written” (1 Cor 4:6). We go only as far as the Word of God goes, nor do we stop short of affirming and declaring *everything* that is part of the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

(2) Scripture is also *supreme* in terms of its *revelation*. Put another way, *special* revelation (i.e., the Word of God, both living [Christ] and written [Scripture]) always holds hermeneutical priority *over general* revelation (i.e., creation).

⁵² *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 334. Barrett (p. 335) also references the excellent summation on the sufficiency of Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646; I.VI.)

General revelation is real, true, universally accessible, and sufficient to condemn (Ps 19:1–6; Rom 1:18–23; 2:15; Acts 17:22–33) but lacks the *specificity* (GR tells us God exists, but not *Who* He is) *clarity*, and *saving efficacy* of special revelation. Some have denied the sufficiency of Scripture⁵³ on the grounds that some areas of knowledge accessible to us aren't found in the Scriptures (e.g., mathematics, some scientific disciplines, medicine, etc.). "All truth is God's truth," and since Scripture doesn't contain *those* truths, it is insufficient.

Certainly, there are other areas of knowledge available to us (e.g., mathematics, etc.) that are not in the Bible, and it is possible (even advisable on many occasions) to draw wisdom from extrabiblical sources. But (unlike Scripture), these are always *fallible* and *inferior* to Scripture. Nor can we ever use these *independently* of Scripture. Finally, some of these areas of "knowledge" contradict Scripture, and thus fall under the heading of "what is *falsely called* 'knowledge'" (1 Tim 6:20, italics mine). In the early church, it was the "truths" derived from various *philosophies* (neo-Platonism; Gnosticism) that sought to undermine the Gospel, these days it's *science* ("proving" an evolutionary world-view), *psychology* (with its materialistic view of man) and *culture* (moral and epistemological relativity and legislated immorality) that are often expected to take hermeneutical and authoritative priority over the Scripture. But general revelation (correctly interpreted) will *never* contradict special revelation (correctly interpreted). But when any perception of irreconcilable tension between the true exists, the "truth" gained through general revelation must always give way to the special revelation of Scripture, which is *more* clear, *more* specific, and *more* efficacious than general revelation.

(3) A closely related but distinct matter is the *supremacy of Scripture over extra-biblical "revelations."* Of course, this applies to many (if not most) continuationist views of tongues and prophecy, to the degree that these latter are taken as direct revelations from God. But even non-charismatics have often pulled the "God *told* me that . . ." trump card—after all, who wants to argue with God?⁵⁴ But the canon is *closed*, brothers and sisters! Though he

⁵³ Or, more precisely, many have denied a *caricature* of what sufficiency advocates actually *mean* by that expression (i.e., a straw man fallacy). Hence the importance of Matthew Barrett's careful definition and delimitations above.

⁵⁴ While I was serving in pastoral ministry, our church had one strongly opinionated deacon who would often seek to persuade those who disagreed with the words "But God told me that. . ." Of course, in practical terms this meant "you go your way, and I'll go God's way"—the discussion is *over*! It was about six months after I needed it that I finally thought of a good answer—"But God told *me* that *you* misunderstood Him, and let me show you the verse where He told me that." Delayed, progressive revelation of such brilliant insights to me can be frustrating, but also a good thing for my own sanctification (and health!).

“has spoken” (Heb 1:1–2), God does *not* speak today apart from His Word.

(4) Scripture is also supreme over our *experiences*, valid as they may (or may not) be. Peter had one of the greatest “personal experiences” of all—seeing the transfigured Christ (2 Pet 1:16–18). And yet he declared that we have the prophetic *word* made more sure” (2 Pet 1:19a, underlining mine), that is, the Scriptures (2 Pet 1:19b–21).

(5) The Scripture holds authority over all human *traditions*—even and especially “religious” ones that seek to define “holiness” (cf. Mark 7:6–8, 14ff). Note how Jesus carefully distinguished between human and divine traditions in his confrontation with the Pharisees in this regard (Mark 7:6–13).⁵⁵ They differ as to their *source* (“traditions of *men*” vs. Commandments of “*God*”), *supremacy* (Scripture is primary; tradition is secondary), and *authority* (God’s word mandatory; human traditions optional). “Optional”—that is, as long as they do not contradict or contravene the Word of God. When that happens, traditions must be flatly rejected (cf. Gal 1:6–9; e.g., the Book of Mormon), as indeed they must also be when traditions are given *equal* weight with the Word of God (e.g., the Council of Trent).⁵⁶ Here, we “stand fast” in the liberty Christ died to set us free with (Gal 5:1), even as we voluntarily limit that liberty on occasion for the sake of the weaker brother (1 Cor 8:9),

⁵⁵ For an excellent, sermonic treatment here, see John R. W. Stott’s *Christ the Controversialist* (IVP, 1970) 65–89. For a discussion on Christian liberty, it would be hard to improve upon the excellent treatment by Garry Friesen in *Decision-Making and the Will of God* (revised) (Multnomah, 2004), 374–419, as well as a similar approach in John Weeks, *Free to Disagree: Moving Beyond the Arguments Over Christian Liberty* (Kregel, 1996). Friesen’s work in particular was transformational and liberating when I first encountered it as a college student struggling to break free from the shackles of man-centered, rule-based, extrabiblical traditionalism.

⁵⁶ The issue of “optional” vs. “mandatory” is the dividing line between legitimate differences over matters of Christian liberty and false teaching. Consider the two illustrations Paul uses in Romans 14: differences over *diets* (v. 2) and *days* (v. 5). In such matters, believers are to (positively) “receive” one another (14:1; 15:7) and (negatively) *not* to “judge” or “despise” one another (14:3, 4, 10, 13). The same negative prohibition and the same two illustrations appear (in the same order, even) in Colossians 2:16, except here the prohibition reads “no one is to *act as your judge*” (emphasis added). When that happens, “diets” and “days” move from the realm of Christian liberty to that of false teaching (cf. 1 Tim 4:3; Gal 4:10). The biblical principle is this: When what is *optional* is made *mandatory*, false teaching results, and on that basis *must* be opposed. This is the difference between Jesus “keeping the sabbath” (as Exodus 20 *defined* and *delimited* it) and going out of His way to deliberately violate human mandates concerning it (e.g., His healing miracles on the sabbath), as well as the difference between Paul having Timothy circumcised (for the sake of the gospel, Acts 16:3), and *refusing* to have Titus circumcised (*also* for the sake of the Gospel [Gal 2:3, cf. 11–21]).

our own consciences (Rom 14:5, 21–23; 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23), or the gospel (1 Cor 9:19–23; cf. Acts 16:3).

VI

The Christ-Centeredness of Scripture

Scripture is unified around its one great Subject, our glorious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Anyone* who knew Steve Fernandez or sat under his ministry knew that Christ-centeredness permeated his entire pastoral ministry—and unlike so many of us, this passion *intensified* rather than mellowed during the latter years of Steve’s ministry, when I was privileged to sit under his ministry. Following a painful church split in the late 1980s, this passion became the cure and an indispensable part of the DNA of Community Bible Church’s body life, and spawned several Christ-exalting ministries out of CBC, not the least of which was The Cornerstone Seminary (2004) and Exalting Christ Ministries International (2002), a local-church based missions agency dedicated to supporting church planters and leadership trainers worldwide who are passionate about proclaiming the glory of Christ to the nations. The singing, the preaching, the discipleship—all of this goes back to Christ-centeredness.

A few introductory caveats. *First*, the Pharisees taught us that it is sadly possible to study the Scriptures—even intensely, closely, and passionately—and yet totally miss Christ (see John 5:39–40, 46).⁵⁷ However, in light of Jesus’ own view of Scripture, it is equally true that it’s not possible to exalt Christ the Living Word unless we also exalt the written Word of God—especially when we read in the Psalms that God Himself has exalted His Word above His own name (Ps 138:2). Sadly, there is preaching that in the name of Christ-centeredness seeks to crowbar Jesus into the text in a way that dishonors both Him and His Word. And in the final analysis, when God’s word is not properly handled, Jesus is not glorified. Indeed, his glory is undermined and obscured under a mass of eisegetical hermeneutics that leaves the Word of God as a nose of wax to be twisted and turned according to the preacher’s own whims. Yes, we need to be Christ-centered in our preaching. But we need to *see Him in the text*; not *read Him into the text*. A legitimate Christocentricity does not violate a valid, historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

Second, there is the ever-present danger of *Christomonism*. We cannot swerve into “oneness” or “Jesus-only” Pentecostalism in our pursuit of Christocentricity. In some ways it may be better to speak of the *theocentricity* of Scripture, since there are multitudes of OT passages that speak of God without specifying Jesus as the specific member of the Godhead in view,⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Again, Stott’s chapter 3 (“Scripture: End or Means?”) in *Christ the Controversialist* is very helpful here.

⁵⁸ Of course, it is equally true that there are quite a number of OT texts that speak

while several NT passages are “Spirit” centered (e.g., Acts 13:1ff) or “Father”-centered (probably Eph 1:3–14, with its threefold refrain “to the praise of the glory of His grace”).⁵⁹ However, the Father delights to exalt the Son (e.g., John 8:50, 54–55; 12:28–29; 13:31–32; 17:1–5), and the Spirit’s mission is to speak of and point to the Son (e.g., John 16:13–14). So, it is entirely possible—not to mention theologically sound and Scriptural—to be Christocentric without also being Christomonistic.

Specific Texts

Perhaps the classic texts on the Christo-centricity of Scripture come from Jesus’ post-resurrection instruction to His disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25–27, 44–46). In these texts Jesus references the entire OT canon, either in its entirety (“the prophets,” v. 25; “*all* the Scriptures,” vv. 27, 45), or by breaking it down into its twofold (“Moses and all the Prophets,” v. 27) or tripartite divisions (“The Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms,” v. 44).⁶⁰ Whether direct and explicit (e.g., Ps 110:1; Isa 7:14; 52:13–53:12), or indirect and implicit (e.g., Esther, Song of Solomon; OT historical narratives), *all* of these Scriptures speak of “things concerning Himself [i.e., Jesus]” (vv. 27, 44–45).

The Apostle Paul also believed this. There is a fascinating text in Acts 17:2–3, which notes that Paul’s regular “pattern” whenever he would come to a new city would be to first (cf. Rom 1:16) preach in a Jewish synagogue (if there was one), “[reasoning] with them *from the Scriptures*, explaining and giving evidence that the Christ [who is Jesus] had to suffer and rise again from the dead” (italics mine). Nor was this pattern restricted to Jewish audiences. He preached Christ on Mars’ Hill as the “unknown God” whose authority as the God-Man has been proven by God’s “raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:2, 31).⁶¹ And Paul’s testimony to the largely Gentile

of *YHWH* generally that in the NT are specifically applied to Christ. One example: Isaiah 6:1 and John 12:41. Isaiah saw *Jesus* high and lifted up. Furthermore, I personally suspect that all theophanies are by definition Christophanies, since He is the only member of the Godhead who was ever made visible (cf. Exod 33:20; John 1:14, 18).

⁵⁹ Cf. Ryan L. Rippee, *That God May Be All in All* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018) 75–76 *et passim*.

⁶⁰ Of course, “the Psalms” headed the third OT canonical division (*kethubim*, or “the writings”); the term thus functions as a synecdoche for the entire canonical division (cf. “Law” and “Prophets,” which often function that way as well).

⁶¹ It is true that Paul (as he had with the pagans at Lystra [Acts 14] and as he would when he wrote Romans 1) begins his Acts 17 address with general rather than special revelation. It is clear, however, that *Scripture* undergirds everything Paul says about Jesus from v. 24 on (cf. Greg Bahnsen, “The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens,” *Ashland Theological Bulletin* [Spring 1980], 4–40).

Corinthian believers was that he “determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. . . . we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord” (1 Cor 2:2; 2 Cor 4:5). Nor should we overlook the account of Philip the evangelist and his witness to the Ethiopian eunuch who struggled to understand Isaiah 53:7—“and beginning from this Scripture [Philip] preached Jesus to him” (Acts 8:35). This is just a sampling of many texts which surround us with a great multitude of witnesses which all proclaim, “the Scriptures speak of Christ!”⁶²

The “Divine Design” of Scripture

The Christ-centeredness of Scripture is not only apparent at the individual text level, it is also seen in the “big picture.” Scripture, when viewed as a whole, clearly points to Christ:⁶³

The Old Testament: “The Book of the Generation of the First Adam.”

OT Section	Contents	Issue	Function
Pentateuch (5 books)	laws (243p; 365n) sacrifices (5)	HOLINESS	<i>To show the need for a perfect <u>PRIEST</u>.</i>
Historical Section (12 books)	optimism (Joshua) pessimism (Judges)	LEADERSHIP	<i>To show the need for a perfect <u>KING</u>.</i>
Prophetical ⁶⁴ Section (17/22 books)	preaching (forthtelling) prophecies (456 Messianic)	LOYALTY	<i>To show the need for a perfect <u>PROPHET</u>.</i>

⁶² For an excellent starting point on finding Christ in the OT, consult Michael P. V. Barrett, *Beginning at Moses: A Guide to Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 1999).

⁶³ Once again, I am indebted to Dr. Mark Minnick (cf. Note 9 above), who first introduced me to this in a lecture he gave in *Principles of Christian Growth* (a freshman Bible class). The chart that follows has been adapted from that lecture.

⁶⁴ We are including in this section the Wisdom literature (i.e., Job–Song of Solomon). It is important to note that the divisions in our English Bible don’t necessarily equate with the canonical divisions in the Hebrew Bible. Some books we would include in our historical section are found either in the prophets (e.g., Joshua) or in the “writings” (e.g., Chronicles, Esther) and some books we would

***All of this is preparation—pointing *forward* to the coming of Jesus Christ, Who Alone perfectly fulfilled all three offices as Prophet, Priest, and King!

The New Testament: “*The Book of the Generation of the Last Adam.*”

Gospels	<p><i>PRESENTATION of the Person and Work of Christ</i></p> <p>Matthew... Jesus as <i>King</i></p> <p>Mark..... Jesus as <i>Servant</i></p> <p>Luke..... Jesus as <i>Man</i></p> <p>John..... Jesus as <i>God</i></p>
Acts	<p><i>PROCLAMATION of the Person and Work of Christ.</i></p> <p>There are over 60 examples of public and private witnessing in the Book of Acts.</p>
Epistles	<i>INTERPRETATION of the Person and Work of Christ</i>
Revelation	<i>CONSUMMATION of the Work of Christ.</i>

VI Conclusion

To exalt Christ is to exalt His word, and to make His own view of, high regard for, and ministry saturated in Scripture the paradigm for our own lives and ministry. Steve Fernandez modeled this particularly in the five areas we have examined above. He has now joined that great cloud of witnesses who have finished their course with joy, and now surround us, as it were, cheering us on to victory as we continue to run our race (cf. Heb 12:1–2). May God help us as we seek to exalt Christ by exalting His Word!

FOR FURTHER READING

There is some great literature available for students, pastor/elders, teachers, and other Christian leaders who would like to study more. For a first introduction (new believers and beginning students), I would highly recommend Kevin DeYoung’s *Taking God at His Word* (Crossway, 2014), Tom Barnes [*Every Word Counts* (Evangelical Press, 2010)], and Robert Saucy

include with the prophets (e.g., Daniel, Lamentations) are found in the writings section of the OT canon.

[*Scripture* (Word, 2001)]. And of course, Steve Fernandez produced his own *God's Living All-Sufficient Word* (available from CBC's Exalting Christ Publishers) that has been marvelously used to train leaders both in his own church and worldwide.

The best systematic theological overviews and summary treatments on bibliology may be found in Paul Enns [*Moody Handbook of Theology* (Moody, 1989)], Millard Erickson [*Christian Theology* (Baker, 1984–)], Wayne Grudem [*Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994)], Rolland McCune [*Systematic theology of Biblical Christianity* (Vol. 1) (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009)], Bruce Milne [*Know the Truth* (InterVarsity Press, 1982)], Charles Ryrie [*Basic Theology* (Moody, 1999)], and Henry Clarence Thiessen [*Lectures in Systematic Theology* (revised) (Eerdmans, 1979)].

For more advanced students and pastor-theologians, I would highly recommended two recent, excellent, full-length treatments on Bibliology by Matthew Barrett [*God's Word Alone* (Zondervan, 2016)] and John Feinberg [*Light in a Dark Place* (Crossway, 2018)].

Classic treatments on bibliology remain those of Louis Gaussen [*Theopneustia* (reprint Kregel, 1979)]; R. Laird Harris [*Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1969)], Rene Pache [*The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* (Moody, 1969)], J. I. Packer [*'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Eerdmans, 1957)], and of course B. B. Warfield [*Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (reprint SBTS Press, 2014)]

On specialized bibliological topics, the best treatments on biblical canonicity come from the pen of Michael Kruger [esp. *The Question of Canon* (InterVarsity, 2013)]. For biblical inerrancy, consult the materials produced by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (1978, 1982), especially the work edited by Norman Geisler [*Inerrancy* (Zondervan, 1980)], as well as Geisler's more recent work (with William Roach) addressing contemporary challenges to inerrancy [*Defending Inerrancy* (Baker, 2011)]. For inerrancy in church history, see John Woodbridge [*Biblical Authority* (Zondervan, 1982)].

Apologetics that Exalts Christ

Cliff McManis*

*“Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?”
(1 Cor 1:20)*

These three questions came thundering off the inspired pen of the apostle Paul as a bold rebuke against all those in the world who would prop themselves up in opposition to the simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote these words as a pastor to his humble congregation that was living in Corinth, a bustling seaport city in southern Greece. Corinthian culture was pagan to the core, a by-product of Grecian and Roman domination that lasted centuries.

Heavily influenced by nearby Athens, Corinthian culture esteemed the “human wisdom” bequeathed by the Greek poets and philosophers over against “heavenly revelation” preached by Paul and the prophets. The Greeks valued “cleverness of speech” (1 Cor 1:17) and the “superiority of speech” (2:2), catch-phrases for polished, manipulative rhetoric. They also prized “wisdom” (1:22), or *Sophia*—their distorted view of true “knowledge,” exalted insight attained through prescribed arduous machinations of ratiocination and expressed in an equally prescribed and polished manner. Much emphasis was placed on the presentation. Style over substance.

In stark contrast, Paul let it be known that he was a propagator of truth, not a pioneer of ideas. He was a conduit and channel of God’s divine revelation, not a clever and sophisticated wordsmith seeking to manipulate speech designed to superficially cajole his listeners. That is what Greco-Roman rhetoricians had mastered. Paul forever puts in stark relief the contrast between the role of the Christian preacher and evangelist versus those who are considered “wise,” erudite, educated, academic, impressive, idolized, and esteemed in the world. Paul would preach the simple, life-changing gospel that Christ had given him while the wise debaters and philosophers of this world would continue to spew their man-made wisdom to gain applause and adulation.

At the heart of Paul’s preached message was a “crucified” Christ; a dead savior; a convicted, rejected criminal and outcast. To the Greeks this notion was utter folly, complete foolishness; an empty hope. To the Jew this message was considered blasphemy and the ultimate stumbling-block (Gal 3:13).

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Memorably, the apostle Paul, through the Holy Spirit, summarizes the contrast this way:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF THOSE WHO HAVE UNDERSTANDING, I WILL CONFOUND.”

Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than mankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than mankind (1 Cor 1:18–25).

In this passage Paul tells us how God saves people. It is through “the message preached.” And that message is about “Christ crucified,” that is, the reality that the eternal, uncreated Son of God came down to earth and assumed a human nature, lived a sinless life in obedience to the Father, and gave up His life for sinners by willfully dying on a cross where he absorbed the full wrath of God’s hatred of sin (Isa 53; John 3:16; 10:17–18). After he died, Jesus was buried, rose from the grave, and ascended back to heaven where He reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords (Acts 3:13; 1 Cor 15:3–4). Any sinner who repents of sin and trusts in this crucified and risen Christ will be saved, by grace through faith, apart from any human works (Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9–10; Eph 2:8–9).

This is the saving message for sinners. This is the good news. This is the one and only unchanging gospel. Our good works do not save—only Christ’s work saves. This gospel is the only hope for humanity. This is the only message Jesus preached (Mark 1:14–15), and this message is the only message Jesus gave to his apostles as a mandate and commanded them to preach (Luke 24:45–48). This gospel is the only message Peter, John and the early church proclaimed (Acts 2:22–36). “Christ crucified,” is the only saving news Paul proclaimed and taught for his thirty-year ministry (Gal 6:14). He wrote,

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). And it was the same message he proclaimed no matter what audience he encountered, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Proclaiming the gospel is the priority of the church.

Paul knew the Corinthians would need to be reminded how the message of the gospel is fundamentally different from the wisdom of the world. Within their cultural setting, the believers in Corinth were especially susceptible to deception, being misled by the shallow wisdom of men. The church today is also in danger of compromising with the surrounding culture and allowing the pagan paradigms of the world to seep into church life. Nowhere is this truer than with respect to Christ’s mandate for all Christians to preach the gospel, witness to the world, and defend the faith.

“Defending the faith,” however, has come to be known almost exclusively as the enterprise of “apologetics.” But this confusion of categories does not correspond to what the Bible teaches about the work of apologetics, as defending the faith is a task that belongs to all Christians, not just professional theologians. The shift to systematize the work of apologetics occurred gradually over centuries, beginning with Origen (184–253), Augustine (354–430), Anselm (1033–1109), Aquinas (1225–1274), Paley (1743–1805), Warfield (1851–1921), Sproul (1939–2017), Geisler (1932–2019) and others, and is now widespread and mainstream—albeit misguided. For many Christians, it is the only brand of apologetics they know. For that reason, this brand of apologetics shall be termed “traditional apologetics” for the purposes of this article. It will be compared and contrasted with what I term “biblical apologetics.” It is time to recover a fresh picture of what Scripture really teaches about apologetics. *Every* Christian should know what the Bible says about apologetics. That is the aim of this article: to delineate a biblical approach of defending the faith while exposing the counterfeit that reigns supreme in the evangelical church today.

The popular understanding of Christian apologetics today centers on a few elite men who specialize in a realm of academia known as philosophical theology as opposed to biblical theology. Also known as natural theology, philosophical theology is based on mere human reflection, independent of any external or objective revelation. Philosophy is a compound word meaning, the “love of wisdom.” Similar to the Greeks, whom the apostle Paul said loved “wisdom.”

In the Christian world today, the work of apologetics is a niche venture. But that was never God’s intent. In the following, I will set forth seven pillars of traditional apologetics, explained and then laid side-by-side with the

biblical alternative, to help distill a clear picture of biblical apologetics.¹ The end result will be a concise, yet thorough, exposé of the fallacies of traditional apologetics set in contrast to a robust biblical apologetic.

Pillar #1 of Traditional Apologetics: Defining “Apologetics”

Out of the gate, traditional apologetics short-circuits the apologetical enterprise by laying the foundation of an ill-gotten definition. The traditionalists define apologetics by employing a strained and myopic meaning of the Greek word, *apologia*, found in 1 Peter 3:15, which reads, “sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always *being* ready to make a defense [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, but with gentleness and respect.” It is not a stretch to say that traditional apologists contrive an entire discipline out of just one word. The traditionalists routinely take the word *apologia* here, translated as “make a defense,” out of context and infuse it with a philosophically-laden meaning that Peter never intended when he used the word in his epistle. Bernard Ramm is typical here:

The historical origin of apologetics is to be found in the legal procedures in ancient Athens. The plaintiff brought his accusation (*kategoria*) before the court. The accused had the right of making a reply (*apologia*) to the accusation...The classic example of the apology is of course the famous *Apology* of Socrates before the Athenian court of law preserved for us in the *Dialogues* of Plato.²

Steven Cowan also defines *apologia* out of context, disregarding the biblical context in favor of a secular one, in order to establish his metaphysical paradigm when discussing apologetics:

The very word apologetics is derived from the Greek *apologia*, which means “defense.” It was a term used in the courts of law in the ancient world. Socrates, for example, gave his famous “apology,” or defense before the court of Athens.³

¹The seven pillars will be based on the writings of the foremost recognized apologists in the Protestant/Evangelical community in the last century, including, but not limited to, B. B. Warfield, Bernard Ramm, R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, Kelly James Clark, Norman Geisler, Alvin Plantinga, and Douglas Groothuis.

²Bernard Ramm, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976), 11.

³Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views On Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2000), 8.

Many other quotes could be given but these two suffice for the purpose of illustrating that the traditionalists over-extrapolate one word, *apologia*, to create an entire discipline of philosophical theology called “apologetics.” And they limit the meaning of the word *apologia* to a secular, legal, formal, Greek connotation rather than referring to its frequent use in the New Testament where it is employed in a religious, personal, informal, and largely Hebrew context.⁴ The backdrop for 1 Peter 3:14–15 is Isaiah 8:11–15 which is about speaking with confidence in light of knowing the true God, YHWH. The background is not the pagan Greek courts of Socrates’ Athens.

Furthermore, when the Apostle Peter exhorted his readers to “make a defense,” he was not talking about presenting a legal brief in a court of law. He was encouraging all believers to engage in gospel proclamation at any time, to anyone, emphasizing the “hope” they have in Jesus Christ. Peter makes it clear in his epistle that the only “hope” for the believer is in knowing Jesus Christ, crucified (1 Pet 1:11), risen (1 Pet 1:3) and coming again (1 Pet 1:13). In other words, Christians were to tell inquiring unbelievers how Jesus saved them. The context of Peter is clear.⁵

Take it from the inimitable biblical expositor, John Calvin, who commented on Peter’s true contextual meaning of *apologia* in the command of 3:15:

It is the general doctrine that is meant, which belongs to the ignorant and the simple. Then Peter had in view no other thing,

⁴Greg L. Bahnsen, *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, ed. by Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 2001), 191–240; William D. Barrick, *Coming to Grips with Genesis*, eds. Terry Mortenson and Thane Ury (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009) 260; D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 35–36; Cliff McManis, *Apologetics By the Book* (Sunnyvale, CA: GBF Press, 2017), 36–43; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 173; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996, xiii); George Zemek, *Christian Apologetical Methodology* (Sun Valley, CA: The Master’s Seminary, 1992), 2.

⁵In contrast to the traditional apologists, the truth is quite to the contrary when reading *apologia* in its biblical contexts; Selwyn explains, “*apologia* and its cognates are used both of public self-defense (as in Lk. xii. and xxi., Acts xix. 33, xxii. 1, xxvi. 1, 2, 24) and of more private and less formal utterances (as in 2 Cor. vii. 11). Its application to written treatises such as Plato’s *Apology* does not seem to occur in Christian literature before the second century, where we have the Apologies of Justin, Aristides, and the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*. The first sense is not excluded here, but the second must be chiefly in mind, for *aitounti* is a quite informal term, and indicates conversation rather than police enquiry”; Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Essays* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1971), 193.

than that Christians should make it evident to unbelievers that they truly worshipped God, and had a holy and good religion...Hope here is by metonymy to be taken for faith. Peter...does not require them to know how to discuss distinctly and refinedly [sic] every article of the faith, but only to show that their faith in Christ was consistent with genuine piety.⁶

Luther was even more specific about Peter's usage of *apologia* in 3:15, noting that the "defense" we give is supposed to be a biblical and evangelistic one, driven by Scripture itself, not philosophical sophistry:

We must here acknowledge that Peter addressed these words to all Christians—clergy and laity, male and female, young and old—of whatever state or condition they may be. Hence it follows that every Christian should know the ground and reason of his faith, and he should be able to maintain and defend it...the devil has hit on a fine trick to tear the Bible out of the hands of the laity; and he has thought thus: "If I can keep the laity from reading the Scriptures, I will then turn the priests from the Bible to Aristotle," and so let them gossip as they will....But look now at what Peter tells us all, that we should give an answer and show reason for our faith...Therefore we must know what we believed, namely, what God's Word is.

So when anyone assaults you, and like a heretic asks why you believe you shall be saved through faith, here is your answer: "Because I have God's Word and the clear declarations of Scripture for it." As Paul says in Romans 1:17, "The just shall live by faith"....

But the sophists also have perverted the text, as though one were to convince the heretics with reason, and out of the natural light of Aristotle. (*emphasis added*) Therefore they say, "It is here rendered in Latin, *Rationem reddere*," as if Peter meant it should be done with human reason. Because, they say the Scriptures are far too weak that we should silence heretics with them. The method by which, according to them, it must be shown that the faith is a right one, must agree with reason and come forth from the brain. But our faith is above all reason, and it alone is the power of God. Therefore, if the people will not believe, then be silent; for you are not responsible for compelling them to hold the

⁶*Calvin's Commentaries: Commentaries On the Catholic Epistles*, vol. XXII, trans. by John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999), 108–109.

Scriptures as the Word or Book of God. It is enough that you give your reason from the Scriptures.⁷

Paul uses the word *apologia* at least eight times in reference to proclaiming and defending the gospel. Philippians 1:16 is typical where he said, “I am appointed for the defense [*apologian*] of the gospel.” Jesus used the word *apologia* in Luke 12:11 to prepare them of how to defend the truth about Christ when challenged by opposition. The New Testament does not use *apologia* in reference to long-winded, esoteric, rhetorical, philosophical disputations of forensic logic-chopping theorems as traditional apologists allege. Jesus, Peter and Paul used *apologia* in reference to the gospel of Christ—its simple proclamation and defense.

Pillar #2 of Traditional Apologetics: The Need for Pre-Evangelism

Closely related to pillar number one is the fictitious concept of “pre-evangelism.” “Pre-evangelism” means what it sounds like. Before a Christian can do evangelism or tell an unbeliever about the saving gospel of Jesus, or even talk about the Bible at all, something else needs to happen. The unbeliever needs to be primed. The Christian has some prep work first. The traditional apologists aver that the non-Christian can’t handle gospel truth “cold turkey.” We need to whet their appetite with philosophical, bite-size, non-threatening appetizers first. Before we use the Bible with unbelievers, we need to grease the slide with “neutral” human reasoning and appealing, air-tight logical syllogisms.

R. C. Sproul was an ardent advocate of pre-evangelism and theorized that “*pre-evangelism*...is involved in the data or the information that a person has to process with his mind before he can either respond to it in faith or reject it in unbelief.”⁸ “Pre-evangelism” is actually a novel concept and the phrase was coined by Francis Schaeffer a generation ago. Since then, countless traditional apologists have glommed on to it and made it mainstream. The notion’s inherent deficiencies are plain to see when considering this explanation for its need and use:

Some persons have walls in their minds and hearts that simply will not allow them to give an open ear to the claims of the Christian faith. When we do pre-evangelism, we may not be “sharing the gospel” with someone, but we are doing the necessary work of

⁷Martin Luther, *Commentary on Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 158–161.

⁸R. C. Sproul, *Defending Your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 23.

helping them clear hurdles that stand in the way of really hearing the gospel.⁹

This author explains that pre-evangelism is selective in its application. He proposes that some unbelievers have less unbelief than other unbelievers. But the Bible says “all” people, not “some” people, have walls in their minds inhibiting belief in the gospel, and it is called sin—personal spiritual blindness. Paul affirms that all sinners are by nature and from birth, spiritually “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). No one is exempt. Paul also states that all people apart from Christ have equally darkened minds, impervious to the truth (Rom 1:21). Jeremiah reminds us that every person has a wicked, sick, evil heart (17:9). Moses reminds us that all unbelievers are equally corrupt (Gen 6:5). In addition, all unbelievers are spiritually blinded by Satan and thus are incapable of believing truth apart from the help of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God in Scripture. Paul says it this way:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they will not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:3–4).

Also, the claim is made that through our pre-evangelistic metaphysical TED talks “we” clear the “hurdles” of doubt away with our human wisdom, allowing the unbeliever to more readily acclimate to the gospel’s apparently unpalatable demands. But such a notion is fallacious. Christians do not have the ability to clear away hurdles of unbelief that result from personal and supernatural Satanic blindness. That is the job of the Holy Spirit and the living Word of God. The Holy Spirit does His own preparatory work on the heart of the sinner apart from anything we do. The Spirit is always working on the hearts, minds, and consciences of unbelievers, convicting them of the truth. Jesus highlighted this preparatory work of the Holy Spirit:

And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me. And concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged” (John 16:8–11).

⁹Josh Moore, “What is Pre-Evangelism,” February 6, 2020, <https://www.unitedchurchofsoro.org/what-is-pre-evangelism/>, Accessed April 27, 2022.

Biblical truth from Scripture also does the necessary preparatory work on the heart of a sinner enabling them to believe, thus over-riding their debilitating sinful and Satanic blindness. The convicting, life-changing power of Scripture is clear:

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple (Psalm 19:7).

This verse from Psalms teaches that the “law of the LORD,” which is a reference to written Scripture, has the supernatural ability to save a sinner’s soul. Human logic cannot do that. The New Testament also testifies to the power of Scripture:

For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:12).

Since you have purified your souls in obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brothers *and* sisters, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable, but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God. For, “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory is like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, But the word of the Lord endures forever.” And this is the word which was preached to you (1 Pet 1:22–25).

In one sense, the traditional apologists are correct. Some preoperatory work on the sinner is needed. But that groundwork is accomplished through the Holy Spirit working with the Word of God on the sinner’s heart. It is a supernatural work. Our words, apart from Scripture, have no power.¹⁰

Craig says pre-evangelism is necessary because the work of apologetics needs to be separate from the work of evangelism. In his view, Peter’s statement in 3:15 has nothing to do with evangelism or the proclamation of the gospel. He claims these disciplines are mutually exclusive—evangelism

¹⁰Presuppositionalists have always acknowledged the propaedeutic work of the Holy Spirit working with the Word as fundamental in the work of apologetics; see Bahnsen, *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, 209; John H. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R, 2015), 57; McManis, *Apologetics By the Book*, 288–296; Robert Reymond *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 81–82; George J. Zemek, “Exegetical and Theological Bases for a Consistently Presuppositional Presuppositional Approach to Apologetics,” (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1982), 226–231.

has nothing to do with apologetics.¹¹ Howe agrees: “a clear distinction between biblical *witness* and biblical *defense* must be made and maintained.”¹² Sproul augments the cipher that is called pre-evangelism by insisting it functions in the realm of natural theology.¹³ Natural theology is doing theology without the Bible (see below), so Sproul agrees with Howe and Craig that evangelism is unrelated to apologetics so there is the need of pre-evangelism to soften the rebel before we pull out the Bible.

Jesus and the apostles never talked about pre-evangelism. They never practiced pre-evangelism. The apostles never wrote about pre-evangelism. The Bible does not need a crutch or a jump-start. The mandate of the church is to preach the gospel. There is no remedial or preliminary step to obeying the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). The gospel is supernaturally efficacious and sufficient and the only thing sanctioned of God that can penetrate the hardened sinner’s heart, over-riding their sinful and satanic blindness. The gospel doesn’t need help. Jesus proclaimed it wherever He went without a pre-game show. Mark summarizes Jesus’ simple, straight-forward, no-nonsense approach to speaking with unbelievers:

Now after John was taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (1:14–15).

Paul emphatically declared that the gospel was sufficient when talking with sinners:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (Rom 1:16).

When Peter gave the imperative for every Christian to “make a defense” for the hope that is in every believer, he was not advocating pre-evangelism—the ill-conceived notion that the gospel needs a pre-cursor in the form of our self-contrived eloquence for the purpose of appeasing the skeptic who can’t

¹¹William Lane Craig, “Reformed Epistemology Apologetics: Responses: A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in *Five Views On Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 287.

¹²Frederic R. Howe, “Kerygma and Apologia,” *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1980), 446–447.

¹³R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 22.

handle hearing undiluted gospel truth. Peter simply encouraged believers to be ready to share their faith, give their testimony, and explain the gospel whenever they encountered an interested or pressing inquirer. Stott exposes the fraud of pre-evangelism when discussing the implications of 1 Corinthians 1:17–23:

The apostle proceeds to enforce these general truths with a more particular reference to [unbelieving] Jews and Greeks. *Jews demand signs*, he writes, *and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified* (vv. 22, 23). Notice the verbs in the sentence. *The Jews* were making imperious demands, insisting on certain signs before they were prepared to accept the claims of Jesus. *The Greeks* were forever restlessly seeking and searching for wisdom. *But we preach...* that is, our task as Christian preachers is not subserviently to answer all the questions which men put to us; nor to attempt to meet all the demands which are made on us; nor hesitantly to make tentative suggestions to the philosophically minded; but rather to proclaim a message which is dogmatic because it is divine. The preacher's responsibility is proclamation, not discussion. There is too much discussion of the Christian religion today, particularly with unbelievers, as if we were more concerned with men's opinions of Christ than with the honour and glory of Jesus Christ Himself. Are we to cast our Priceless Pearl before swine to let them sniff at Him and trample upon Him at their pleasure? No. We are called to proclaim Christ, not to discuss Him...we are 'heralds,' charged to publish abroad a message which did not originate with us (that we should presume to tamper with it) but with Him who gave it [to] us to publish.¹⁴

That is biblical apologetics.

Pillar #3 of Traditional Apologetics: Natural Theology

Pillar number three for the traditional apologist is natural theology. Traditionalists make a priority of talking about ultimate realities with unbelievers without using the Bible. They seek to answer questions like, "What is the purpose of life?" "How did we get here?" "Where did the world come from?" "Why do bad things happen?" "Where do people go when they die?" To answer these questions, since they say they cannot resort to the Bible, they lean on what they call natural theology. Craig and Moreland give a standard definition:

¹⁴John Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 110–11.

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Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of...divine revelation or scripture.¹⁵

In other words, natural theology is doing theology without the Bible. It is a philosophical pursuit; unaided human reason. It is dependent ultimately on autonomous human thought, which they call “common sense,” by utilizing sensory perception. They also say it is driven by the laws of logic, which are universally shared by all humans. These apologists conclude that this method provides common ground between believer and unbeliever in the realm of epistemology to (allegedly) level the intellectual playing field. Saint and sinner can equally “reason together” objectively on the most important matters in life, including the ideas of God, the problem of evil, and more. Habermas, one of the foremost recognized evangelical apologists today, summarizes the traditionalists no-Bible approach to defending the faith saying his method

...does not begin with a belief in the inspiration of Scripture, no matter how well this may be established. In fact, this approach does not even require that Scripture have the quality of general trustworthiness...the trust-worthiness and inspiration of Scripture... are simply not required in order to establish the central tenets of the Christian position.¹⁶

This statement is alarming coming as it does from a leading Christian apologist. Habermas asserts that when defending the Christian faith, believers do not need to use the Bible, nor do they need to believe it is trustworthy. Worst of all, he says the Bible is not necessary to establish the central tenets of the Christian position. But just the opposite is true. None of the central tenets or doctrines of the Christian faith can be established, believed or defended apart from the Bible (cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17). We defend the faith after the pattern of the Old Testament prophets who boldly declared, “Thus saith the Lord,” and after the model of Jesus who declared, “It is written” (Matt 4:4, 7, 10; 11:10; 21:13; 26:24, 31),¹⁷ and like Paul who “reasoned from the Scriptures” (Acts 17:2) with pagans.

¹⁵J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2009), 1.

¹⁶Gary Habermas, “Cumulative Case Apologetics: Responses: An Evidentialist’s Response,” in *Five Views On Apologetics*, 187.

¹⁷“It is written” is actually one Greek word, *gegraptai*, which is a perfect passive indicative and means, “it stands written and is still binding.” The perfect indicative emphasizes ongoing, continuous results. “There is a grand and solid objectivity about the perfect tense, *gegraptai*, ‘It stands written.’ ‘Here,’ Jesus was saying, ‘is the permanent, unchangeable witness of the eternal God, committed to writing for our

There is no warrant for talking with unbelievers about the ultimate issues of life using unaided human reason, apart from Scripture. There are two main reasons for that. The first is that human thinking is fallen. It is skewed by sin. Because of the fall of Adam and the resultant curse from God, every person born has “a depraved mind” (Rom 1:28). All unbelievers have a “darkened” mind as a result of being a sinner (Rom 1:21). In addition, because of inherent sin, all non-Christians have innate bias *against* truth and the holy God of Scripture. Every person comes out of the womb with a sin nature (Ps 51:5), a separated enemy of God (Rom 5:10), “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3), and in need of spiritual regeneration by Christ (John 3:3–5). Until that happens, every unbeliever is incapable of reasoning properly about ultimate realities and spiritual truth. They are predisposed to deception and lies. Paul put it this way:

For who among people knows the *thoughts* of a person except the spirit of the person that is in him? So also the *thoughts* of God no one knows, except the Spirit of God. Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God. We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor 2:11–14, emphasis added).

The second reason unbelievers cannot contemplate the ultimate realities of life with unaided reason is because they are in need of outside revelation, for man is finite and limited. God the Creator needs to explain and interpret all of reality for finite humans. No one living today was around when the world began. No one alive today knows what exists beyond the grave. No human knows inherently the ultimate purpose of life. God must reveal that information because only he possesses this information. God rebuked Job, telling him that no human can answer the ultimate questions of life without revelation from his Creator. Here’s a sampling of the eighty-plus questions with which God interrogated Job to deflate his presumptuous notion that he can reason about God apart from divine revelation:

Who is this who darkens *the divine* plan
by words without knowledge?
Now tighten the belt on your waist like a man,

instruction” John W. Wenham, “Christ’s View of Scripture” in *Inerrancy* ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 15.

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and I shall ask you, and you inform Me!
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell *Me*, if you have understanding,
Who set its measurements? Since you know.
or who stretched the measuring line over it?
On what were its bases sunk?
or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
(38:2–7).

Doing theology without the Bible is futile. Trying to answer the ultimate questions of life without God’s revelation is impossible, foolish, and presumptuous. Traditional apologists say otherwise and argue that utilizing natural theology is indispensable when talking with pagans, those with no biblical background. Exhibit A for these apologists is Acts 17 when Paul was in Athens, debating with the Greeks (vv. 22–34).¹⁸ They aver that Paul used natural theology, philosophy, and unaided human reason when talking to the heathen about creation and a Higher Power. But close examination of the text shows Paul utilized special revelation, coupled with explications of general revelation in light of special revelation—not natural theology. Acts 17:18 says that the content of Paul’s message to “Epicurean and Stoic philosophers” was the gospel, for “he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection” to them. Paul did not deviate from his pattern no matter who his audience was. He was single-minded. He purposed to preach only Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:1–2; Gal 6:14). And when he headed to Athens he stuck to that plan, for the text says, “according to Paul’s custom” he “reasoned with them from the Scriptures” (17:2). Paul did not use natural theology; he used biblical theology. And he rounded out his conversation with the pagan Greeks by calling them to repent and believe in Christ, saying,

So having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now proclaiming to mankind that all people everywhere are to repent, because He has set a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all people by raising Him from the dead (vv. 30–31).

Traditional apologists agree that Paul did the work of apologetics in Acts 17 with the Greek philosophers, but they assert that it was void of any gospel proclamation or evangelism. They claim further that Paul’s approach was not

¹⁸Craig alleges Paul used natural theology, but gives no proof. Paul never used natural theology; see Craig “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views*, 40.

biblically-driven but was characterized by natural theology, unaided human reason. The truth is, Paul's apologetical methodology was always the same, "reasoning from the Scriptures," and always culminating with a complete gospel presentation, calling sinners to repent and believe in Christ.

Pillar #4 of Traditional Apologetics: Professional Secular Philosophy

The fourth pillar of the traditional apologists is the presupposition that their trade is closed and only for the initiated. Apologetics is reserved for the professional philosophers, not for every-day, untrained, normal Christians. This is another corollary derived from the one word, *apologia*, used by Peter in his epistle. For the traditionalists the work of apologetics is strictly in the domain of philosophy proper. Groothuis, a renowned evangelical apologist makes that very claim. He opines, "apologetics...walks arm and arm with philosophy...A Christian-qua-apologist, then must be a good philosopher...This is nonnegotiable and indispensable."¹⁹

Wow! To defend the Christian faith one must be a good philosopher? And it is "non-negotiable?" Did Jesus expect his apostles to defend the faith and to do apologetics? Yes! (cf. Luke 12:8–12). They were the ultimate apologists (Acts 4:8–12). As was the apostle Paul. Was Paul a philosopher? No. He deplored the philosophers, specifically the secular Greek philosophers. That is why he threw down the gauntlet in 1 Corinthians and asked rhetorically, "Where is the wise man?...Where is the debater of this age?" (1:20). The NIV legitimately translates the second phrase, "Where is the philosopher of this age?" Paul impugned the philosophers. The Greek philosophers in Paul's day operated strictly on autonomous intellectual speculation and reflection apart from divine revelation. They believed in the competence of human cognition. They wielded natural theology just as the traditional apologists do today. Paul was a trained Rabbi and theologian. He attested, "I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the [Mosaic] law of our ancestors" (Acts 22:3). Paul was among the elite in the party of the Pharisees, "as to the Law, a Pharisee" (Phil 3:5), "advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age" (Gal 1:14). Pharisees were known for one thing—a rigid, legalistic, fastidious adherence to divine revelation, the Hebrew Scriptures. To act, write, teach or think independent of divine revelation was unimaginable to Paul. To live apart from revelation or to think with "unaided" reason was the epitome of treachery and even blasphemy. And as an apostle, Paul was reliant upon divine revelation in everything he preached, taught, and wrote. He received direct revelation from Jesus Himself, with no intermediary (Gal 1:11–12). He was a conduit for delivering heavenly revelation, not the wisdom of man. Paul was not a philosopher and

¹⁹Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Apologetics* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 27.

never aspired to be one. The thought is absurd. And as an apostle, a shepherd of the church, and discipler of men, he exhorted Christians to be obedient followers of Christ (1 Cor 11:1), not aspiring philosophers (Col 2:8).

Groothuis is not the only one who believes in an elitist apologists' guild. Craig purports that the work of real apologetics is reserved for the elite, trained, professional philosophers, and apologetics needs to be discussed in the vortex of "current philosophical discussion."²⁰ Ramm was extreme on the point. He said, "no person can really dare to enter the area of Christian apologetics in a competent way without some mastery of the history of philosophy."²¹ This is an outrageous claim. No one alive today has "mastered" the history of philosophy! The history of philosophy extends from Pythagoras (570–495 BC) to Plantinga (b. 1932) and the material is too vast for any one person to sufficiently exhaust.²² It is an absurd expectation to make a mastery of philosophy a prerequisite for an average Christian to share and defend the faith. Peter wrote his letter to all believers "who reside as aliens" in the region today known as Turkey (1:1), and exhorted every one of them to give an answer about their "hope" in Christ to anyone who might ask (3:15), and Ramm demands that before they do that, they must have a Ph.D. in the history of philosophy. This is pure, condescending academic snobbery.

This illegitimate, elitist mindset is overtly coddled by the guild of Christian philosophers as seen on their websites, bios, and profiles describing their vocation. Their own websites typically bill them as "Professor of Philosophy" who "lecture" in "universities," while nary a word is said about affiliation with a church. Jesus promised to build, bless, and perpetuate only one institution to further Christian ministry and the gospel of Christ, and that is the church (Matt 16:18). Furthermore, they identify as "apologists," which is a misnomer. The New Testament delineates no category or moniker for "apologist" being utilized in reference to an office in the church, or to a unique spiritual gift, or to an individual. Of the eighteen times *apologia* (and its cognates) is used in the Scripture, it is used as a verb. It is an action, not a person.²³ "Making a defense" or "giving an answer back" to inquirers is what all Christians are expected to do. "Apologist" it is not a special epithet describing a select few who have intellectual prowess beyond the norm. The

²⁰Craig, "Classical Apologetics," in *Five Views*, 38.

²¹Bernard Ramm, *A Christian Appeal to Reason* (Waco, TX: Word, 1972), 25

²²Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, Vol. I, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 31ff.

²³Robertson notes, "The term *apologia*...is an old word from *apologeomai*, to talk oneself off a charge, to make defense....for his conduct or life...It is a speech." So it is consistently used as a verbal, not substantively. See Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Vol. III: Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930), 386.

only God-ordained offices in the church are apostle, prophet, pastor/elder/bishop, teacher, evangelist and deacon (Eph 4:11–12; 1 Tim 3). There is no office or title of “apologist.” That is a contrived, artificial slogan that usurps basic Christian responsibilities from what is expected of all Christians, especially pastors and elders (cf. Titus 1:9–11).

Contrast Groothuis’ and Ramm’s intimidating requirements for believers who want to do the basic obligation of Christian apologetics with what Christ Himself said to prospective believers:

Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is comfortable, and My burden is light (Matt 11:28–30).

The main power and insight that Jesus gives to His followers is other-worldly in nature, namely power that comes from the Holy Spirit. It is not academic aptitude or wisdom that is showcased according to the world’s standards. After a training session with his disciples in which they experienced a little success, Jesus celebrated on their behalf by giving thanks to the Father for his bestowal of sovereign grace, noting that the disciples were not the most erudite nor likely candidates for the current Ivy League schools in Athens:

At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from *the* wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for *doing* so was well pleasing in Your sight” (Luke 10:21).

Paul also made it clear that the average believer is, well, average. God does not expect us to be the academic elitists or from the batch of the smartest people in the world. Scripture says just the opposite in terms of whom God favors with His saving grace:

For consider your calling, brothers *and sisters*, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the insignificant things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no human may boast before God (1 Cor 1:26–29).

In this passage Paul says that “not many wise according to the flesh” are chosen by God to be saved. That literally means, “not many of this world’s

philosophers” are chosen. And the reason is because they tend to trust in themselves and their own intellectual machismo. They don’t need anyone telling them what to do. They are “know-it-alls.” This is hubris; the very thing God opposes in a person (James 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5).

As Calvin reminded us earlier, when Peter said to “make a defense” he was talking to every believer, and Peter assumed that every Christian was sufficiently prepared to fulfill the task of defending the faith because they were all armed with a personal relationship with the risen Christ, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, and had at their disposal the very living Word of God. God puts a priority on Spirit-led, obedient Christians, not elitist, professional philosophers driven by unaided human wisdom.

Pillar #5 of Traditional Apologetics: Epistemological Neutrality

Pillar number six for the traditional apologist is belief in the fiction known as “epistemological neutrality.” The phrase is a mouthful and looks overbearing. But obscure, multi-syllable words are par for the course when dealing in philosophy proper. “Epistemological” comes from “epistemology,” a compound word meaning “the study of knowledge,” or more formally, “the theory of knowledge.” The suffix is the common “-logy,” meaning “the study of.” The rest of the etymology is a bit more complicated, which one dictionary delineates as follows:

epistemology *n.* study or theory of knowledge. 1856, formed in English from Greek *epistḗmē* knowledge (Ionic Greek *epístasthai* understand, know how to do, from *epi-* over, near + *hístasthai* to stand) + English *-logy*.²⁴

A form of the word “epistemology” actually occurs in the New Testament about fourteen times and is translated as “know, understand, being acquainted” (cf. Acts 10:28; 15:7; 18:25), so it is not an obscure notion. There is a legitimate concept known as “the theory of knowledge” and we all have one. Epistemology is a vast field and discipline, including sub-categories such as the nature of truth, tests of truth, degrees of certitude, and taxonomies of various theories of knowledge. For the sake of our discussion on apologetics, the topic of epistemology will be limited to two facets, one objective and one subjective. The objective issue at hand is the debate over tests for truth. How do we determine something to be true in the area of spiritual realities or religion? The subjective issue is related to the question of what believers and unbelievers have in common on knowing spiritual realities? The issue of “common ground” is controversial in metaphysics. These two issues are inseparable and overlapping. Nevertheless, I will discuss these topics in order.

²⁴Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, (New York: H. W. Wilson, 2004), 337.

First is the objective concern: what are the tests of truth, especially with religious claims? The traditional apologist argues that the tests of truth are in the areas common to all people, no matter their religious beliefs. Such areas include human experience, common sense, sensory perception, and the laws of logic. All the essential sensory data (empirically) and cognition (rationally) required to arrive at truth or knowledge supposedly filters, in the end, through human reason, thus enabling the individual to objectively reflect on a truth claim. The test for truth claims, even religious ones, are through unaided human reason. The biblical apologist has a radically different approach and standard. He argues that all truth claims are measured by God's objective revelation found in the Bible. Scripture is the standard of truth. Human reason is guided by, monitored, managed, and illumined by divine, special revelation from God with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

R. C. Sproul was an advocate for unaided human reason as a test for truth. Cornelius Van Til advocated for Scripture as the only test for truth in spiritual and metaphysical matters. Sproul says man is the starting point in establishing epistemology. Van Til said God is. Sproul argued,

we must start with ourselves rather than God...It is logically impossible for us to start with God for we cannot affirm God without assuming logic.²⁵

Geisler agreed with Sproul and said categorically, "logic is prior to God *in the order of knowing* (epistemologically)."²⁶ Van Til said just the opposite:

the central concern of a truly biblical apologetic method is...to show that without presupposing the Christian worldview, all of man's reasoning, experience, interpretation, etc., is unintelligible. Only the transcendent revelation of God can provide the philosophically necessary preconditions for logic, science, morality, etc., in which case those who oppose the faith are reduced to utter foolishness and intellectually have nowhere to stand in objecting to Christianity's truth-claims.²⁷

Van Til was right. The Bible is clear on this point. God is prior to *everything*. He is preeminent in everything, including epistemology: "He is before all

²⁵R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 223.

²⁶Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002), 90.

²⁷Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1998), 676.

things” (Col 1:17); YHWH is “the first and...the last” (Isa 44:6). All reality is what God says it is. “In Your light we see light” (Ps 36:9). He is not true because the laws of logic validate him to be so. Geisler and Sproul erroneously contend that the laws of logic are prior to God as though logic and epistemology is independent of God. But God is the perfect, eternal Mind. Logic cannot be separated from God’s nature. God always thinks perfectly logically and does not violate the laws of logic. To think illogically would be to speak in contradictions. God never does that.²⁸

John’s Gospel refers to the eternal Christ as “the Logos” (John 1:1), the Divine Mind, Word or Reason that is always logical. Logic is not separate from God. Logic is inherent to God, and God always thinks logically. And when he made humans in His image, he made them logical (rational) beings. God created human laws of logic that flow from His character—they are contingent, secondary, and subject to Him. He is completely sovereign over all things (Ps 115:3). YHWH warns puffed-up, supposedly all-knowing, self-sufficient humans saying: “Remember this, and be assured; recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa 46:8–10).

God is truth (Exod 34:6). Jesus is truth (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit is truth (John 14:17). God’s Word is truth (John 17:17). Scripture is truth (Rev 21:5). For us today, Scripture is the standard of and final test of truth. The traditional apologists’ claim that the first ultimate test of truth for spiritual truth claims is finite human reason is categorically unbiblical, and therefore fallacious. I conclude that because the Bible tells me so. The traditional apologists don’t use the Bible as a test for truth because they say, “You can’t prove the Bible with the Bible. That is circular reasoning.” Instead, they argue that human reason needs to be the test for truth because their human reason led them to that conclusion. So, who is circular in their reasoning? Everyone.²⁹

²⁸ Sproul makes many more comments to this end, alleging man’s reason and logic comes before God and God’s thinking. For example, he writes, “reason must be satisfied before the Bible can be accepted as the Word of God” (R. C. Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*), 319. For further elucidation on this fatal tendency of Sproul see, George Zemek, “Review Article: Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense,” *Grace Theological Journal* 7:1 (1986).

²⁹ Frame shows how all humans of all persuasions are circular in their epistemology, for they are finite beings; only God is ultimate. Humans, as created and contingent beings, are of necessity presumptive beings. He writes, “on a biblical view, there is no such thing as unbiased human thought. Human thought is either biased against God, by repressing his revelation (Rom. 1), or biased in his favor (by the work of

The starting point of all knowing and knowledge is God and Christ, not fallen man. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). True wisdom is “from above” (James 3:17), that is, wisdom and knowledge find their source and origin in heaven from God. The wisdom of the world, originating with man, is no wisdom at all but rather counterfeit knowledge. Human wisdom “is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic” (James 3:15). Paul taught that “true knowledge” can only be found in Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3).

Carl Henry properly explains the ultimate source from which all reasoning and discussion about what is true begins is the self-disclosure of God the Creator: “As revelationally grounded and intelligible faith, Christianity sets out from the ontological priority of the living God and the epistemological priority of divine revelation. From these basic postulates it derives and expounds all the core doctrines of the Christian religion.”³⁰

Traditional apologists argue that the Christian has common ground with the unbeliever in the area of epistemology. What this means is that the unbeliever is perfectly capable of reasoning about God just as much as the believer is. Non-Christians can be just as informed and objective about theology as the Christian. Scripture, and biblical apologetics, says otherwise. This truth was hinted at earlier under in our discussion of the intellectual blindness that results from personal sin and the spiritually blinding work of Satan.

Stated simply, the traditional apologist argues that unbelievers can think properly about God, ultimate reality, and even theology by using mere human logic and “common sense.” These apologists aver that the unsaved person starts with a neutral intellectual starting point, unbiased in perspective about God. The Bible says the unbeliever has innate hostility toward the true God from the heart and this skews his thinking. Paul said that all unregenerate people “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18), and as a result their thinking is inherently “futile,” “foolish,” “darkened,” “depraved” and “without understanding” (vv. 21, 28, 31). All unbelievers “hate” the true God from the heart (Ps 81:15; John 7:7; 1 Tim 3:4).

The issue at stake here is the doctrine of total depravity and its relation to the unbeliever. Because of his disobedience, Adam became corrupt in every facet of his being, and he passed on this sin nature to all his offspring. As a

the Spirit, overcoming our sinful bias). Everyone has presuppositions, some false, some true. The first step in epistemological wisdom is to recognize that fact. ...All systems of thought are circular in a sense when they seek to defend their ultimate criterion of truth.” John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 734–736.

³⁰Carl F. H. Henry, *Toward A Recovery of Christian Belief* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 59.

result, every person born into this world inherits a sin nature and is totally depraved, which means that sin has poisoned every human faculty: the will, the body, the emotions, and the mind or intellect. Biblical apologetics asserts that apart from Christ and regeneration, the unbeliever's thinking on spiritual matters is twisted and self-centered. Traditional apologists argue unbelievers can think just fine about ultimate truth. Groothuis says categorically, "reason is not fallen...sound reasoning is the norm for people willing to follow truth wherever it leads."³¹ This is not a recent view. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) believed the same thing, affording capabilities to the unregenerate man way beyond what God says is reality. Aquinas opined, "natural man can, by the ordinary use of his reason, do justice to the natural revelation that surrounds him."³²

Augustine articulated a more biblical understanding of the unsaved person's epistemological status. Demarest explains:

The bishop insisted that natural man's cognitive powers have been crippled by the effects of sin. In matters pertaining to the eternal realm, the sinner is unable to intuit eternal, changeless truths, whereas in the temporal realm man's knowledge of changing things is distorted. The mind of natural man has been darkened and weakened by original sin. As Augustine argues, 'Every man is born mentally blind.' In addition, the will is not free but is bound by the power of reigning sin. Only what is loved and embraced by the will is known. But the fact is that the unregenerate will is perverse and corrupt. Fallen man's proclivity to self-love and pride compels him to turn aside from God. With Paul, Augustine insists that autonomous man holds down or suppresses God's presentation of Himself to the soul. God must heal, perfect, and free the will to make it willing to respond positively to Him. It is only when faith is established and sinful pride is routed that the intellect is enabled and the will freed to receive wisdom.³³

The unbeliever's inability to understand truths about God and true spirituality are compounded further by the supernatural blinding work of Satan. Paul said Satan "blinds the minds" of unbelievers so that they cannot understand the gospel of their own accord (2 Cor 4:4). They are deceived by the devil. Actually, they are offspring of the devil, children of "the prince of the power

³¹Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Apologetics*, (Downers Grove IL, InterVarsity Press, 2011), 177.

³²Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1967), 87.

³³Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 27.

of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2; cf. John 8:44–45).

In light of the blinding effects of sin and satanic blindness, how can unbelievers get saved? If they can’t understand spiritual truth, then they can’t understand the gospel. If they can’t understand the gospel, then they can’t believe it. If they can’t believe the gospel, then they cannot be saved. Is the situation futile? Not at all. That is where God in His grace intervenes. God over-rides the epistemological deficiency of unbelievers by removing their sinful and satanic blindness through the supernatural power that comes with the Holy Spirit working in conjunction with the Word of God, the preached good news. The gospel is the “power” of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16), the content of which the Holy Spirit uses to penetrate the deepest recesses of the human heart, mind, and spirit (John 16:8–9; Heb 4:12). The power of the Word working with the power of the Holy Spirit is the preparatory work of God needed to “open up the heart” of a sinner (Acts 16:14) enabling them to believe and be saved (Titus 3:5). The Word of God in Scripture and the Holy Spirit are the only instruments that can over-ride the unregenerate person’s debilitating and depraved epistemological state. Unbelievers have the apparatus necessary to receive the truth of the Spirit-empowered gospel by virtue of being made in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and possessing a conscience. So, the common ground between believer and unbeliever enabling life-changing spiritual transactions and inter-change is rooted in the ontological reality of the human persona. We share ontological common ground, not epistemological common ground.

Pillar #6 of Traditional Apologetics: Establishing Probability

Pillar number six of the traditional apologists pertains to their stated goal: to establish the “probability” of the Bible’s claims. This aim contrasts with the biblical goal of authoritatively proclaiming the settled, universal, unassailable, binding truth as defined by the gospel. Traditional apologetics seeks to establish Christianity as a “feasible” religion in the eyes of the unbelieving world. Stated another way, the goal of apologetics is to logically argue for the plausibility (not the “certainty”) of Christianity’s legitimacy. Through apologetics, we are told, Christians are to try to convince the unbeliever through sheer human reason and rhetorical persuasion that Christianity is logically possible, intellectually viable, academically conceivable, theoretically sensible, apparently non-inconsistent, or the best of all options.

Listen to a sampling from some of the world’s most famous evangelical apologists, arguing that the goal of apologetics is not to establish binding, universal truth, but to propose negotiable plausibility. Groothuis says that in apologetics we are to present the Christian worldview to the unbeliever “as a

large scale hypothesis” or as “the best hypothesis.”³⁴ Geisler posits that we try to show that the Christian worldview “is most reasonable” compared to other worldviews.³⁵ Similarly, McCallum says, “we only have to discern that one alternative is more plausible than the others.”³⁶ Tim Keller says, “The theory that there is a God who made the world accounts for the evidence we see better than the theory that there is no God.”³⁷ In other words, we should believe in God, not because the Bible says He exists, but because we have a better theory against all the other competitors. Our belief in God is only a theory—it is possible that God might not exist! Keller says, “there cannot be irrefutable proof for the existence of God,”³⁸ and even concedes with the atheist saying, “the secular view of the world is rationally possible.”³⁹

J. P. Moreland hopes his work on apologetics “contributes to making the belief that the Christian God exists at least permissible.”⁴⁰ Craig puts it this way: “using the methodology of classical apologetics, one seeks to show that Christian theism is the most credible worldview.”⁴¹ He adds that the aim of apologetics is “to show that God’s existence is at least more probable than not... more plausible than their contradictories...extremely plausible... more likely than not.”⁴² Hardy agrees and says that the goal of apologetics “is to show that it is a credible religion...[and] reasonable.”⁴³

Plantinga is no different. His apologetic work exists to seek “the rational acceptability of Christian belief” among unbelievers.⁴⁴ Sproul says we do apologetics to show “the extreme plausibility” that God may exist.⁴⁵ Dulles penned his tome on apologetics, not to establish the certitude of Christianity, but merely to establish “the general credibility of Christianity.”⁴⁶ Dulles the apologist goes on to say that “we cannot know the exact words used by Jesus”

³⁴Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 49.

³⁵Norman Geisler and Peter Bocchino, *Unshakable Foundations* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 29.

³⁶Dennis McCallum, *Christianity, the Faith that Makes Sense: Solid Evidence for Belief in Christ* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1997), 12.

³⁷Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton), 141.

³⁸Keller, *The Reason for God*, 127.

³⁹Keller, *The Reason for God*, 141.

⁴⁰J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 13.

⁴¹Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views*, 53.

⁴²Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views*, 48-51.

⁴³Dean Hardy, *Stand Your Ground: An Introductory Text for Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 1-3.

⁴⁴Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press), vii.

⁴⁵R. C. Sproul, *Defending Your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 50.

⁴⁶Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), xxi.

as we read them in the Gospels—nothing is certain.⁴⁷ Traditionalist, Kelly James Clark, speaks for them all as he demurs, “Gone, I believe, are the prospects for rational certainty.”⁴⁸

So, the experts tell us that Christianity is a “hypothesis,” “a theory,” “one plausible view” among many that is “reasonable,” “permissible” or more likely than not. This agnostic skepticism is contrary to the New Testament. Jesus gave the “Great Commission” to the Church, not the Great Suggestion. Jesus said He Himself was “the truth” (John 14:6) and that His Word was truth (John 17:17). Jesus never argued for truth with such agnostic paradigms of probabilistic and conditional speculations. Jesus typically made dogmatic assertions about ultimate reality in the face of skeptics and doubters by using the phrase, “Truly, truly...” (John 6:47). The Greek word for “truly” is “amen” which means “fixed, certain, reliable, unchanging.”⁴⁹ This was an emphatic way of saying, “You can absolutely count on it, without a doubt!” Jesus believed in the reality of knowing spiritual truth with absolute, unshakable certainty.

Jesus commissioned His disciples to proclaim the truth with full certitude as well, not half-cocked speculations. Listen to the apostle John speak with absolute confidence and in categorical terms about the certainty of gospel truth:

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him (1 John 5:13–15).

Paul taught, preached and wrote with the same dogmatism, assuming the certainty of his message without equivocation:

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of *mere* men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which also is at work in you who believe (1 Thess 2:13).

Despite Paul’s confident assertion, many argue that Christians cannot expect unbelievers to accept God’s Word with certainty, nor can we preach it to

⁴⁷Dulles, *A History of Apologetics*, 3.

⁴⁸Gordon Clark, “Reformed Epistemology Apologetics,” in *Five Views*, 277.

⁴⁹J. B. Taylor, “Amen” in *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1980), 40.

them with dogmatism. Paul thought otherwise. Hear him explain the divine mandate that God has placed upon the whole unbelieving world:

So having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now proclaiming to mankind that all people everywhere are to repent, because He has set a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all people by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30–31).

Every Christian is expected to represent Christ wherever they are. When unbelieving inquirers ask us what and why we believe, we are commanded to explain the gospel of Christ to them with utter confidence, knowing that it is absolutely true. The gospel is so certain that we have staked our eternal souls on it. As we defend the faith, we argue for its certainty, not its plausibility.

Pillar #7 of Traditional Apologetics: Proving the Existence of God

The final main pillar of traditional apologetics pertains to proving God’s existence. The first move of traditional apologists is to prove that God exists and to defend religion generically, not Christianity or the gospel specifically. This approach contrasts with the priority of biblical apologetics which is to proclaim the gospel and call sinners to repent and believe in Christ.

Though the Bible never commands believers to defend God’s existence to atheists and agnostics, traditional apologists make this their stated goal. Geisler was an apologist for classical apologetics, a form of traditional apologetics, which seeks to begin the apologetics process by establishing the existence of God through rational argumentation.⁵⁰ This is achieved, it is presumed, through the rehearsing of the philosophical “theistic arguments,” an esoteric enterprise undertaken with unaided human reason.⁵¹ God must first be proved before He can be obeyed. The Christian cannot use the Bible or preach the gospel to the skeptic, agnostic, or atheist until God’s whereabouts have been satisfactorily identified. Groothuis begins his apologetic approach the same way saying, “If the unbeliever is an atheist, we must start from scratch and argue for theism.”⁵² So we are told that Apologetics 101 begins with defending “theism” instead of the “hope” of Christ that is within us, as Peter stated (1 Pet 3:15).

Yet the Bible never commands believers to labor trying to prove the existence of God. The Bible itself never attempts to prove God’s existence—

⁵⁰Normal L. Geisler, “Classical Apologetics,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 154.

⁵¹That is, the ontological argument, the teleological argument, the cosmological argument, etc.

⁵²Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 43.

the Bible *presupposes* God's existence. There is no need to try to prove God's existence to the unbeliever anyway, for unbelievers already believe in God! They are called "unbelievers," not because they do not believe in God, but because they do not believe in Christ and His demands in the gospel (John 5:38; 6:36, 64; 8:45; 10:25). God makes it clear in Scripture that there are no true atheists or agnostics. There are only self-deceived liars who identify as agnostics or atheists. Actually, God is not sympathetic toward people who profess to be atheists. He's already given his judgment on this matter in Psalm 14:1, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed detestable acts." And again in Psalm 53:1 God renders the same verdict: "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice." Every human believes that God exists and knows that He is the Creator and Judge. This is what Paul teaches in Romans 1:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes*, *that is*, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures (Rom 1:18–23).

This passage is specific regarding man's innate knowledge of God. Paul says unbelievers have the knowledge of God "within them" which means the imprint of God's existence is embossed indelibly on the conscience of every human by virtue of being made in the image of God. Further he says that this innate knowledge of God's existence is "clearly seen" by them. It is perspicuous, intuitive, and inescapable. As a result, every person is "without excuse," which means every person is accountable to God for the truth they already possess, and they will be judged accordingly. Those who cry "Uncle!" claiming they don't know whether God exists are being dishonest, as are the self-proclaimed atheists. Paul makes it clear that they do not believe because they willfully "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18).⁵³ That

⁵³All unbelievers "suppress" the truth about God that is intuitive by means of general revelation; the nature of this deliberate "pushing against the truth" is graphically picturesque in light of Paul's word-choice of the verb *κατεχόντων*

means that unbelievers resist the truth within them by smothering it out with their sin, which they prefer over obedience.

Jesus taught this same truth. He said that unbelievers love their sin more than they love the truth about following Christ as Lord:

The one who believes in Him is not judged; the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, so that his deeds will not be exposed (John 3:18–20).

The true task of defending the faith is about protecting and advancing the gospel and the person and work of Jesus Christ; it has nothing to do with remembering how to rehearse from rote the dizzying gyrations of the pleonastic *kalam* cosmological argument.⁵⁴

The call of the Christian is to defend the faith with the beautiful purity and simplicity that was modelled by Christ:

Now after John was taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15).

Defending the faith is about defending Christian doctrine, especially the gospel of Christ. And God commands every believer to fulfill that task in light of their personal relationship with Christ as the opportunity arises. Our defense to the inquirer is to be rooted in, guided by and clothed in the truth of Scripture, God’s living and holy Word, the only supernatural truth that can penetrate to the deepest recesses of a hardened sinner’s heart (Heb 4:12). The Holy Spirit will then use that articulated special revelation of the Bible to strip

[*katechontōn*] as Zemek explains: “The force of *κατεχόντων* in Romans 1:18 is to hold down, to restrain, to suppress, or to hinder, or to hold in prison (i.e. incarcerate). Robertson’s illustration vividly portrays the impact of the verb in this context, when he states that the idea is to ‘put in a box and sit on the lid’” George J. Zemek, Jr. “Exegetical and Theological Bases for a Consistently Presuppositional Approach to Apologetics” (ThD Dissertation, *Grace Theological Seminary*, May 1982), 21.

⁵⁴The *kalam* cosmological argument is a lengthy, philosophically complicated theistic argument seeking to establish plausibility for contingent causation back to a first cause or a higher power. This argument is utilized by a select few evangelical philosophers that has been co-opted from Muslim theology. See Norman Geisler, “Cosmological Argument,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, 161.

away sinful blindness and satanic blindness, thus enabling the sinner to see the light, understand spiritual truth, and by God's grace, believe (Eph 2:8–9; Matt 18:17).

Conclusion

Pastor Steve Fernandez was not a well-known apologist. But for over three decades he faithfully defended the Christian faith and the gospel of Christ as boldly, consistently, and sincerely as anyone. His hope was in Christ and Christ alone, and it was that hope that Peter exhorted believers to guard. Steve proclaimed that hope as a believer, a pastor, and as an elder in the local church. He modeled how to do it, in season and out of season, to countless other men. His thoughts resonated with Paul's rhetorical challenge, "Where is the philosopher? What human reason can withstand the unparalleled power inherent in the divine revelation of the message of the cross?" There is only one kind of true apologetics—the work of defending the gospel of Christ.

The misguided and highly praised model of traditional apologetics needs to be exposed for what it is: a philosophically-driven, man-made counterfeit to biblical apologetics. In this article its unbiblical foundational presuppositions were exposed, and the proper biblical priorities were then presented. Seven foundational principles were considered.

First of all, when Peter commanded believers to give a "defense" [*apologia*] to unbelieving inquirers, he did not mean that the believer was to resort to an antiquated pagan Greek understanding of the word *apologia*. Peter meant every believer should be ready to give a personal, biblical, and even evangelistic answer about their Christian faith and their salvation story to anyone who asks.

Second, apologetics is not the work of "pre-evangelism." We cannot do any efficacious preparatory work on the hearts of sinners to melt their doubts away. The Holy Spirit prepares the sinner's heart through His sovereign, convicting work, in keeping with God's predetermined calling (Rom 8:29–30). And the preached Word does its own preparatory work, as it is the living Word of God, able to penetrate to the deepest recesses of a person's being (Heb 4:12). Our job is simply to present faithfully the gospel and biblical truth and then pray for the Spirit to do His work.

Third, apologetics is not about arguing and debating from natural theology, unaided human reason. Defending the faith is about proclaiming the truth with power, utilizing the special revelation of Scripture, and even interpreting general revelation for the unbeliever through the lens of that special revelation. We use biblical theology, not natural theology.

Fourth, the work of apologetics is not reserved for the few, the proud, the elite in the upper echelon of academic Christendom. All Christians are called to do the work of defending the faith—because they are able to (Rom 15:14; Eph 3:20). "Apologist" is not an office in the church or a unique

spiritual gift. Rather, the work of “defending the faith” is the obligation of every saint.

Fifth, believers do not share epistemological common ground with unbelievers. Unbelievers are blinded by sin and Satan. The only thing that can overcome those inhibitors is the power of the gospel. Unbelievers can understand the simple gospel because the Holy Spirit brings gospel truth to the conscience of every person and enlightens the sinner’s understanding. Our common ground with unbelievers is ontological as image bearers.

Sixth, biblical apologetics follows the pattern of Jesus and the Apostles in proclaiming a truth that is objective, universal, knowable, binding, Christ-centered and determined by Scripture. This is in contrast to traditional apologetics that proposes we can only argue for generic probability or plausibility.

Finally, the call to biblical apologetics is gospel proclamation and biblical exhortation, not arguing from philosophy for the mere possibility of God’s existence. There are no atheists. There are only those who willfully reject the claims of Christ. It is every believer’s responsibility to be faithful to this commission entrusted to our care, the privilege of exalting the cross of Christ at every opportunity, being confident in the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes.

Preaching that Exalts Christ

Todd Bolton*

During Christmastime millions of families hang stockings over the fireplace, decorate a Christmas tree, and enjoy candy canes and hot chocolate. If one were to ask one of these families the reason why they do such things, they would probably respond by saying, “Well, it’s just what we do this time of year. It’s tradition.” When something is familiar, it is often unquestioned. It is done without any thought to as why or the original meaning behind the tradition. The same can be true of preaching. Every Sunday millions of Christians go to church where they hear a preacher read a passage of Scripture and then explain it. Preaching is so commonplace in the life of most Christians, that few stop and consider what preaching is.

Preaching has a vital role in the life of the church. In fact, Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:1–5 that preaching is his chief responsibility in fulfilling his ministry. Because preaching is so important, it must be defined correctly. Much of what passes today for preaching does not meet the qualifications that Paul lays out for Timothy. Preaching tends to either be a stale lecture or a motivational talk. Some hold that the Word must be explained and application is up to the Holy Spirit and the listener.¹ Still others would say that people must be helped in preaching. They need more than mere explanation.

The crucial task for all preachers is to fulfill their ministry in the way that God intended. In order to do that, one cannot rely on tradition or opinion to define preaching. The definition of true biblical preaching must be determined from Scripture. Thankfully, Paul provides Timothy with a robust description of the preaching ministry. 2 Timothy 4:1–5 shows that preaching is authoritative heralding of God’s message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that calls people to live differently. This will be shown by examining the context of 2 Timothy, the charge of 4:1, the nature of the task in 4:2, the reason for the task in 4:3–4, and the personal appeal to the task in 4:5. Lastly, implications will be made for contemporary ministry.

2 Timothy 4:1–5 in Context

Last words are important. When a person knows that their time on earth is

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¹ For example, see “John MacArthur on Sermon Application,” Grace to You, accessed December 7, 2018, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/GTY117/>.

coming to an end, they take great care in what they communicate. A husband and father will make sure his wife and children know how much he cares for them and will give them any special instructions to secure their future needs. In the case of a great leader, he or she will desire to ensure the future success of their followers and the carrying on of their vision. In Scripture, last words also play an important role in the life of God's people. Moses assures the Israelites that God will keep His promises to give them the land He promised (Deut 31). Joshua encourages God's people to remain faithful to the Lord (Josh 23). David charged Solomon to walk in all the ways of the Lord (1 Kings 2). In each case, a lifetime of wisdom and instruction is boiled down to the essential means of advancing God's ultimate purposes. In the same way, 2 Timothy records Paul's last written words to Timothy.² These last words serve not only to ensure Timothy's ministry success, but also the success of Christ's church for all time (1 Tim 3:15; 2 Tim 2:2).³

Historical Context

1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are commonly referred to as the Pastoral Epistles (PE) as they are written from the Apostle Paul, a pastor and church planter himself, to his pastoral proteges in Ephesus and Crete.⁴ In addition to helping the individual ministries of Timothy and Titus, Paul was consciously writing documents that were intended to provide authoritative instructions for the church for all time (1 Tim 3:15; Titus 2:11–13; 2 Tim 2:2). Paul's ultimate goal is the conduct of those within the household of God and their influence on the world around them through devotion to good works and the Word of God.⁵

The rise and influence of false teaching makes the letters that much more necessary (1 Tim 1:3–4; 2 Tim 3:1ff.). Paul is seeking to safeguard the church

² Walter Lock, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus)*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), 79.

³ George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992), 10.

⁴ Authentic Pauline authorship is assumed for this paper: "The arguments against Pauline authorship of the PE ... initially appear to be persuasive. But when examined more closely they fall far short of being convincing. Examination of both sets of arguments brings out relationships between the PE and the other Paulines that have been overlooked or not adequately appreciated. Thus the apparent problem areas have in the long run made their own contributions and have thus strengthened rather than weakened the pervasive self-testimony of the letters to their Pauline authorship" (Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 51).

⁵ Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, xiii.

from error and provide stability for fruitful future ministry.⁶ New Testament scholar Philip Towner also highlights the missionary focus of the PE in his introductory comments, stating, “An often-overlooked concern of these three epistles is mission. The church exists for many reasons, but one of the most primary is to spread the gospel.”⁷ Paul’s purpose in writing goes beyond the immediate historical setting. His instructions are meant to provide the basis for ministry and the spread of the gospel until Christ’s return.

The particular context of 2 Timothy is even more striking as Paul knows that his time on earth is drawing to a close (2 Tim 4:6–8). Theologian George W. Knight explains, “He is in prison in Rome (1:16, 17; 2:9; 4:16, 17) and has come successfully through his first defense... But he expects to die soon (vv. 6, 18), probably thinking that his second defense will lead to execution.”⁸ Another commentator, Walter Lock, says 2 Timothy is “the portrait of the Christian Teacher face to face with death.”⁹ Lock continues:

It is the letter of a good shepherd who is laying down his life for the sheep (2:10 διὰ τοῦς ἐκλεκτοῦς) to one whom he is training to be in his turn a good shepherd and to lay down his life for the Gospel’s sake, inspired by the thought of “the Good Shepherd” who had laid down His life and had risen from the grave (2:8), to be the strength of all who should suffer for His sake.”¹⁰

Paul is passing on what it looks like to lay down one’s life for the sheep, modeled after Christ Himself. 2 Timothy represents Paul’s last chance to impart to Timothy the vital tasks of ministry which will allow him to confidently anticipate a “crown of righteousness” from the “righteous judge” (2 Tim 4:7–8).

Genre

While 2 Timothy is clearly a letter to a pastor, it is distinct from both Paul’s other epistles and the other PE as well. NT and PE scholar William Mounce comments, “2 Timothy is almost totally unlike the other two letters in the corpus. While it does share a literary style, in almost every other way it is different: it is a personal letter; it is replete with encouragement and personal comments...”¹¹ There is no doubt that Paul’s being in prison and knowing

⁶ Philip Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, vol. 14, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 22.

⁷ Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, 29.

⁸ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 10.

⁹ Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, 79.

¹⁰ Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, 80.

¹¹ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, [general ed.:

he would soon die profoundly shapes the letter.¹² It makes the letter far more intimate. In fact, when read after Paul's death it was sure to function almost like a will, powerfully bringing to mind the last words of a dying man. Professor Larry J. Perkins highlights the deeply personal nature of the letter when he writes, "There is a personal level of engagement not matched in the other two letters as the writer, with himself as a model to be imitated, addresses the recipient about his own conduct relative to their common mission."¹³ The highly personal nature of the letter was sure to stress the importance of Paul's words in Timothy's mind.

The other PE, while addressed to individuals, clearly had a broader church focus. Both 1 Timothy and Titus deal with the qualifications and ministry of elders and deacons (1 Tim 3; Titus 1). 1 Timothy deals with the roles of men and women (1 Tim 2) and the care of widows (1 Tim 5). Titus gives special attention to the various stages of life for individuals within the church (Titus 2) and the way the church should interact with the world (Titus 3). 2 Timothy, on the other hand, is almost completely focused on Timothy's personal responsibility as a pastor. It is written from the context of cherished mentorship and discipleship.¹⁴

Structure

Because the letter is so personal, it makes it difficult to identify the structure. Marshall and Towner comment, "2 Timothy is the most difficult of the Pastoral Epistles to analyze, as is evidenced by the way in which the various commentators differ considerably from one another in how they do it..."¹⁵ The following outline represents a synthesis of various commentators' attempts at identifying the structure of the letter:¹⁶

Bruce M. Metzger; David A. Hubbard; Glenn W. Barker. Old Testament ed.: John D. W. Watts. New Testament ed.: Ralph P. Martin]; Vol. 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2009), lxiii.

¹² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lxiii-lxiv.

¹³ Larry J. Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2017), xx.

¹⁴ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 44.

¹⁵ I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, International Critical Commentary (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 33.

¹⁶ Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles* x-xi; Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 38; Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 58-59; Philip Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, vol. 14, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 152; Linda Belleville, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*, vol. 17 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers,

1. Salutation (1:1–2)
2. Thanksgiving (1:3–5)
3. Boldness and Strength for Ministry (1:6–2:13)
 - a. Purpose and Appeal to Boldness in Ministry (1:6–14)
 - b. Friends and Foes in Ministry (1:15–18)
 - c. Strength from Christ to Endure Suffering (2:1–7)
 - d. Motivation from Christ to Endure Suffering (2:8–13)
4. Facing False Teaching (2:14–26)
 - a. Be an Approved Workman (2:14–19)
 - b. Be Useful to the Master (2:20–26)
5. Difficult Days and People Ahead (3:1–9)
 - a. The Character of False Teachers (3:1–5)
 - b. The Influence of False Teachers (3:6–9)
6. How to Minister in Difficult Times (3:10–4:8)
 - a. Remember Your Models for Ministry (3:10–13)
 - b. Remain in the Scriptures (3:14–17)
 - c. Preach the Word (4:1–5)
 - d. Accept the Baton (4:6–8)
7. Requests and Warnings (4:9–18)
8. Final Greetings (4:19–22)

In light of the outline, it is important to note that Paul’s charge to Timothy to preach the Word falls within his instructions on how to minister in difficult times (3:10–4:8).

Purpose

While the precise structure of the letter may be difficult to nail down, Paul’s purpose is crystal clear. He wants Timothy to make full use of the gift that God has given him through the laying on of hands (2 Tim 1:6). With this purpose statement heading the letter, 2 Timothy as a whole should be understood as fleshing out what it means to “kindle afresh the gift of God.” In fact, 2 Timothy is bookended with similar charges. Paul ends his final charge with the words, “fulfill your ministry” in 4:5. From beginning to end Paul is concerned with Timothy’s stewardship of his pastoral gift.

Themes

There are three dominant themes in 2 Timothy related to Timothy’s fulfillment of his ministry: suffering/opposition, the Word of God, and Paul’s personal passing of the baton.

2009), 22; Aída Besançon Spencer, *2 Timothy and Titus: A New Covenant Commentary*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 77–78.

Suffering and Opposition

After calling Timothy to fulfill his ministry in 1:6, Paul immediately focuses his attention on the persecution that will come with it (1:8). Timothy must not be ashamed. Instead, he needs to be willing to suffer for the sake of Christ, just as Paul has.¹⁷ Knight highlights this important theme, writing, “2 Timothy is especially marked by Paul’s repeated urging of Timothy to suffer with him for the gospel in the strength of God (manifested in God’s gift [1:6], his Spirit [1:7, 14], his power [1:8], and his grace [2:1]; see further 1:6–14; 2:1–13; 3:12; 4:5)...”¹⁸ Timothy needs to understand that suffering is going to be a large part of him fulfilling his ministry.

The Word of God

In addition to suffering in the strength provided by Christ (2:1), Timothy must cling to the Word of God. Once again, Paul highlights this theme from the beginning of the letter. In 1:13ff. he states that Timothy needs to “hold fast to the truth of the gospel.”¹⁹ The suffering and persecution that comes from the gospel is presumably going to tempt Timothy to lay aside or compromise the truth. Timothy must resist that temptation and guard the treasure that is the gospel (1:14).

Beyond guarding the content and implications of the gospel from those who would later them, Timothy must himself be transformed by the Word of God (3:14–17). It is the Word of God that is going to equip Timothy to endure suffering and fulfill his ministry. It is also the Word of God that is going to equip others to live for Christ in difficult times (4:1–5). Commentators Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin summarize the theme of the Word of God in the PE:

For Paul the gospel was a fixed body of knowledge, and it presented a message about Jesus that had led him to an abundant experience of grace and righteous living. Paul’s representatives, Timothy and Titus, were to use this gospel to call wavering followers of Christ away from false teaching and back to true obedience.²⁰

The Word of God is both the content of the gospel message and the means by which people, including Timothy, are transformed into the image of Christ. It is the essential tool of Timothy fulfilling his ministry.

¹⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lxiii

¹⁸ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 11.

¹⁹ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 35.

²⁰ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 47.

Passing the Torch

The final main theme of 2 Timothy is the personal passing of the torch from Paul to Timothy. Mounce summarizes it this way:

Paul was writing to an individual (who was a good friend), not to teach but to encourage, recalling earlier times (2 Tim 3:10–11) and appealing for personal loyalty and loyalty to the gospel (1:6–14; 2:1–13; 3:10–4:5) in the face of suffering (1:8, 16; 2:3; 3:12; 4:5). He spent years proclaiming the gospel and was confident that it would continue after he was gone.²¹

Paul was ensuring the continuing progress of the gospel by stirring Timothy to loyalty, both to Paul and the gospel. Elsewhere, Mounce states:

...the emotional bond between writer and recipient is so strong and so much a part of the message that the letter's intent would be destroyed without it. These details are not literary trappings added to the letters; they are woven into the fabric of the text and are an integral part of what Paul wants to say.²²

For Paul, the continuation of gospel ministry is personal. It involves pouring out one's life into faithful men who will continue the work and pour out their lives as well (2:2). While opposition and persecution will be constant realities, Timothy's focus must be receiving the baton from Paul and faithfully passing it onto others through personal ministry.²³

Climax

2 Timothy 4:1–8 represents the climax of the letter as it sees these three themes converge into a dramatic charge before God and Christ (4:1). Knight comments:

These two keynotes [suffering and passing the torch] are intertwined and come together in a third, which is Paul's charge to Timothy to be the Lord's faithful servant who, relying on the Holy Spirit (1:14) and equipped with the God-breathed scripture, effectively and gently teaches the truth (2:24–26), who unceasingly preaches the word and applies its truths, and who does the work of an evangelist and fulfills his ministry (4:1–5).²⁴

²¹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lxiii.

²² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, lxxxii.

²³ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 44–45.

²⁴ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 11.

Verses 1 and 2 focus on the central place of the Word of God in ministry. Verses 3–5 emphasize the need for Timothy to withstand the persecution and suffering that are associated with gospel ministry. Verses 6–8 call Timothy to follow Paul’s personal example even to the point of death.²⁵ Paul made sure that Timothy would not miss the importance of this final charge by weaving all of these important themes together.

On top of all that, 4:1–5 represents the final charge of Paul’s last epistle in a series of epistles related to church ministry. As such, it serves not only as the climax of 2 Timothy, but the climax of the PE as a whole.²⁶ And since Paul intended the PE to form a basis for church ministry for all time, 2 Timothy 4:1–5 represents the consummate charge for pastoral ministry. Preaching the Word is the fully-distilled fundamental task of pastoral ministry. It is *the* means of the progress of the gospel and the health of Christ’s church.

II

The Unparalleled Charge (4:1)

To ensure that Timothy realizes the importance and responsibility of the task of preaching the Word, Paul issues an unparalleled charge.²⁷ The use of the charge creates a “scene of solemnity”²⁸ to focus Timothy’s attention on the chief responsibility of his pastoral ministry. Beyond that, Paul calls two witnesses to whom Timothy will be accountable in the fulfilling of his charge and invites Timothy to remember key future events. Mounce paints the following picture of the scene, stating, “As Timothy discharges his duties as an evangelist, he does so in full sight of God and of Christ, who is the eschatological judge, and in recognition of Christ’s second coming and of the eschatological consummation of Christ’s kingdom.”²⁹ While Paul has used charges in two other places in the PE (2:14 and 1 Tim 5:21), neither instance is as robust in either the nature of the witnesses or in the description of the task. In fact, the formal nature of the charge, the witnesses, and the specific instructions lead commentators to see this as a kind of “last will and

²⁵ Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, 111.

²⁶ Köstenberger, Andreas J., *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: B &H, 2017), locations 5343–5344, Kindle.

²⁷ Köstenberger, locations 5331–5333.

²⁸ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 571.

²⁹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 571.

testament.”³⁰ Köstenberger appropriately summarizes saying, “Paul’s appeal exceeds all previous charges in solemnity, intensity, and urgency.”³¹

The Charge

The charge begins without a conjunction. The absence of a conjunction (asyndeton) in this context is used to emphasize the solemnity of the charge.³² In addition, asyndeton creates prominence in the discourse.³³ It lets Timothy know that what follows is extremely important. Paul could have used a purpose statement linking 3:17 to 4:2. However in that case, Timothy may have missed the urgency of the following commands serving as the true bedrock of his ministry.³⁴ The interruption and inclusion of the charge shifts the focus of the following commands from situation-specific to ministry non-negotiables. In that light, the commands that follow form an “ordination charge.”³⁵

The verb διαμαρτύρομαι is a “technical term for taking an oath.”³⁶ Additionally, Spicq says the term can be used with an official transfer of office.³⁷ This would let Timothy know that the responsibility to shepherd the church in Ephesus was squarely on his shoulders.³⁸ Perkins adds that the verb would serve as a “strong warning, which has the weight of sworn testimony.”³⁹ If that were not enough, Knight states, “The first person singular form gives the charge a direct and forceful quality and conveys the fact that the charge is given by Paul in his apostolic authority (cf. 1:1).”⁴⁰ All of these factors would alert Timothy to the supreme importance of what Paul was about to say.

The Witnesses

While the weight of Paul’s personal and apostolic appeal was sure to grab Timothy’s attention and likely his obedience as well, Paul does not stop there. He goes on to inform Timothy that this charge is to be received in the

³⁰ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 797; Lock, *Pastoral Epistles*, 111; Cynthia Long Westfall, “A Moral Dilemma? The Epistolary Body Of 2 Timothy,” in *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2010), 246.

³¹ Köstenberger, Kindle Location 5355–5356.

³² Daniel B Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 658.

³³ Westfall, “A Moral Dilemma,” 246.

³⁴ Westfall, “A Moral Dilemma,” 247.

³⁵ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 797.

³⁶ Mounce, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 571.

³⁷ Ceslas Spicq and James D Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) Vol. 2, 798.

³⁸ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 572.

³⁹ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 121.

⁴⁰ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 452.

presence of “God and Christ Jesus.”⁴¹ First, Timothy would have to answer to God as to how faithfully he carried out his commission. Along with the personal appeal, the “recognition of accountability to God would provide Timothy a jarring incentive to obey.”⁴² Second, Timothy will also have to answer to Christ Jesus. His accountability is before the giver of life (1:1), the Lord (1:2), the Savior who abolished death and brought life and immortality (1:10), the One who gives strength (2:1) and has risen from the dead (2:8). God and Christ Jesus are witnesses to Timothy’s charge. They will see everything that Timothy does, and he will answer to them.⁴³ Professor William E. Arp summarizes, “Both the words used and the witnesses mentioned point out the importance of Paul’s charge to Timothy.”⁴⁴ Timothy must fulfill his ministry of preaching the Word.

Description of Christ

Paul does not stop with a mere mention of Christ Jesus. He goes on to describe Jesus with the adjectival participial phrase τοῦ μέλλοντος κρίνειν ζῶντας καὶ νεκρούς. The additional description of Christ is Paul’s way of letting Timothy know that there is something particular about Christ as a witness that he needs to understand: Jesus is the one coming to judge the living and the dead. Christ will judge Timothy because Christ is the One who judges all men and their deeds.⁴⁵

Instead of merely saying that Christ will judge in the future, Paul highlights the fact that Christ is about to judge. Stating the truth this way highlights the “certain fulfilment more strongly than a plain fut[ure].”⁴⁶ Judgment is coming and Timothy must be ready to give an account to the judge of all men.

Paul also thinks it is important for Timothy to know the scope of Christ’s coming judgment. He is coming to judge “the living and the dead.” The judgment in view is the final divine judgment of Christ.⁴⁷ The term has in view “the whole of the human race at the time of the judgment, based on the idea that Christ will judge those alive at the time of the judgment and also those whose death has preceded it (cf. 1 Thess 4:13–17).”⁴⁸ This was Paul’s motivation in persuading men to respond to the gospel in 2 Cor 5:9–11 and

⁴¹ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 452.

⁴² Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 246.

⁴³ William E Arp, “The Priority of Preaching in Problem Times,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 49.

⁴⁴ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 49.

⁴⁵ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 452.

⁴⁶ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 798.

⁴⁷ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 798.

⁴⁸ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 452.

he wanted it to be Timothy's as well.⁴⁹ Timothy, alongside all other believers and unbelievers, are going to stand before Christ. In that day, unbelievers will be eternally condemned, while believers are eternally rewarded. This was to motivate Timothy to faithfully and carefully fulfill his ministry of preaching the word.⁵⁰

His Appearing and Kingdom

In addition to the witnesses, Paul wants Timothy to understand his responsibility in light of two other realities: the appearing and kingdom of Christ. While not a common construction, the accusatives τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν βασιλείαν αὐτοῦ can be used as additional witnesses to Timothy's commission.⁵¹ While these are two events, the emphasis is still clearly on Christ by the use of the genitive "His" in each occurrence. Mounce states, "...it is not the appearing of a world ruler...but that of Christ that is to be feared, and this is the basis of Paul's charge."⁵² Additionally, Christ's future reign "adds weight to the admonition."⁵³ While these events may be threatening to those who do not know Christ, they command reverence to those who do, and, in light of Paul's expectation in verse 8, are also positive. Marshall and Towner explain, "Timothy is being urged to do his work in a way that will lead to recognition and reward at the final judgement when Christ visibly rules."⁵⁴ Timothy is encouraged to fulfill his ministry in light of sure future realities. The opposition and suffering that he is experiencing must not cause him to forget that there is a future appearing and kingdom of Christ that must shape the way he lives, even in difficult times.

III

The Nature of the Task (4:2)

Having provided an unparalleled charge to establish the immense importance of Timothy's ministry before God, Christ, His appearing and His Kingdom, the stage is now set for Paul to call Timothy to the essential task that will define whether or not his ministry is faithful to his Savior and Coming Judge: preaching the Word.

Nine Imperatives

The fact that Paul uses nine imperatives in his charge gives it even more

⁴⁹ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 452.

⁵⁰ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 242.

⁵¹ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 799. See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 204.

⁵² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 572.

⁵³ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 799.

⁵⁴ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 799.

urgency.⁵⁵ Because there are no conjunctions linking the commands, Lea and Griffin say they appear with “machine-gun precision” in verses 2 and 5.⁵⁶ The pragmatic effect of this type of construction would surely cause Timothy to realize the importance of his task.

In addition to urgency, the arrangement of the nine imperatives would alert Timothy to the fact that these commands are not separate but should be taken together.⁵⁷ The charge represents one task fleshed out in the nine imperatives centered on Timothy’s “faithful presentation of the Christian message to the church with the accompanying discipline that is needed for people who are tempted not to listen or to heed it.”⁵⁸ Closing the list with the command to “fulfill your ministry” (4:5) would further establish that Paul was not expecting Timothy to memorize different tasks, but understand them as one package.

The Aorist Tense

The first five—and eight of the nine—commands are in the aorist tense. The stress of the aorist command in this context is one of solemnity and urgency. It is the author’s way of saying, “Make this your top priority!”⁵⁹ The preaching of the Word and the associated commands are given “with the crisp forcefulness of a military order.”⁶⁰ Dr. Arp adds, “They suggest that Timothy was in a crisis situation. These commands clearly spell out what Timothy must do in these difficult times. Paul gives him no choice.”⁶¹ Because Paul is charging Timothy with the task that will define the success of his ministry before God and Christ, it is entirely appropriate to use such urgent imperatives.⁶²

Priority of Preaching

Once again, the number of imperatives is not meant to suggest that Timothy had a variety of different responsibilities to accomplish. Preaching was to be the priority of Timothy’s ministry. Preaching is the first command that Paul gives, and the rest of the imperatives that follow elaborate what it means. Knight summarizes by stating, “The first imperative, ‘preach the word’ (κηρύξον τὸν λόγον), plays a dominant role, not only by being first but also by being amplified by the second imperative ‘be ready in season and out of season,’ and by the prepositional phrase with δι’ ὅραμα at the end of this

⁵⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 555.

⁵⁶ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 241.

⁵⁷ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 799; Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 451.

⁵⁸ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 799.

⁵⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 720.

⁶⁰ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 242.

⁶¹ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 49.

⁶² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 74.

verse.”⁶³ The ministry of the Word is Paul’s focus from beginning to end, starting with, “preach the Word,” (4:2) and ending with, “do the work of an evangelist,” (4:5) before summarizing the commands in the final, “fulfill your ministry.” Sandwiched in between are references to “sound doctrine,” “teachers,” and “the truth” (4:3–4). The entire context of the charge has to do with Timothy’s use of the Word in the lives of those in the church (cf. 2:15).

As a result, “be ready,” and “reprove, rebuke, exhort” are properly understood as part of the preaching task. These four imperatives “define more precisely how this proclamation will find expression.”⁶⁴ The task of preaching the Word is the means by which Timothy will fulfill all these commands.⁶⁵ The readiness that Timothy needed was in reference to preaching the Word. The reproving, rebuking, and exhorting that he was to do was in his preaching of the Word. Timothy can do those things because that is what the Word is designed by God to accomplish (3:16–17).⁶⁶ With these observations in mind the interpreter is in a more suitable place to define the preaching task that Timothy would have understood.

Defining “Preaching”

Seeing the priority of preaching as the essential task of Paul’s charge, Timothy would have been careful to carry it out just as Paul described. The first place Timothy would start in understanding the task would be the term preaching itself. The word means, “to make public declarations, proclaim aloud.”⁶⁷ In the NT, the verb κηρύσσω “frequently describes the public communication of the gospel. The cognate terms κήρυξ (‘herald’; 1 Tim 2:7; 2 Tim 1:11) and κήρυγμα (‘proclamation’; 2 Tim 4:17) also occur in the PE.”⁶⁸

Preaching “indicates a public and authoritative announcement which demands compliance.”⁶⁹ It is the action of a herald.⁷⁰ The concept of a herald is important, and Timothy would have immediately understood that the message he is to proclaim is not his own. Pastor and professor, Raymond Zorn, explains:

Preaching therefore is the work of someone the King has called to

⁶³ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 453.

⁶⁴ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 222; See also Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 243.

⁶⁵ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 242.

⁶⁶ Alastair Campbell, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (1992): 124.

⁶⁷ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 543.

⁶⁸ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 74.

⁶⁹ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 49.

⁷⁰ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 74.

be his herald. That means that he doesn't come to people with his own message, but rather, with the message of another, his King.

So he doesn't have to be original, or rack his brains in order to present something novel or entertaining. Rather, he is only required to be faithful, i.e., to pass on to his hearers exactly what the King wants his subjects to hear.⁷¹

In light of this heralding task, it makes perfect sense that Paul repeatedly encourages Timothy, throughout both of his letters, to continue in the Word (e.g., 2 Tim 3:14ff.). Timothy's ministry faithfulness will depend on his ability to accurately proclaim the message of another. If Timothy exchanges God's message for his own, he would cease to be fulfilling his charge.

The heralding task also connotes authority. Not the authority of the herald himself, but the authority of the one who sends the herald. As a result, preaching must include boldness and directness in calling people to respond. Zorn continues:

So the herald does not come with his, "I think"; or "It might be a good idea"; or "May I suggest"; or even "Let me share with you...." For it is not his message nor his ideas that he is bringing to God's people. It is nothing less than the King's Word, and therefore the herald proclaims "Thus says the Lord!"⁷²

It would be inappropriate for Timothy to offer God's Word as merely a suggestion or a good idea. The task of the herald is to authoritatively call people to respond. If Timothy fails to call people to respond, he would cease to be fulfilling his charge. It is the combination of another's message and another's authority that differentiate preaching from other forms of oral communication.

Preaching, even in this context, is distinct from teaching (cf. 4:2). Teaching (διδάχῃ) is a tool of preaching, but it does not constitute preaching. Teaching focuses primarily on explanation and helping people understand concepts or processes, and it may not require a response. Teaching is an important tool of preaching but is not a substitute. Theologian J.I. Packer says, "preaching is more than teaching—not less, but more! Preaching is essentially teaching plus application (invitation, direction, summons), and where that plus is lacking something less than preaching takes place."⁷³ Paul

⁷¹ Raymond O. Zorn, "Preach the Word," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 7, no. 1 (1991): 23.

⁷² Zorn, "Preach the Word" 23.

⁷³ J. I. Packer, "From The Scriptures To The Sermon I. Some Perspectives On Preaching," *Ashland Theological Journal* 22 (1990): 45.

and Timothy would agree.

Preaching is also not a conversation. A conversation involves an exchange of ideas through dialogue. Preaching is one-way communication. That does not mean that Timothy will never engage in dialogue with either believers or even opponents, it simply means that the primary task Timothy has to accomplish is to relay an authoritative message that demands a response.

Packer offers the following definition of preaching:

Christian preaching, I urge, is the event of God bringing to an audience a Bible-based, Christ-related, life-impacting message of instruction and direction from himself through the words of a spokesperson...it views God as speaking his own message via a messenger whose sole aim is to receive and relay what God gives.⁷⁴

Packer defines it well. The content comes from God through a spokesman and makes demands on the life of the listener. This is what Timothy would have understood Paul to mean when he said, “preach the word.” Timothy would see himself as a servant and mouthpiece for relaying God’s message to God’s people.⁷⁵ Packer continues to paint the picture of the ideal preacher:

He has resisted the temptation to stand in front of his text, as it were, speaking for it as if it could not speak for itself, and putting himself between it and the congregation; instead, he is making it his business to focus everyone’s attention on the text, to stand behind it rather than in front of it, to become its servant, and to let it deliver its message through him.⁷⁶

Paul is charging Timothy to relay God’s authoritative Word to His people and call them to respond.

Defining “the Word”

After establishing the activity of preaching, Timothy’s next concern would be the content of preaching. Paul calls him to preach “the Word.” While most contemporary readers may see this expression as equivalent to “preach the Bible,” Timothy would have had something more specific in mind: the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications.

The first relevant passage to defining “Word” is 2 Tim 1:8-11. Paul exhorts Timothy to not be ashamed of the “testimony” of their Lord (1:8) but join in him in suffering for “the gospel.” The “testimony of our Lord” is equivalent to “the gospel.” In verses 9–10, Paul goes on to articulate the

⁷⁴ Packer, “From The Scriptures,” 42–43.

⁷⁵ Packer, “From the Scriptures,” 48.

⁷⁶ Packer, “From the Scriptures,” 48.

gospel. Christ Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (1:10). In verse 11, Paul says it was for the gospel that he was appointed a κηρυξ, or “preacher.” So, from the outset of the letter, Timothy would see the connection between preaching and the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

Another key text in identifying the “Word” of 4:2 would be 2 Timothy 2:8–9. There Paul encourages Timothy to “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel” (2:8). Once again, the gospel message focuses on Jesus Christ. Paul then says that he suffers hardship for the sake of the gospel to the point of imprisonment, but the λόγος, or “word” of God is not imprisoned.” Paul is using “gospel” and “λόγος of God” interchangeably. Therefore, when Paul charges Timothy to “preach the Word,” Timothy would understand it to mean not, “explain the Bible,” but, “authoritatively call people to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The relationship between the Old Testament and the gospel is alluded to in 2 Timothy 2:8–9 but becomes more evident in 2 Timothy 3:14–17. In 2:8–9, Christ was described as the descendant of David, a clear OT reference. In 3:14–15, Paul states that Timothy has known “the sacred writings” from childhood, another clear reference to the OT. Furthermore, Paul goes on to make the statement that it is these OT Scriptures that “are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (15). What Paul is saying is that the gospel message is contained in the OT. Therefore, Timothy does not have to make the choice between the OT or the gospel in his preaching.

A proper preaching of the OT will include the gospel. Mounce states, “Although Paul uses different terms to describe the OT and the gospel, they all refer to the message of God and need to be interpreted together. Timothy’s ministry centers on Scripture: the OT and the gospel message.”⁷⁷ The OT and the gospel are not two different messages. They are together the “word of God.” Perkins agrees when he writes, “The message here [in 4:2] would be the gospel. The article could be construed anaphorically, probably referring to things taught to Timothy by the writer (3:14) and the contents of πᾶσα γραφή (3:16).”⁷⁸ Preaching the gospel does not exclude the OT, it actually relies on it.

The implications for Timothy’s preaching are striking. He is told that *all* Scripture, the written communication of God, is profitable. The only Scripture Timothy has is the OT. He is then told to preach the “word,” the gospel message about Jesus Christ. So, the connection Timothy would make is that to accurately preach the OT is to proclaim the saving message of Jesus

⁷⁷ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 555.

⁷⁸ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 222.

Christ. Preaching, even OT preaching, must be centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ. The OT does not need to be reinterpreted in light of Christ, it has to be properly interpreted to show how each OT writer was consciously testifying about Christ. As a result, true preaching that fulfills Paul's charge must be Christ-centered. Packer explains:

For the New Testament, a Christian spokesman preaches (kerusso) only when some aspect of the God-given message concerning Christ (the kerygma) is the content of the utterance. This is not our usual modern way of looking at the matter, but it is the biblical way, and it is always best to follow the Bible.⁷⁹

Preaching that does not focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ is not true preaching. If Timothy were to expound the OT text without showing its relation to Christ, he would not be fulfilling his charge.

The Means of Preaching

Preaching the Word means authoritatively calling people to respond to the gospel message of Jesus Christ, even from the OT. From here, Paul gives several more instructions intended to explain the means of true preaching.

Be Ready

First, Timothy must "be ready." In this context the word means, "to be present in readiness to discharge a task."⁸⁰ The idea is that Timothy is prepared at every moment to preach the Word.⁸¹ Here, the verb may also have the idea of "keep at it."⁸²

In Season and Out of Season

Paul then adds two adverbs indicating the time when Timothy needs to be ready. The adverbs *ἐνκαιρως* and *ἄκαιρως* are a wordplay on *καιρός*.⁸³ Timothy is to be ready in good times and not good times. The reference here is undoubtedly geared toward the attitudes of his hearers. Timothy needs to preach the word when people want to hear it and even when they do not.⁸⁴

It is probable that Paul has the Greek rhetoricians in mind when he issues this second command. It was common knowledge that, "Speakers should

⁷⁹ Packer, "From The Scriptures," 43.

⁸⁰ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 418.

⁸¹ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 800.

⁸² J. N. D. Kelly, *The Pastoral Epistles*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 1963), 206.

⁸³ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 453.

⁸⁴ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 453–454.

choose the time which will be most favourable from the point of view of the people whom they hope to persuade.”⁸⁵ Timothy is being told that the condition of his hearers should not be the determining factor regarding when to preach the Word. John Calvin called for pastors and other believers to have a “ruthless persistence” when it comes to preaching the gospel.⁸⁶ The preaching of Christ’s gospel “will create its own rightness of time.”⁸⁷

Paul has a pastoral concern for Timothy knowing that there will often be a temptation to find an excuse for why the timing is not right. Zorn explains:

In the pulpit the temptation will be “to trim sail,” to avoid the risk of giving people what they need to hear if in doing so we might offend them. It’s so easy to rationalize and temporize by regarding the present time as inopportune, thus putting the matter off till later, but in doing so, finding that the more opportune time never comes.⁸⁸

Timothy must resist the temptation to shrink back and boldly proclaim the Word even when people are not receptive.

Directed toward Life Change

The reason Timothy needs boldness in proclamation and readiness regardless of the condition of his hearers is that the message he proclaims is going to make demands on people’s lives. Timothy is not being called to teaching information that people can take or leave. He is relaying the very words of God calling people to repentance and change.

It must be remembered that these next three imperatives have the preaching task in view. As Timothy preaches, he will need to “confront the false teachers and their teaching, rebuke those who will not listen to him, and exhort those who will listen and follow the true gospel.”⁸⁹ Packer explains the ministry of the Word this way:

[The] preacher labors to let the text talk through him about that with which, like every other text in the Bible, it is ultimately dealing—God and man in relationship, one way or another... There is no doubt about the purpose of what is happening: response to God is being called for. The preacher, as spokesman

⁸⁵ Howard and Marshall, 800.

⁸⁶ Jean Calvin, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians; The Epistles to Timothy, Titus And Philemon* (Edinburgh; London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964).

⁸⁷ Philip E Thompson, “2 Timothy 4:1-5,” *Interpretation* 56, no. 4 (October 2002): 422.

⁸⁸ Zorn, “Preach the Word,” 24.

⁸⁹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 573.

for the text, is seeking not only to inform and persuade, but to evoke an appropriate answer to what God through the text is saying and showing.”⁹⁰

Timothy’s preaching must be marked by calling his hearers to respond to the truths of the gospel.

Parallel to 2 Timothy 3:16–17

The chief reason that Timothy’s preaching must call for change is because God has designed His Word to accomplish life change. While many go to 2 Timothy 3:16–17 to establish the inspiration of Scripture, the verses actually have much more to say. They not only say what the Word *is*: the God-breathed product of God; but also what the Word *does*: it teaches, reproves, corrects, and trains so that Timothy and anyone else would be equipped for every good work. Because Timothy is preaching a Word that *does something*, if he wants to be an unashamed workman who rightly handles it, he must also call people to *do something* in his preaching. True preaching of the Word does not only explain what the text says but calls people to do what the text is intended to accomplish.

Possibly because of an unfortunate chapter break, “Most modern writers see a major break at 4:1, but this separates the charge that Timothy preach (4:1–2) from the ultimate reason he is to do so (3:16–17).”⁹¹ Timothy would not have missed the connection. Having been told the source and purpose of all Scripture, he is then told to “preach this inspired and profitable Word in order that other men might become complete and equipped. Because the Word is profitable, it is ‘preachable.’ What should Timothy do in the difficult times in which he is ministering? He must preach the profitable Word!”⁹² Timothy’s task and authority come from God through His Word.

Additionally, there is an even more direct correspondence between what the Word does and what Timothy is asked to do. Mounce highlights the parallel, stating, “The four main imperatives (Preach! Confront! Rebuke! Exhort!) loosely parallel the four prepositional phrases in 3:16 [teaching, reproof, correcting, training in righteousness], especially if “exhort” is encouragement to live out the gospel (i.e., “righteousness”).”⁹³ More than a loose parallel, two cognates are repeated in both passages: διδασκαλίαν (3:16) and διδασκῆν (4:2); and ἐλεγμόν (3:16) and ἔλεγχον (4:2). Timothy would

⁹⁰ Packer, “From The Scriptures,” 49.

⁹¹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 555.

⁹² Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 53–54.

⁹³ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 573.

instantly see his charge is to proclaim and ask people to live in light of the inspired and profitable Word.

Reprove

The first imperative Paul gives in this light is “reprove.” The word means, “to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing, *convict, convince*.”⁹⁴ The false teachers and those who have believed them would be in view.⁹⁵ The same word is used of sinning elders (1 Tim 5:20), opponents (Titus 1:9), and false teachers (Titus 1:13).⁹⁶ Timothy is charged to boldly confront those in error and show them that they are wrong.⁹⁷ God’s Word exposes sin. True preaching must likewise show people their sin.

Rebuke

The second imperative Paul gives regarding life change is “rebuke.” The word means, “to express strong disapproval of someone, *rebuke, reprove, censure*.”⁹⁸ The word has some overlap with reprove. The emphasis of reprove is the exposing of sin. The emphasis of rebuke is calling people to stop.⁹⁹ Dr. Arp further highlights the difference, stating, “Timothy is to point out their sins [reprove] to his hearers that they might stop sinning on their own. However, if they continue to sin, he must rebuke them and warn them to stop sinning.”¹⁰⁰ God’s Word does not only expose sin; it calls people to stop sinning. True preaching must call people to stop sinning.

Exhort

The final of the three imperatives Paul gives regarding life change is “exhort.” The word means, “to urge strongly, *appeal to, urge, exhort, encourage*.”¹⁰¹ The focus of this command is much more positive. This command is geared to those who do listen so that they might be encouraged to live out the truths of the gospel.¹⁰² God’s Word does not only expose sin and call people to stop bad behavior; it also urges right behavior. True preaching must call people to positively live out what God’s Word intends.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ Arndt et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 315.

⁹⁵ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 574.

⁹⁶ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 51.

⁹⁷ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 454

⁹⁸ Arndt et al., *Greek-English Lexicon*, 384.

⁹⁹ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 454.

¹⁰⁰ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 51.

¹⁰¹ Arndt et al., *Greek-English Lexicon* 765.

¹⁰² Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 574.

¹⁰³ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 801.

These three imperatives taken together show that the essence of preaching is calling people to live differently in light of God's Word. Packer summarizes:

There is no doubt about the perspective of what is happening: the preaching is practical... What is being said would not be preaching at all were it not life-centered. Communication from the text is only preaching as it is applied and brought to bear on the listeners with a life-changing thrust. Without this... it would merely be a lecture—that is, a discourse designed merely to clear people's heads and stock their minds, but not in any direct way to change their lives."¹⁰⁴

True preaching must be directed toward life change. For Timothy to fulfill his ministry before God and Christ Jesus, he must preach the Word in a way that calls people to respond and live differently as a result.

The Manner of Preaching

Timothy's initial charge is not quite complete. There is also an appropriate manner with which he must discharge his responsibility: "with all patience and instruction."¹⁰⁵ This prepositional phrase does not merely modify the command to exhort, but surely applies to the previous three commands,¹⁰⁶ and possibly even all five.¹⁰⁷ Patience and instruction are to be the manner in which Timothy calls people to change. To call people to change without patience and instruction leads to many problems. Commentator Donald Guthrie writes, "Christian reproof without the grace of long-suffering has often led to a harsh, censorious attitude intensely harmful to the cause of Christ.... To rebuke without instruction is to leave the root cause of error untouched."¹⁰⁸ Preaching without patience does not take into account the time that is often needed for change to take place. Preaching without teaching can fail to show why people must change and leave them ill-equipped to know the practical steps that will help them accomplish change.

All Patience

The word μακροθυμία, "patience," refers to "that which is required by the tasks commanded and by the need for persistence and forbearance when dealing with sinful people in general and particularly when dealing with the

¹⁰⁴ Packer, "From The Scriptures," 49.

¹⁰⁵ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 223.

¹⁰⁶ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 223.

¹⁰⁷ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 801.

¹⁰⁸ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 167.

difficulties that the next verse speaks of.”¹⁰⁹ The inclusion of the word “all” makes the necessity of this quality even more pronounced. In every situation, regardless of the attitude of his hearers, Timothy must be patient. In the context of difficult times, it is also likely that Paul has in mind a “spirit that will never retaliate.”¹¹⁰

Patience in preaching does not mean that Timothy is to shrink back from calling people to the often-dramatic change that God is demanding. However, it does mean that there is an understanding that change takes time and progress may be incremental. Timothy must not be frustrated by the response of his hearers, either by their rejection or their slowness to respond. He must be willing to patiently continue calling people to live as God intends.

Instruction

The word διδασκαλία, “teaching,” in this context refers to the “the activity of teaching, *teaching, instruction*.”¹¹¹ Once again, this highlights that teaching and preaching are distinct. Teaching is a tool of preaching. Teaching is the process by which the teacher can get his hearer from point A to point B. Teaching involves explanation and strategies for helping people understand the truth.¹¹² Correction and rebuke will not be profitable without good teaching.¹¹³ Timothy must labor hard at presenting the Word of God in ways that his hearers can understand.

In contemporary circles, the use of teaching techniques in preaching is often disdained. There are those that feel preaching must be only explanation from behind a pulpit and any other teaching strategies or techniques are viewed as gimmicks that reflect a lack of confidence in the power of the God’s Word.¹¹⁴ However, Paul encourages Timothy to use teaching techniques in preaching. Paul wants Timothy to bring people face to face with what God says and what God wants them to do. There is a sense in

¹⁰⁹ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 454.

¹¹⁰ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 52.

¹¹¹ Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 241.

¹¹² Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 223.

¹¹³ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 243.

¹¹⁴ For example, John Piper states: “I think the use of video and drama largely is a token of unbelief in the power of preaching. And I think that, to the degree that pastors begin to supplement their preaching with this entertaining spice to help people stay with them and be moved and get helped, it’s going to backfire... It’s going to communicate that preaching is weak, preaching doesn’t save, preaching doesn’t hold, but entertainment does... I believe in drama. I believe in the power of drama. But let drama be drama! And let preaching be preaching!” John Piper, “What Are Your Thoughts on Drama and Movie Clips In Church Services?,” *Desiring God*, July 15, 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-are-your-thoughts-on-drama-and-movie-clips-in-church-services>.

which Paul is telling Timothy to use whatever means necessary to get them to see what God requires and respond. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ Himself used figures of speech, illustrations, examples, stories, and even object lessons. Christ's desire was to help people clearly understand and respond to the truth.

Teaching in preaching requires that the preacher knows his audience. He knows the hurdles they may have to responding to the truth and aims to address those issues. He knows what material may be difficult to understand and carefully chooses words and illustrations that will make the truth accessible. The content of the preaching never changes. Yet, the teaching methods should change based on the audience. For example, a sermon on Ephesians 4:25 should call all people to "speak the truth." However, the explanations, illustrations, and applications would change depending on if the audience was adults or children. True preaching will use instruction to help people respond to God's Word.

IV

The Sobering Times

Having charged Timothy to the vital task of his ministry, preaching the gospel, Paul now provides an additional reason to preach by highlighting the troubling times ahead whose symptoms are already present.

Reason

The $\gamma\alpha\rho$ that begins verse 3 clearly indicates the reason for the preceding commands.¹¹⁵ Knight explains, "The imperatives in the preceding verse are warranted not only by the demands of the ministry of the word but in particular by the tendency of some professing believers to fall away from the truth."¹¹⁶ Preaching is necessary to combat false teaching and exhort believers to remain in the truth.

Paul referred to convenient and inconvenient times in verse 2 and now highlights a particularly inconvenient time for preaching the gospel: when no one wants to hear it.¹¹⁷ In fact, Paul says there is going to not only be a rejection of the truth, but an accumulation of teachers that will teach the opposite. The key reason for rejecting the gospel message is their unwillingness to "endure sound doctrine."

Sound Doctrine

It is noteworthy that Paul does not begin by saying they reject the gospel message, though certainly they do (4:4). In the context of the PE the terms

¹¹⁵ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 223.

¹¹⁶ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 454.

¹¹⁷ Knight *Pastoral Epistles*, 454–455.

εὐαγγέλιον (“gospel”) and διδασκαλία (“doctrine”) are near synonyms.¹¹⁸ However, when the terms are used in close proximity there is often a distinction being made between the content of the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον) and the doctrinal formulations or demands of the gospel (διδασκαλία).¹¹⁹ Those that reject the gospel are particularly loathe the demands that the gospel makes on their lives.¹²⁰ This fits perfectly in the context of what Paul has been charging Timothy to do in preaching: make demands on people’s lives from the Word of God. If preaching was merely explanation without a call to response, there would likely be no objection. However, preaching makes demands. It calls people to flee from sin and pursue righteousness. This is what makes the gospel so offensive.

V

The Personal Appeal (4:5)

In verse 5, Paul directs his attention back to Timothy with the emphatic σὺ δέ.¹²¹ Timothy is to be a contrast to the false teachers and those that follow them.¹²² The commands that follow do not represent another set of responsibilities distinct from verse 2. Like the five previous imperatives, the last four continue the charge to preach the Word.¹²³

Be Sober

The command to “be sober” calls for alertness to the dangers around one’s self.¹²⁴ It also connotes control over one’s emotions, not being subject to “rashness of foolishness.”¹²⁵ In the context, this is likely a warning to Timothy to not be swayed by those whose itching ears are clamoring for something other than the gospel message applied to their lives. Timothy must remain focused on preaching the Word.

Suffer Hardship

The idea of suffering hardship harkens back to one of Paul’s initial commands about joining him in suffering hardship for the sake of the gospel (cf. 1:8). Suffering comes with the territory of gospel ministry.¹²⁶ Timothy

¹¹⁸ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 575.

¹¹⁹ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 42.

¹²⁰ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 244.

¹²¹ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, xxvii.

¹²² Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 803.

¹²³ Philip Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, vol. 14, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 205.

¹²⁴ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 245.

¹²⁵ Perkins, *The Pastoral Letters*, 225.

¹²⁶ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 172.

should expect hardship when ministering in a context where people do not want to hear the message he is charged to proclaim.¹²⁷

The Work of an Evangelist

The last command Paul gives before summarizing them all in “fulfill your ministry,” is the call to “do the work of evangelist.” Many see this as a reference to Timothy’s gift from God described in 1:6.¹²⁸ This may likely be the case. However, that should not lead one to think that Paul is charging Timothy with a completely different task.

When many today hear the term evangelist they immediately think of someone who preaches the gospel to unbelievers in hopes of them being saved. D.A. Carson explains:

I suspect that most of us read 2 Tim 4:5, “Do the work of an evangelist,” along some such lines as the following. Paul tells Timothy, in effect, that even when he is rightly involved in preaching, teaching, instructing, correcting, even when he is known for keeping his head in all situations and learning to endure hardship, he must not forget to do the work of an evangelist... Make a priority of evangelism. Herald the gospel to outsiders, whether one-on-one, in small groups, or in larger contexts—this is what evangelism is, and this is what an evangelist does. In the midst of diverse and demanding ministry, do not forget to engage in evangelism.¹²⁹

However, this is probably not the way Paul is using the term, at least not exclusively. Acts 21 gives Philip the designation, “evangelist” (8). The information provided by Acts that relates to this title is found in chapter 8. While Philip is definitely used by God to help his hearers believe in Jesus,¹³⁰ evangelism, from the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι, is broader. Evangelism is not about the state of the hearer, it is about the activity of the evangelist. The heart of what Philip does in Acts is interpret Scripture.¹³¹ Therefore, the role of an evangelist is to “proclaim Jesus and to do so by the interpretation of scripture.”¹³² This can occur with unbelievers, in hopes of saving them, or with believers, in hopes of strengthening them to continue in the faith.

¹²⁷ Arp, “Priority of Preaching,” 173.

¹²⁸ Marshall and Towner, *Pastoral Epistles*, 804.

¹²⁹ D.A. Carson, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” *Themelios* 39, no. 1 (April 2014): 2.

¹³⁰ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 457.

¹³¹ Alastair Campbell, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (1992): 123.

¹³² Campbell, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” 123.

Preaching that Exalts Christ

Evangelism is not limited to unbelievers. Properly understood it encompasses all of gospel ministry.

For Timothy, preaching the Word and calling people to live in light of the gospel is to do the work of an evangelist. Campbell summarizes:

If it be objected that much of what the scriptures do, and of what Timothy is called to do through them, looks more like what we would call teaching than evangelism [in the modern sense], then I would reply that that is exactly the point! The work of an evangelist is not an additional duty that Timothy is being asked to take up. On the contrary the work of an evangelist sums up the preaching and teaching activity just described, since the evangelist is to be defined not by his audience but by his message, a message which comes as teaching, proof, correction or appeal depending on where it ‘finds’ its hearers. Unbelievers need to be taught, if they are to be made wise unto salvation, and backsliding believers need to be evangelized, corrected by the gospel, if they are not to lose their salvation.¹³³

Evangelism is not a different task than preaching the Word. The work of evangelism is to be accomplished by the local church leader, not a specialist.¹³⁴ Timothy is an evangelist, not because he goes from place to place trying to win converts, but because he continually calls people, believers and unbelievers, to live in light of the gospel. Evangelism is simply gospel ministry: “ministry that is faithful to the gospel, that announces the gospel and applies the gospel and encourages people to believe the gospel and thus live out the gospel.”¹³⁵

Fulfill Your Ministry

Paul ends his charge with a final summary command, “fulfill your ministry.” By the time Timothy read this final command he would have a full-fledged understanding of his charge. He was to continually engage in the ministry of proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ, calling people to live in light of its demands, and expecting hardship. This is what it means to do the work of an evangelist. This is what it would mean for Timothy to fulfill his ministry.¹³⁶

¹³³ Campbell, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” 124–125.

¹³⁴ Campbell, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” 127.

¹³⁵ Carson, “Do the Work of an Evangelist,” 3.

¹³⁶ Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 458.

VI Implications

Modern preaching needs to be evaluated in light of Scripture. It is not enough to continue a model that has always been done. In order to faithfully fulfill the ministry that God has given to each pastor, one must preach the way God intended.

Much of modern preaching falls into one of two extremes: explanation without application (lecture) or application without explanation (motivational stories).¹³⁷ Depending on one's church experience they have probably had a steady diet of one or the other leading them to either emulate their traditional style or swing to the other end of the spectrum in reaction against their traditional style.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 calls for balance: explanation of the text that calls people to live differently. It is only God's Word that can be preached with authority. That authority must then be applied to the hearer in more than just two minutes tacked on to the end of a sermon.¹³⁸ Packer summarizes what is needed:

To sum up, then: preaching is marked by authority when the message is a relaying of what is taught by the text, when active response to it is actively sought, when it is angled in a practical, applicatory way that involves the listeners' lives, and when God himself is encountered through it.¹³⁹

God works powerfully through His Word to affect change in His people. Therefore, the preacher boldly proclaims and applies that Word trusting God will work. The preacher is truly biblical when he does not just say what the text says, but he does what the text does.

¹³⁷ Packer, "From The Scriptures," 45.

¹³⁸ Packer, "From The Scriptures," 49.

¹³⁹ Packer, "From The Scriptures," 50.

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Bruce Jamieson III. *The Path to Being a Pastor: A Guide For the Aspiring*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021. 185 pp. \$17.99 (paper).

Austin Thompson*

The Path to Being a Pastor is a concise work that seeks to serve as a guide for men who aspire to be pastors. The book is divided into three sections that represent the progressive steps a man must follow on his way to serve Christ as a pastor in the local church: finding the path, walking the path, and approaching the destination (9–10). Each chapter is built on an imperative that represents an important aspect of the journey towards pastoral ministry (12). In the preface, the author puts forth two primary goals. First, the author states that the book's goal is to offer counsel men who aspire to be pastors (12) and provide them with helpful bearings as they start down the road (13). Second, the author states that his personal goal to provoke men to study the Scriptures, self-examination, prayer, and counsel from others as they travel down the road (13). The analysis that follows will consider the effectiveness of the book in view of its stated goals.

Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of this book is the author's discussion on aspiration versus calling in the opening chapter. In an age where mystical subjectivism is on the rise, it is all too common to hear statements such as, "God is calling me to be a pastor," or, "Am I called to be a pastor?" This is where Jamieson helpfully brings the conversation back to the language of Scripture to provide clarity. When it comes to the office of pastor, the biblical terminology used of those who seek to serve Christ in that manner is *aspiration* and not *calling*. He explains that the Bible uses *calling* to describe God's effectual act of saving sinners and the life of holiness that accompanies that call (25). Instead, men should view their pursuit of pastoral ministry as the Apostle Paul did—through the lens of *aspiration* or *desire* (1 Tim 3:1). The

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author proceeds to offer compelling evidence that this change in posture results in a more biblical, more humble, more accurate, more fruitful, and more freeing pursuit of the office of pastor (28–30). This simple but crucial redirection positively flavors the entire book and is enough to merit its addition to any pastoral library.

One potential hindrance to the book achieving its first stated goal of providing counsel to men who aspire to be pastors is that the author's statements about his own aspirations to become and to address a specific type of pastor/elder in the book may alienate those who aspire to a different type of pastor/elder. In the first chapter, Jamieson does an excellent job of explaining the interchangeable nature of the terms used in Scripture to refer to the office of pastor. 'Elder', 'overseer', and 'shepherd' are all words that can be used synonymously with 'pastor' (21–22). He rightfully asserts, "To be a pastor is to fulfill the office of elder. Every pastor is an elder, and every elder pastors" (22). As a result, this book could have been appropriately titled, "The Path to Being an *Elder*." The author continues this discussion by noting that the New Testament does make a distinction between types of elders in the local church (22). There are pastors/elders that the church supports financially and others they do not (Gal 6:6). There are pastors/elders who are especially given to the task of preaching and teaching, and there are those who are not (1 Tim 5:17-18). While this is the case, the author is transparent about his emphasis on the former type of elder. Concerning his aspiration, he writes:

Let's begin with how I am evidently unqualified to write this book. The title is *The Path to Being a Pastor*, and I am not *the* pastor of a church. I aspire to be a senior pastor, but that remains an aspiration. I have not yet completed the path that this book maps. If that breaks the deal for you, I understand...But if you're still with me, here are two factors that temper my lack of ethos. First, though I am not *the* pastor of my church, I am *a* pastor. And I spend a decent chunk of my time mentoring men who aspire to be pastors (11).

Concerning his intended readership, he explains:

Like our church's internship, this book is for men who aspire to be pastors...And the men I chiefly have in mind are those who desire to vocationally serve a local church as that church's primary preacher...The further your goal is from serving as a full-time preaching pastor, the less relevant this book will be. But if you want to be a senior pastor, you're in the bull's-eye (12).

Despite the author's disclaimer regarding his purpose, the preface's emphasis

on a specific type of pastor/elder causes confusion throughout the book any time the word pastor/elder is used. For example, is it correct to understand the author as saying every aspiring pastor that he mentors has as their ultimate goal serving as the senior pastor of a church? And if not, how would the reader discern that distinction in aspiration with each appearance of the term pastor/elder throughout the book unless specifically noted? This confusion is unfortunate, as most of the book contains well-written, biblical counsel that applies to both vocational and lay pastors/elders. Perhaps the book should have been titled, “The path to being a senior, full-time preaching pastor,” and not, “The path to being a pastor.”

A simple solution to this issue would have been to adopt a different structure. The first part of the book could have been addressed to all men aspiring to the office of elder, while the second part of the book could have been addressed to men with the specific desire to serve as a senior pastor immersed in preaching and teaching. This is preferable for a few reasons.

First, all pastors/elders are required to meet the same qualifications and share most of their responsibilities in shepherding the flock of God among them (1 Tim 3:1–7, 1 Pet 5:1–4). This would help aspiring pastors/elders identify the areas of overlap between vocational and lay elders. Second, a two-part structure would help shed light on the areas where the two types of pastors/elders are different. It would become clear to some that they would only walk part of the path that the book lays out, while others would continue the path to fulfilling the book’s primary purpose for being written. Third, there is always the possibility that men who do not initially aspire to serve vocationally as the primary preacher/teacher of a local church might cultivate the desire to do so later. In this case the book’s structure would do less to alienate them in part one and provide them with insight into what vocational service might look like in part two should their aspirations expand. While the book is effective as is, a structure change could go a long way to maximize its benefit for all who aspire.

When it comes to the author’s goal of provoking men to the deeper study of Scripture, self-examination, prayer, and counsel from others, the book is a great success. Each chapter in the book addresses a variety of important topics for aspiring pastors to consider. Though not comprehensive in nature,¹ each treatment provides enough Scripture, illustrations, and practical wisdom to help aspiring men to build a strong foundation as they seek to meet and continuously exercise the necessary qualifications and responsibilities of the pastoral office. Exhortations such as “Marry wisely,” “Serve outside the spotlight,” and “Improve your trials” are helpful reminders for areas of life that can be neglected for disciplines like Bible study, preaching, and prayer.

¹ The author provides this disclaimer in the preface, stating, “I won’t even get to every room in the house. (No chapter on evangelism!)” (13).

In the chapter, “If you can, make the most of seminary,” the author upholds the value of seminary education without laying an undue burden on those who are unable to take advantage of higher education. Overall, the counsel provided in the book sufficiently fulfills its purpose for being written.

In conclusion, I would heartily recommend this book to any man who aspires to be a pastor/elder. As a graduate from seminary, I know men who share Jamieson’s aspiration to be the primary preaching pastor/elder of a local church. This book would be a tremendous resource to them on their journey towards that goal. However, I also know faithful men who aspire to serve the Lord Jesus Christ as a lay elder. In their case, I would still recommend this book while also pointing them to the author’s disclaimer in the preface regarding his distinction.

Harold L. Senkbeil. *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019. 290 pp. \$21.99.

Timothy Ingram*

The church's thinking about its own normative experiences, and therefore the necessary emphases of pastoral ministry, exhibits a constant tension between two poles that could be called ritual and revival. Revivalistic thinking tends to see the church's life as a search for dynamic, tectonic-shifting encounters with grace. Pastors' aims, therefore, must be big, transformative, and radical. Ritualistic thinking, on the other hand, tends to see the church as a garden under the slow drip-irrigation of grace and truth, especially through formal worship gatherings, which nourish the saints through seasons and years until everyone finally makes it home. This emphasis focuses the pastor's perspective on the small, ordinary, and cyclical things of ministry.

These interests need not be mutually exclusive, but may instead pull against one another in a constructive tension. However, the revivalistic perspective receives far more representation in books that continue to be published in pastoralia. Reasons may be several, but one obvious factor is that promising the secret of a dynamic, life-changing breakthrough for the pastor or church stands a better chance of achieving healthy sales than a work championing the ordinary. Ministers are not immune to the folly that takes one's eyes off quiet discernment in favor of the exciting possibilities that ever loom over the horizon (Prov 17:24).

But the constant and unchecked pull of revivalism inevitably loads pastors with pressure and leads to exhaustion or worse. For this reason, there is great refreshment to be found in the rare book that stresses the freeing simplicity of a steadier and more ordinary way to inhabit the pastorate—one that likens ministry less to taking a start-up through an IPO, and more to a farmer milking his cows on a brisk winter's morning. Harold Senkbeil has written *The Care of Souls* to fill this space. He aims to liberate readers from false models of the pastorate and call them to the classical discipline of soul-care as dispensing God's gifts in Christ that the pastor himself continually learns and receives. As Michael Horton well describes in the book's foreword, Senkbeil writes to focus shepherds on a certain *habitus*, a learned way of being

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in the world, rather than on such superficial techniques as are commonly found in books of this genre (xiii).

Writing primarily to pastors and ministry students (xvii), Senkbeil defines and champions what he identifies as the “classical heritage of the ‘care of souls,’ as it is called in the church’s collective tradition” (xix). The risen Christ’s call to Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17), provides the clearest encapsulation of this way of viewing the pastorate. “This,” claims Senkbeil, “is the secret for sustainable pastoral work: You need to realize that you’ve got nothing to give others that you yourself did not receive. . . . It’s being one more link in the unbroken chain of love that extends all the way back to Calvary” (xx). The pastor is not the origin of what the sheep need. This comes from Christ himself (xxi). “The essence of pastoral work is to bring the gifts of the Good Shepherd to his sheep and lambs” (19).

This conceptualization—pastoring as dispensing Christ’s gifts as a receiver of them—is the source of power in ministry and the secret to avoiding unrealistic expectations, despair, burnout, and moral failure. It also suggests a corresponding manner of being and working in the pastorate—the *habitus*. Pastoral care is an art, much like farming (2). It calls for patience, rather than rushing and forcing results (3–5). It requires prayerfully probing and listening to church members as they tell their stories, with ears tuned to clues about what God is doing in their lives and how they are responding (67–91). Christ’s active work among his sheep, on his own timetable, both frees and requires the pastor to enjoy his work—not just the results, but the work itself, because it is never done (6).

Many of the hazards of pastoral ministry stem from misunderstanding the role. Senkbeil promotes what he calls the classical view, over against popular modern rivals: the pastor as coach, manager, or CEO (8). No, the pastor is a steward of the mystery of Christ (Col 2:2), which is manifest in preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments (10–11). These, after all, are Jesus’s ongoing means of carrying out his ministry on earth (12–13). This classical model holds together the unchanging core of Christ and the truth of his Word, with context-specific flexibility in application (16–17).

After his chapter introducing this vision, Senkbeil spends the rest of the book explaining various facets of the pastoral *habitus* in view of the classical model. The book does not follow a tight and sequential argument from chapter to chapter, but rather unfolds as a series of loosely connected meditations. These discussions include the role of the Word of God in the soul and ministry of the pastor; diagnosis of people’s spiritual ailments; intentional treatment using the tools of Word and sacrament to combat the works of the devil, the flesh, and the world; the roles of guilt and shame; sexual purity and sanctification; spiritual warfare; the connection between mission and soul care; the need for each pastor to himself be shepherded; personal spiritual disciplines; and long-term steadiness. Amid such diversity,

the unifying thread of an agrarian motif runs through the book, as Senkbeil recalls growing up on a farm and watching his father at work.

This book offers an effective unburdening for pastors who, consciously or not, may have imbibed revivalistic thinking about their own need to be powerful, ingenious, and transformative. In rejecting rival contemporary models of the pastorate and stressing instead the administration of Christ's gifts and the *habitus* of soul care, Senkbeil presents a simplified scope of ministry. This streamlining liberates the reader from false expectations and pressures that Christ never intended him to face. True to Senkbeil's Lutheran angle of approach, even amid mountains of practical wisdom and exhortation, there is no tenor of "Do more" in this book. Rather, the thrust is "Think differently," and often, as a result, "Find rest." It is the life-giving power of Christ, through his Word and Spirit (40–43), which does what the pastor himself cannot do in people's souls.

The book exhibits a high view of Christ and his gifts, especially gospel and sacrament, a pair that sees frequent mention throughout the book. And it is no wonder why. These gifts "throb with vitality. They are filled to the brim with the energy and life of God's own Spirit" (30; cf. 193). Again, such an emphasis puts the weight of ministry on Christ rather than the pastor himself. To be highly confident in these graces is to be well on the way to developing the pastoral *habitus*. The sufficiency of these gifts empowers the pastor to focus his life and ministry on proximity to Jesus rather than burning himself out with activism (193–94). Further, this high view of Christ leaves room for mystery, suggesting that there is always more to learn, more depth to plumb in understanding the gospel and its administration in pastoral ministry (12). Therefore, the minister is always digging, always growing, and always humbled about his task. It is in this light that the reader most fully comes to understand how the *habitus* transcends mere technique.

Another strength is that Senkbeil is wise with recognizing balances. For example, he identifies as one of the main challenges for pastors and churches: "To address what's going on now not with the flimsy fads of pop culture but with the solid truth of the Word of God, rooted in Christ and extending throughout time and space" (62). He recommends a prudent combination of knowing the times and applying the timeless Word to them effectively. He also balances paying attention to emotions with caring for the whole soul (178). His application of the law/gospel distinction to the pastoral *habitus* provides another example of healthy balance (173).

The Care of Souls should prove helpful for any in the target audience, from seminary students to seasoned shepherds. It will especially aid a pastor who, through education, the fleshly ambitions of his heart, or passive intake from the evangelical culture, has imbibed an expectation that he must be radical and impactful and potent and dynamic. But it could shift paradigms and change the life of pastor who has spent some years trying on this model of

ministry and feels its exhausting toll. (I realize the irony of claiming that a book which avoids normalizing dramatic transformation could end up being dramatically transformative. Radical change has its place.) To such a pastor, Senkbeil comes alongside and says, in essence, “Friend, there is another way. Christ is powerful through his Word and sacrament. You do not need to be your people’s savior; point them to the Savior they already have, even as you stay near him yourself.” This counsel comes with the humble tone that is formed by decades of battling, laboring, and sometimes failing.

However, the book is not without weaknesses. Senkbeil casts a wide net, bringing many topics and issues into consideration under the rubric of the pastoral *habitus* as a steward of the mystery of Christ. Usually, a clear connection binds the issue under discussion to this central hub of the wheel. At times, however, the connection is less clear. Likewise, looseness of structure can make it difficult to discern what binds a chapter together conceptually. The pieces are usually quite good, but sometimes they come in almost proverbial fashion. Similarly, some of the chapters are overly long and repetitive. The book could be edited substantially for length without much loss of content.

Readers from Baptist and independent perspectives will find some quibbles with Senkbeil’s denominational distinctives as they arise in the book. First is his Lutheran sacramentalism that suffuses his discussions of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (100–105, 191). However, even this poses a constructive challenge. How many Baptists or independents would think to include substantial reflection on the ordinances in a book on pastoral ministry? Perhaps Senkbeil’s perspective can push them to consider whether a less sacramental view of the ordinances causes them to overlook these powerful means of grace appointed by Christ for the good of his church. Even if one disagrees with Senkbeil’s theology of the sacraments, he must not neglect their potency and value. Similarly, at times the author reflects the Lutheran accents of over-centralizing justification (125) and recapitulation of one’s baptism (148–49), while omitting to endorse the third use of the law in his discussion of progressive sanctification (162, though see 128).

Some readers will disagree with Senkbeil’s treatment of the interface between pastoral ministry and outside secular counseling. For instance, he recommends that a pastor sometimes refer church members to a trusted psychologist for cognitive-behavioral care (180). He does not claim that the need for spiritual care thus ends, but that both the secular therapy and pastoral care continue side-by-side, even for unambiguous moral issues such as sex addiction (185).

These possible qualms aside, *The Care of Souls* offers pastors a compelling vision for a way of life and work that leans heavily on Christ’s powerful and sufficient grace for his people. The thoughtful chapter on mission as soul care (220–37) demonstrates that Senkbeil rejects revivalistic busyness not

from apathy or smallness of ambition for Jesus's glory. Rather, his embrace of the ordinary stems from a firm confidence in the Savior, a long view of ministry, and a humble appreciation for the pastor's weaknesses as a creature and a sinner. The book offers neither a simple formula for pastoring made easy, nor even a tightly unified argument, but a pair of glasses for the pastor to try on, giving him a fresh and refreshing view of his calling under the Good Shepherd.

Austin Carty. *The Pastor's Bookshelf: Why Reading Matters for Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022. 182 pp. \$19.99.

Ryan L. Rippee*

Introduction

Austin Carty is the Senior Pastor of Boulevard Baptist Church in Anderson, South Carolina. He holds a degree in literature from High Point University (B.A.) as well as degrees in divinity, Wake Forest University (M.Div.), and Emory University (D.Min.). He is the author of *High Points and Lows: Life, Faith, and Figuring It All Out* (2010).

Summary

Carty divides *The Pastor's Bookshelf* into three sections: (1) "All the Reading We Don't Remember" (reading for formation), (2) "Not Just a Luxury" (reading for ministry), and (3) "For Whatever Reason" (how to become a pastor-reader). In his words, "the first explaining what a pastor-reader is, the second explaining why a pastor ought to become one, and the third explaining how a pastor can go about doing it" (4). Carty's goal is to persuade the reader that wide, regular reading of all genres is of greater benefit than narrow, focused reading of only theology (or even worse, the lack of reading because there is so much else to do). In doing so, he argues, "I will make the case for how reading not only makes us better pastors, but also makes us better people" (4).

The first section consists of five chapters explaining, arguing for, and giving copious and varied examples of reading for formation rather than simply information. He begins in Chapter 1 by explaining what he means by formation, "as pastor-readers, we don't just read to become smarter or to absorb new information, but that we instead read in order to be changed by our reading" (14). Chapter 2 is a brief excursus on formation versus information. In Chapter 3, Carty discusses the danger of single-sourcing information and becoming one-dimensional thinkers. In contrast, he argues that we need to listen to many differing perspectives, genres, and disciplines to think well and develop wisdom. He asserts,

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If we will commit ourselves to a balanced reading diet that includes writers of different periods and perspectives—and if we will approach such reading with the aim of being slowly but gradually formed rather than immediately and usefully informed—then we will more fully and naturally grow into the original model of pastor. That model sees us as loving shepherds, caretakers tasked with guiding our flocks through besetting dangers on both the left and the right, less concerned with adding more sheep to our numbers than with keeping the ones entrusted to our care healthy and safe (39).

Chapter 4 explores the development of wisdom as a corrective to the temptation of bigness and busyness in pastoral ministry. He makes a case that *gravitas* (or wisdom) is developed and shaped by our wide and curious reading. When we immerse ourselves in this kind of reading, we are formed and learn to apply our learnings to our own lives and circumstances. Chapter 5 concludes the section with a connection of wisdom and love. Because reading is formative, it develops the capacity to love.

Section two consists of four chapters and moves from formation to motive. In Chapter 6, Carty argues for the necessity of reading for preaching. Reading is not a personal luxury but a vocational responsibility. In Chapter 7, Carty discusses reading and pastoral care. He argues “to become wise interpreters [of the people in our church], we must first develop such interpretive skills through the reading of *nonhuman* documents: books, novels, journals, essays, and so on. Only then can skills from our reading begin to shape our skills for caregiving” (80). Chapter 8 applies reading to vision casting and Chapter 9 applies reading to leadership. In all of this, his goal is to convince the audience that reading in pastoral ministry is not a *luxury* but a necessity.

Section three concludes the book with six chapters on how to integrate wide and diverse reading into the rhythms of a pastor's life. He begins in Chapter 10 by thinking of the time spent reading as a pastoral appointment or visit. He continues into Chapter 11 with the claim that general reading (outside of the Bible) ought to be considered a spiritual discipline and spends Chapter 12 discussing the need to have a charitable spirit in our reading. Chapter 13 digs into the practical matter of choosing what to read while Chapter 14 gives the reader tools to collect and file reading for later use. Carty concludes the book with a chapter on the primacy and priority of reading Scripture in the same way. “Nothing I have written in this book about a program of general reading supplants the pastoral priority of reading Scripture” (147).

Critical Evaluation

Carty's organization and development of his argument is well done. Using personal stories, varied examples from a diverse body of literature, and scientific studies on reading, he makes a compelling cumulative case for his thesis. From beginning to end, Carty's work does not stray from the mark. He has organized his thoughts along a trajectory of formation to motive, to practical tips on improving the discipline of reading. Chapter by chapter, he never strays far from the theme of the benefits of reading literature. His writing style is winsome, clear and concise, and throughout the work, he "practices what he preaches" by quoting and alluding to an exceptionally diverse body of works.

Because of this, it is helpful to remember that before Carty was pastor, he was an English professor, and received his Master of Divinity from Wake Forest University and his Doctor of Ministry from Emory University. The School of Divinity at Wake Forest was founded in 1989 as a non-denominational, ecumenical institution, while Emory University is affiliated with the United Methodist Church. It is not surprising, then, that the endnotes contain quotes from theologians such as Miroslav Volf, Walter Brueggemann, Jürgen Moltmann, or Richard Hays. Perhaps more surprising is his inclusion of more conservative theologians such as Tim Keller, James K.A. Smith, Kevin Vanhoozer, Owen Strachan, and Leland Ryken. Although I am hesitant to commend all of the specific examples Carty uses throughout his book, the diversity of his sources adds weight to his argument rather than hindering it. He "walks the walk before he talks the talk," as it were.

The Pastor's Bookshelf exhibits other strengths, particularly in the sections on formation and wisdom. As the foundation for all that follows, Carty ably demonstrates that reading is an act that can shape the reader into a better pastor. In doing so, he doesn't limit the audience to the pastor alone, but shows that this kind of habit of wide reading is useful for anyone that desires wisdom, discernment, gravitas, empathy, and love in their lives.

Perhaps the strongest chapter is "Developing Wisdom" (Chapter 4). From the opening illustration of his own mistake in pastoral ministry of pursuing the fleeting pleasure of social media fame, to the development of a friendship that was concerned for a "Christ-modeled life," Carty sets up an example to which every pastor can relate, Carty sets up a framework of wisdom/gravitas that is biblical and compelling. Arguing against pastoral ministry as a fetishization of busyness or bigness for bigness sake, Carty forcefully concludes:

Egoistic ambition ought to have no place for pastoral ministry, and that once we begin to equate our effectiveness as pastors with the reach of our audience or with the busyness of our calendars, we

are beginning down a path that will soon enough hollow out our substance and steadily diminish our capacity for gravitas (45).

Carty's book also presents some weaknesses. Given the diversity of examples in the book, his chapter on choosing what to read will be liberating to some ("You mean I can actually read fiction as a pastor?!") while arousing frustration in others given the lack of a reading list or some sort of literary triage. Additionally, Carty could have made a clearer pastoral application of the ultimate wisdom of the Gospel and sufficiency of Christ. To his credit, in his chapter on "Reading for Preaching," Carty writes, "I never start a sermon with a quote or image or allusion or reference in mind; instead, I start with the gospel point intend to convey..." (72) but it is not clear that the goal is to go beyond pulling the heartstrings of those listening or imparting good advice.

Conclusion

Carty's overarching thesis is that reading is formative, produces wisdom in the pastor and is therefore not a luxury but a vocational necessity. *The Pastor's Bookshelf* accomplishes its intended purpose and makes a compelling case that the pastor ought to be a wide and varied reader. This book would be useful to the student in seminary who is shaping their own philosophy of reading. It is also helpful those in the pastorate who have fallen into the trap of thinking that reading is a luxury rather than a necessity in ministry. Though accessible to the layperson, it will have more benefit among those with a working knowledge of pastoral ministry.

Miles Werntz. *From Isolation to Community: A Renewed Vision for Christian Life Together*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022. 195 pp. \$22.99.

Derek J. Brown^{*}

Coming out of a pandemic after two years of lock downs and the mandated separation of family, friends, and fellow church members, the question of isolation is a natural, if not urgent, one. Yet, Myles Werntz, associate professor of theology and director of Baptist Studies at Abilene Christian University, contends that our recent experience in the thick of a pandemic only brought to the surface a problem already present in the church. Why was it often the case that so many Christians and churches were able to transition seamlessly from regular physical gatherings to Zoom church? “[O]ne reason,” Werntz suggests, “that churches were able to glide with relative ease into a season of social distancing and isolation was that, as churches, we had been *trained to be isolated for years*” (9). For Werntz, the problem of isolation in the church goes deeper than one’s preference for digital church over the corporate gathering.

But healing the disease of isolation is not only a matter of establishing new practices within the church. If we fail to reckon with the underlying assumptions that support these practices, we will perpetuate the problem rather than rectify it. For example, if the church emphasizes the “inviolability of the individual,” then it will value activities that pertain mainly to the private aspects of the Christian life and, in so doing, “magnify individualism and isolation already present culturally” (8). The church, therefore, needs a new vision of community life that incorporates a more robust theological understanding of the nature of the church, its unity, and its relation to the world.

As the subtitle to the book hints, Werntz draws from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran theologian who wrote on this very topic in Germany during World War II, nearly eighty years ago. Bonhoeffer serves as the principal guide for Werntz, although Bonhoeffer’s piece *Life Together* is one of many primary and secondary sources consulted throughout the book. While Scripture is alluded to throughout and biblical themes serve as a basis for Werntz’ reflections, the reader will find a handful of explicit references to biblical

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texts—only nineteen on my count. While this feature does not automatically disqualify Werntz's book as a reliable *theological* resource, the reader who desires to see Werntz's argument rooted in biblical exegesis will be a little disappointed. Nevertheless, Werntz makes offers some trenchant observations relevant to pastoral ministry that deserve a hearing. I will consider these now before I move on to my critiques.

Werntz defines isolation as "the condition of being structurally, morally, and estranged within creation" (18), but argues, along with Bonhoeffer, that this ailment cannot be healed through political solidarity or even by belonging a community as such, including a church. Even in the Christian congregation we can hide in a crowd and pretend that we are not isolated merely because we are in proximity to so many people. This bent toward isolation finds its origins in the fall, where Adam and Eve's separation from God immediately disrupted their relationship with one another: "Adam no longer considered Eve 'flesh of my flesh' but 'this woman who you gave to be with me' (Gen 2:23, 3:12)" (30). The aftermath of Adam's sin is now felt in every relationship, and a drift toward isolation is the human default.

Again, Werntz helpfully reminds us that activities alone cannot cure our isolation. Rather, a deeper understanding of the nature of the church as Christ's body provides the theological and spiritual resources to draw us back together. Indeed, the imagery of the church as Christ's body teaches us that we cannot have Christ apart from his church, which means that we cannot have Christ without the "difficulties and banality of other people, any more than one can have the fullness of marriage apart from the difficulties and joys of one's physically present spouse" (32). Those who isolate themselves from or within the church out of a desire to avoid the challenges that attend Christian relationships are not maintaining the unity of the Spirit. Rather, they've traded the concrete stuff of life for mere abstractions, and they are in danger of swapping the real Jesus for a savior who has no vital connection to his people. "To desire a salvation that is not social is...to desire a world other than the one created by God: one in which I can exist in isolation from others" (39).

The priority for the gospel minister, therefore, is to instill in his people a deeper understanding of Christ's vital connection with his people. But he cannot preach that which he doesn't practice. The pastor himself must be authentically connected to the body for his own sake and the sake of the congregation. One way a pastor can know he is in the grip of isolationist tendencies is in how he responds to a church member when confronted with sin. "The minister who is *not* truly part of the community is the one who feels their authority challenged by a word of admonition by a congregant and thus facilitates the isolation of sin and amplifies it by their status within the community" (170). The pastoral office, though endowed by God with spiritual authority, does not place the pastor in a separate category of church

member. He, like any other member, must be open to the correction that comes from fellow congregants.

There are other worthy observations that one can find throughout the book, but for the sake of space, I turn now to offer a few points of criticism.

I've already noted Werntz's reliance on Bonhoeffer and his sparing use of direct biblical references and exegesis. While not necessarily wrong, this methodology made for some strange if not tenuous biblical interpretations and applications. For example, in a discussion on prayer, Werntz appeals to Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Genesis 3. According to Bonhoeffer, the conversation between Eve and the Serpent was defective because it was a theological conversation *about* God rather than the common worship *of* God. Leaving the validity of this interpretation aside for the moment, Werntz then takes Bonhoeffer's observation and applies it to prayer, saying, "In prayer, the point is not the dissection of God as an object but rather participation in the life of God as a member of Christ's body" (106). This is a fine statement about prayer. But how one gets from the Genesis narrative to this application is not entirely clear. By positing a questionable interpretation of Scripture from a third party, Werntz distances his reader from the text of Scripture and the primary meaning of it.

As to the validity of Bonhoeffer's interpretation, I find it to be only marginally relevant to the point of the passage. Bonhoeffer comments, "[Their conversation] is not common worship, a common calling upon God, but a speaking about God, about God in a way that passes over, and reaches beyond God" (106). But is this the best way to summarize the chief problem Eve and the Serpent's interaction? Far better is to recognize the serpent's strategy was to cause Eve to doubt God's goodness. He accomplished this strategy, not through merely talking about God, but by deliberately *misrepresenting* God and his Word. "Did God really say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden" (Gen 3:1). Although the serpent's question sounded similar to what God had said earlier, it was actually the very opposite. God said that they could eat of *every* tree of the garden, save one (Gen 2:15–16). With his sophisticated inquiry, Satan made it appear that God was primarily a prohibitor of Eve's happiness, rather than a gracious provider of it.

The application to prayer, then, is not in dissuading believers to think theologically about God, but precisely the opposite. Yet, Werntz takes Bonhoeffer's interpretation and uses it as a basis to warn believers to not judge the words offered by others in prayer, for such a posture would cause us to "break away" from the community (106). On the contrary, the Genesis narrative teaches believers to ever guard themselves from Satanic lies about God in *every* context. This may require us in corporate prayer settings to make judgments about what others are praying to keep ourselves from imbibing false statements about God, even if they are uttered in the sacred moment of corporate prayer with other professing believers. Such discernment doesn't

fracture unity but preserves it. Wertz immediately qualifies this statement and says he isn't suggesting that all judgment is forbidden. But his interpretation and application of Genesis 3 certainly leaves the reader with that impression, hence the need for a qualification.

Another concern I have for Wertz' book is the overemphasis on the corporate nature of Christianity to the neglect of the individual. Granted, Wertz is laboring to correct what he perceives as the normal drift toward isolation found in many churches. I welcome his admonition at this point. But there are times where I am afraid the need to avoid isolationist tendencies leads Wertz to understate aspects of the Christian life that relate directly to the Christian as a human being who stands accountable to God *prior* to his responsibility toward man or his status in the community.

For example, in his discussion on how Christians are to be on mission during the week among their neighbors, there is a clear emphasis on drawing unbelieving neighbors into both the Christian faith (as a set of truths personally believed) *and* into a believing community (144). Well and good. But, so anxious is Wertz to avoid the individualistic trappings of our culture, evangelism is given only a cursory mention, if not an insufficient one. "By mission, I do not mean solely evangelism, that what we do apart from church is persuade people to come to church. Rather, what we do in extending the work of prayer to the day apart is to extend the kingdom of God through *being the image of Christ's body to the world*" (142). There may be Christians who may conceive of evangelism as the mere invitation for their unbelieving neighbor to come to church, but that is a woefully inadequate view of evangelism. It is true that faith in the Christ leads inescapably to vital attachment to his body (1 Cor 12:13; 1 Pet 1:22), but for that individual, faith in Christ is logically prior, and without a clear evangel a person only remains marginally connected to the community that bears Christ's name.

There is a right and healthy place within Christianity for understanding the "individual" that simply cannot be avoided. Even in his discussion of how the Christian community must practice "confession" to one another, Wertz appeals to Bonhoeffer's observation of the publican as an example of what this kind of confession should look like: "*without* pretense and *with* specificity" (180). But the reference to the publican doesn't exactly fit. The publican's confession of sin, we must remember, was before God and God alone without any reference to the community (Luke 18:13). This sinful man had to deal with God *first*. In his broken-hearted confession, the tax-collector was coming to terms with his sin in the presence of the one whom all people must, individually, give an account (Heb 4:13). Then and only then does a person come into right relationship with the community.

True, vital community, then, only occurs when people embrace the gospel and are born again. This radical heart change in the sinner's heart and their baptism by the Spirit into the universal church of Christ are the necessary

prerequisites for true siblinghood in the body of Christ. I'm sure Werntz agrees. But even his recommendations for countering isolationist tendencies in our churches will not gain much traction apart from a sharp and clear articulation of the gospel that divides the individual from other individuals before it unites them to Christ's body.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Peter Sammons. *Reprobation and God's Sovereignty: Recovering a Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2022. 296 pp. \$25.99 (paper).

Cliff McManis*

Peter Sammons completed his PhD in 2017 at The Master's Seminary where he is director of publications, editor of the seminary journal and an assistant professor. The book includes endorsements from dispensational and covenant theologians. The foreword is by John MacArthur. Sammons' theological perspective is an enigma, for he clearly endorses "the covenant of works" (34, 38) which is typically a distinctive of covenant theology, and favors amillennial and covenant theologians (such as Sproul, Murray, Grudem and others) and Confessions (such as the Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF] and the Synod of Dort) over dispensational ones. Yet, he represents The Master's Seminary, which historically was dispensational and the current doctrinal statement of that seminary still reflects dispensational distinctives.

Sammons says the present book is a "lay-level treatment" of his doctoral thesis (11). He claims to hold a Reformed (14) and Calvinist view (112) of reprobation, or "double predestination" (145). This doctrine flows from the dilemma of the problem of evil and is a proposed answer to the reality that "God does not save all men" (145), an affirmation held by Calvinists and Arminians alike. So the controversial doctrine of reprobation amounts to Sammons' theodicy of choice. The book is composed of an introduction followed by eighteen chapters. The first nine chapters lay the theological foundation for the thesis of the book. The last nine chapters focus on answering objections. The goal of the book is twofold: to define reprobation and to explore God's use of secondary causes in carrying out reprobation (15). Understanding how God uses secondary causes preserves God's

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sovereignty and man's accountability. His definition of reprobation is gleaned from "Scripture and history" (15). Sammons informs the reader that his goal is narrowly focused on defining reprobation, not on being exhaustive in explaining predestination (15). Ironically, that conflicts with the promise given in the foreword which asserts that this book "is undoubtedly the most thorough explanation and defense of the doctrine of predestination" (9).

The author bemoans the fact that there is very little scholarly literature on the topic of reprobation. Hence his desire to "recover" this doctrine. He avers that the lack of literature on the doctrine is due to its divisive nature (14). Up front he gives a cryptic definition of reprobation as "the divine ordination of men unto damnation" (13). The reader must wait until chapter 3 to get a formal definition of reprobation. The introduction closes with the writer's five assumptions or theological presuppositions which include his commitment to the inerrancy, authority and sufficiency of Scripture, God's complete sovereignty and a compatibilist view of anthropology.

The first two chapters lay the foundation by showing God is completely sovereign. God controls all things and he has the power and authority to do so. This means that from eternity, God ordains all things that come to pass, an echo of the WCF (20). This is carried out through his decree. God's eternal decree of all things that come to pass does not impinge upon natural law nor man's accountability. This is not determinism, fatalism, nor hyper-Calvinism. It is simply the expression of his divine will. This includes his justice and judgment against sinners. Hell is warranted, for God is the holy creator and humans are sinful rebels; they deserve God's holy wrath. God punishes the wicked in hell based upon "full proof of evidence" against them (41). The whole Trinity is involved in judgment, but Jesus is the main judge.

The objects of hell are reprobate humans and fallen angels. God is not partial about who goes to hell—all ages go to hell. Young people go to hell. Five-year-old children go to hell (44). Even some babies who die in infancy go to hell. Sammons gives no Bible verses to establish this horrible prospect about babies and children. His only proof for this is that John Gerstner said so (45). Ironically, John MacArthur, who wrote the foreword to this Sammons's book, wrote in his own book *Safe in the Arms of God* that babies who die go to heaven.¹ MacArthur uses several clear Bible passages to prove it in contrast to Sammons' unscriptural dogmatic assertions.

In chapters 3 through 7 Sammons gives an exposition of Romans 9:1–23, which constitutes the *locus classicus* for his iteration of reprobation. Chapter 3 begins with a definition of reprobation, the theme of the book, stating it is the eternal, unconditional decree of God for the non-elect whereby he chooses to exclude them from electing mercy and instead hold them accountable with justice to display the glory of his wrath (47). Later he states

¹John MacArthur, *Safe in the Arms of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

reprobation is the damnation of the non-elect unconditionally established by God's eternal decree (107) and again as "the act of God choosing men to eternal perdition and hell" (112). Three verses supposedly directly undergird this idea: Romans 9:22, 1 Peter 2:8 and Jude 4. Other verses indirectly support it such as Lamentations 3:38, Amos 3:6, Proverbs 21:1 and Acts 2:23. Sammons admits Romans 9 is a "controversial" passage, but it is critical to the debate on reprobation. Paul's main point is in Romans 9:6 where he shows that God's Word and promises of election have not failed despite Israel's rejection and unbelief (50). God has a purpose for unbelief to reveal his glory, which ends in reprobation (56).

The main argument in Romans 9 is that individuals are elect. Not every ethnic Jew within the nation of Israel was elect. That is why Paul names individuals: Isaac was elect, not Ishmael (59–60); Jacob was elect, not Esau (61). Key to this whole debate of reprobation is the challenging statement of Romans 9:11–13: "in order that God's selective purpose would stand, not from works but because Him who calls, it was said to her, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'" Sammons notes how many have followed the misguided thinking of Arminius in trying to dilute the implications of this passage by rejecting Paul's clear argument, as they say it speaks of some non-specific, national, or corporate election instead of individual salvation. Wesley, Barth and Geisler are culprits here (64–65). Recent scholars have also tinkered with the plain meaning of the passage in an attempt to ameliorate the straight-forward reading which affronts the sensibilities, men such as Cranfield, Mounce, Morris and N. T. Wright (75–76). Sammons says the face-value reading of the text stands and so "hate" means "hate" and God's reprobation of the non-elect was a pretemporal decision expressing his "intense anger" and righteous hatred toward Esau before Esau was ever born (79). And it is an active attitude of judgment, not a passive denial of blessing. Sammons concludes, "God hated Esau, even as a preborn entity" (102). So, God hated all the non-elect from eternity past.

Chapter 8 further explains election, the positive side of predestination. It also exposes wrong views, which tend to be Arminian, as represented by Wesley (106), and Geisler (109). Whitefield and Sproul get it right (113). Chapter 9 further defines reprobation, the negative side of predestination, and explains why reprobation is not hyper-Calvinism. Sammons' view sets him apart as he alleges that in reprobation God is not passive but active (119). Sammons' stringent view says reprobation is the decree of "God to hold men accountable without consideration to the lives they will live" and a "purely sovereign act...apart from any consideration of the creature" (122–123). But this reviewer poses Scripture says otherwise: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4). Commenting on this verse, John MacArthur got it right when he said that God's wrath and

accountability results from a person's sin.² In contrast, Sammons repeats that his view is "the Reformed view" (14, 105, 108, 114, 128), when in fact the Reformed view is not monolithic. Historically there are actually a host of Calvinists and Reformed theologians, such as Gill, Spurgeon, Horton, Demarest and many others, who argued that Scripture teaches election is active and perdition is permissive. The view of these men was in the thoroughly orthodox Augustinian tradition.

Chapter 10 explains "compatibilism," the idea that says God's will and the human will are compatible (140). This is Sammons' panacea which supposedly relieves the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Sammons says some try to relieve the tension in wrong ways such as Erickson, Ware, and Craig who resort to the fictitious "middle knowledge" and Molinism (136). This chapter betrays Sammons' insistence on relieving the tension where maybe it should remain. Later Sammons will say categorically, "this tension is not irreconcilable" (204). Ironically, MacArthur, Charles Smith and Zemek, all founders of The Master's Seminary, warn against ridding of the scriptural tension for it risks undermining the God-given balance. Zemek asserts, "there will always be a tension."³ Throughout his book Sammons disparages mystery, considering it a cop-out (14, 201, 220). In contrast, Zemek exhorts one to embrace mystery and welcome the tension:

When we explore the exegetically based truths about a pretemporal decree which includes predestination, election, etc., most frequently set historically in contexts of post-fall applications pertaining to eternal salvation or eternal condemnation, no human system can pack every piece of the data neatly into a logical box....Every exegetical theologian must pay due respect to divinely placed boundary markers such as those generally identified in Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 55:8–9; Romans 11:33–36."⁴

MacArthur also rightly embraces the mystery eschewed by Sammons when he writes, "We should let the antinomy remain, believing both truths completely and leaving the harmonizing of them to God."⁵

Chapter 11 exposes competing views of his double predestination, which

²John MacArthur, ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Nashville: Word, 1997), 1173.

³George J. Zemek, *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace: Exegetical Considerations of Key Anthropological, Hamartiological and Soteriological Terms and Motifs* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 153; see also Charles Smith's unpublished paper, "Salvation and the Christian Life."

⁴Zemek, *A Biblical Theology*, 268.

⁵John MacArthur, *Ephesians*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentaries (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 11.

include fatalism, Lutheranism, Arminianism, open theism, permissivism and single-predestination (145–161). Chapter 12 explains why God is not the author of evil despite the reality of double predestination (163–173).

In chapter 13 Sammons completely abandons biblical exposition in favor of rhetoric and philosophical Aristotelian speculation with a mini-treatise on causality. The reader is informed that without the fourth century heathen's genius taxonomy of causes, "meaningful exegesis" of the Bible is "impaired" (176). Aristotle will rescue us. One wonders how believers understood the Old Testament before the pagan Greek philosopher arrived on the scene with his prerequisite categories of reality. Sammons seems to disparage the doctrine of providence. He mentions it once, only in passing, and has no use for it (25–26). It is not listed as a key word in his Index of Terms, whereas non-biblical words abound in the Index and throughout the book, words and phrases such as "causal joint," "compatibilism," "domino theory," "equal ultimacy," "hierarchical theory," "principle of sufficient reason," "*praetertitio*," "*praedamatio*" and more. The historic understanding of providence says God works all things after the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11) through direct and secondary causes. Providence is the true biblical doctrine of causality, but unfortunately Sammons supplants it with the pagan, Aristotelian naturalistic four-fold counterfeit paradigm of material, form, agent, and purpose (178). To understand true means of causality from a biblical perspective the reader can consult Henry Holloman who gives the more robust, scriptural delineation of various causes God uses to interact with his creation, along with Bible verses, which include natural laws, general revelation, supernatural intervention, special revelation, conscience, God's Spirit, God's Word, human discretion, God's control of the heart and outward circumstances.⁶ Sammons' confusion over the matter of causality is illustrated in his dealings with Genesis 50:20, the classic passage of God's providence. On five separate occasions (22, 156, 189, 250, 278) he views this verse through the lens of reprobation rather than through providence.

Chapter 14 fleshes out the implications of causality (191–204). Chapter 15 explains Sammons' theodicy. His solution is that God is the ultimate cause of evil, not the efficient cause (224). With this premise, Sammons can say that God "caused" David to sin (221); God "incites" people to sin and "God ordains evil" (222); "God determines...evil" and "God predetermines sin" (135); "God indeed ordains people to sin" (188); "sin exists because God wanted it" (189). Despite the qualifiers and occasional caveats, this phraseology is alarming. It lacks the precision and needed nuance that Scripture maintains. Horton more accurately captures the balance when he writes, "it is inconsistent with God's nature, and in fact unthinkable that

⁶Henry W. Hollowman, *Kregel Dictionary of the Bible and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 431–32.

God...should ever determine that any purpose of his will terminate in evil”⁷

Sammons closes out the book with three chapters that explain four categories of reprobation: abandonment, hardening, personal agency and non-personal agency (228).

Despite some impressive names in the beginning of the book who endorse it (i.e., Mark Dever, Steve Lawson, Joel Beeke, Andy Naselli, etc.) and routinely stating basic truisms about theology in general, this book has little to commend it. Actually, it has many weaknesses—some fatal. Space prohibits a delineation of them all, so just some key ones will be considered.

First, the word “reprobation” is not a biblical word, whereas “election” is. Theologians do not even agree on the meaning of the word reprobation and hence it is a clumsy and imprecise term which does not reflect or advance exegetical theology.

Second, Sammons routinely equivocates on the word “predestination,” at times equating it with election while distinguishing it from reprobation (108), at others equating it with reprobation (165), and at others saying it includes election and reprobation together (165). The fact is “predestination” [προορίζω] is used only six times in the New Testament (cf. Acts 4:28; Rom 8:29–30; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:5, 11), always positively, usually in reference to the elect, always to encourage Christians and never in reference to the damned or reprobate. It lacks biblical fidelity to refer to the damned as “predestined.” Hence, Sammons’ preference for the phrase “double predestination” is illegitimate as it does not reflect biblical diction.

Third, this book is rife with dogmatic assertions and is woefully deficient in exegesis to establish the main points and arguments. Sammons develops his thesis on the backs of theologians who align with his systematic precommitments rather than from objective biblical exposition. There are too many examples to catalogue. One includes his assertion that “God is Pure Act” (42), which he does not explain and has no Scripture to support the notion and all of chapter 13 on causality is bereft on Scripture and long on human opinion and speculation.

Fourth, Sammons’ handling of key passages is anemic and misguided, leaving him with wrong conclusions on critical points. He alleges 1 Peter 2:8 teaches that God gave an eternal decree before creation “appoint[ing] men to destruction” (17) providing no exegesis whatsoever. First Peter does not mention the word “destruction.” Sammons foists the concept on the text. Later he changes the word “destruction” to “doom” without warrant (47), a word which is not in the Greek text.

Sammons goes on to argue that God “appointed” unbelievers to “disobey” by eternal decree to ensure their “doom” via reprobation (120).

⁷ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 311.

Further he says 1 Peter 2:8 teaches “predamnation” (127), again with no exegesis, just mere assertion. Supposedly this verse teaches that God predetermines the eternal destiny of the wicked (172) “without consideration to the lives they will live” (123). The fatal law here is that Sammons assumes the verb “appointed” is a pretemporal decree of eternal “doom,” when in fact the verb refers to the stumbling of the wicked in history. The “appointing” happens in time, not in eternity past; a consistent usage of the verb “appoint” in the New Testament (cf. John 15:16). Ironically, the recently released *Legacy Standard Bible* translation put out by The Master’s Seminary clearly reveals what Peter intended, as it reads, “They stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this *stumbling* they were also appointed.” Long-time Greek scholar of The Master’s Seminary, Robert L. Thomas, affirms 1 Peter 2:8 does not teach reprobation, when he says, “Their disobedience is not ordained, the penalty of their disobedience, stumbling, is. They rebelled against God and paid the penalty....*Proskoptousin* (“stumble”) is the logical antecedent, for it is the main verb; *apeithountes* (“disobeying”) is only a participle and cannot support a relative clause”⁸

The main text Sammons relies on is Romans 9, where again he flounders in exegesis on some key points. Sammons misinterprets 9:13, “Jacob I loved but Esau I hated,” saying it is a divine “decree to condemn” (79), concluding that God declared his hatred for Esau before he was born (102). But this quote is not from Genesis nor from when Jacob and Esau were in the womb (c. 2000 BC). This quote is from Malachi (c. 450 BC), written 1,500 years after Esau lived. As such it is a historical reflection, in hindsight, regarding the fruits of election rather than a statement about the origins of reprobation.

Another critical blunder comes in 9:18 where Sammons says God hardened Pharaoh before he was ever born (100). But the twenty-two statements of Pharaoh’s hardening mentioned in Exodus all take place in history, during the course of Pharaoh’s life. MacArthur rightly notes that half the references to Pharaoh’s hardening say he hardened his own heart through unbelief while the other half say God hardened his heart, illustrating “the humanly unreconcilable tension between God’s sovereignty and man’s will.”⁹ The final major exegetical mistake committed by Sammons is his interpretation of 9:22–23. He fails to distinguish between the “vessels of wrath,” like Pharaoh, whom God fits for destruction during their lifetime, in history (v. 22) as a result of their unbelief versus the “vessels of mercy” whom God chose before creation by His sovereign grace (v. 23). Paul is careful to highlight the distinction between the two parties by his use of two different

⁸Robert L. Thomas, *Exegetical Digest of the Epistle of First Peter* (Sun Valley: The Master’s Seminary, n.d.).

⁹John MacArthur, *Romans*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 35.

verbs, *katartizō* [καταρτίζω] for the vessels of wrath and *proetomazō* [προετοιμάζω] for vessels of mercy. The preposition “pro-” explicitly speaks to the pretemporal decision God made about the vessels of mercy, the elect, before they were born. There was no similar pretemporal decision made with respect to the vessels of wrath, for their hardening happened in time. A further explicit distinction is made by Paul reflected in the mood of the verbs: *katartizō* is passive and *proetomazō* is active. God does not deal with the vessels of wrath in the same manner as the vessels of mercy. As such, this passage supports the idea of a single-predestination, whereby God, in eternity past, chose (active voice) some to be saved while passing by (passive) others, leaving them to the doom of their own sin. Ironically, this is actually the position of the Synod of Dort which Sammons tacitly endorses (108, 130, 168). Sammons ignores the above exegetical distinctions, asserting, “there is no distinction in God’s choice to have mercy or to harden” (88).

A fifth weakness of the book is the tone. Sammons comes across as condescending, alleging scholars avoid the topic of reprobation “primarily” out of the fear of being divisive (14). He also suggests that when reprobation has been addressed in church history it was typically convoluted. Therefore, he claims to set the record straight. Note a few of his screeds against the majority: “Most opponents of the doctrine of reprobation...fail to understand the doctrine correctly” (105); “misconceptions concerning reprobation are pervasive throughout history” (112); “Most theological thinkers are uninformed about the doctrine of causality” (176). Sammons cannot indict “most theological thinkers” because he has not read “all” theological thinkers. Hence, he overstates the case. Scholars have not written much on the topic of reprobation because Scripture is virtually silent on the details of it. Ironically, Sammons unwittingly quotes Boettner who affirms this reality when he says, “the Scriptures have given us no extended explanation of their [i.e., the reprobate] state” (145–146).

Further evidence of the paucity of information on reprobation is the fact that Sammons has few Scriptures to make his case. He leans primarily on Romans 9:6–23 and alludes to 1 Peter 2:8 and Jude 4 (17, 47, 256). Another irony is that the current doctrinal statement of The Master’s Seminary is explicit and clear on the doctrine of the elect unto salvation and is completely silent on reprobation. This makes sense in light of the history of The Master’s Seminary which has traditionally espoused a form of single-predestination. Sammons, who currently holds several positions at The Master’s Seminary, condemns single predestination out of hand (113, 153) whitewashing all iterations of it as unjustified libertarianism. But many solid Calvinists hold to single predestination, including the majority of past professors at the Master’s Seminary.

A sixth and final weakness of the book is that it is riddled with a variety of literary and typographical errors (more than ninety) giving the impression

it was rushed to publication. The errors include problems in formatting, spelling [i.e., “Suprelapsarism”] (15), diction (62, 63), typos [“quiet” instead of “quite”] (24), tense agreement, lack of citations and more. The author repeatedly confuses “than” for “then” (19, 44, 45, 68). Proper citations are neglected (27, 34, 40). Punctuation is frequently missing or misused (24, 25, 29, 30, 33, 35, 75). There is an inconsistent use of capitalization for the personal pronoun of the Deity, “he” vs. “He” (21, 172). There are too many to list here. Granted, working with a third-party publisher can contribute to the above stated errors, but in the end the author must take ownership for the final body of the work.

In the end this reviewer cannot recommend this book, for Sammons falls short in proving his thesis. The Bible does not teach that God hated the non-elect before they were born and Scripture nowhere says that in eternity past God “predestined” the non-elect to eternal damnation. This controversial and complex issue of the divine decrees relative to the damned requires greater exegetical expertise than Sammons can muster. As a result, he loses the delicate scriptural balance, thus clouding and even undermining the Bible’s teaching on election and perdition. As alternatives, the reader who wants to study these doctrines further should consult better, more tempered works by more mature and nuanced exegetes such as George Zemek’s, *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace*, Michael Horton’s *Justification* (two volumes), and John MacArthur’s, *The Love of God*, to name a few.

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