

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY JOURNAL

issued by

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY

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**EDITORIAL:
TRAINING MEN FOR PASTORAL MINISTRY**

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* * * * *

Forty years ago, in 1986, The Master’s Seminary (TMS) became a formal institution training men to become pastors, shepherds, and missionaries.¹ The name, The Master’s Seminary, underscores that the seminary belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ and that every man who comes through the program is to submit himself to Christ’s authority. The seminary’s mission was and remains “to train men for pastoral ministry—to preach the Word of God, reach the world for Christ, and teach others to do the same.”² This mandate is taken directly from 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul charged Timothy, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Then focusing specifically on preaching and pastoring, Paul added, “Preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). This is the objective of The Master’s Seminary.

As the seminary strives to produce men who would fulfill their ministry faithfully and who could truly be called “The Master’s Men,” it focuses on raising up men of God. When TMS was launched, Dr. MacArthur wrote to the students: “The essential emphasis of the new seminary may be summarized in the phrase, ‘Building a man of God.’”³ From the very outset, TMS was committed to developing men who would demonstrate the fundamental traits of a man of God: godly character and biblical convictions.⁴ Godly character is a non-negotiable for effective ministry. For this reason, TMS faculty meet with the students weekly in Discipleship Labs to focus on the practice of personal holiness. Godly character, then, manifests itself in biblical

¹ In this *TMSJ* issue, see Irv A. Busenitz, “Seminary Goes Back to Church: A Short History of The Master’s Seminary” *TMSJ* 37, no. 1 (2026): 5–26.

² See “Producing Preachers Since 1986,” at <https://tms.edu/mission/>.

³ Busenitz, “Seminary Goes Back to Church,” 15.

⁴ In this *TMSJ* issue, see Nathan Busenitz, “The Fundamentals of a Faithful Pastor: Godly Character and Biblical Convictions,” *TMSJ* 37, no. 1 (2026): 41–52.

convictions. At TMS, these convictions are cultivated in courses that carefully expound Scripture—courses on biblical languages, hermeneutics, theology, exposition, and preaching. TMS contends that “Expositors are born from sound theology, an accurate view of Scripture, a precise hermeneutic, and a comprehensive understanding of the biblical languages. Such knowledge ignites love for God, His Word, and His people. It cultivates humble hearts that long for holiness.”⁵ Men with godly character and biblical convictions strive to be able to say, with the Apostle Paul, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1).

Holding to a high view of Scripture and seeing Scripture as the final authority, TMS trains men to interpret the Word of God accurately. Paul charged Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). With this as a fundamental objective, TMS emphasizes the accurate interpretation of Scripture through the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic. Included in the current issue of the journal is The Master’s Seminary Statement on Hermeneutics, which lists thirty-five articles pertaining to the accurate interpretation of Scripture. TMS was committed to this hermeneutic when the seminary was launched and it continues to be committed to it to this day.

Since the day the seminary was born, God has blessed its efforts tremendously. The seminary has graduated over 2,500 students who have come from all around the world: United States, Israel, Egypt, Lebanon, Russia, Ukraine, England, Mexico, Portugal, Kenya, South Africa, India, and numerous other countries.⁶ Because the need for biblical training is great and global, The Master’s Academy International (TMAI) was founded in 2004, establishing training centers throughout the world to achieve the same mission: to train men for ministry. Currently, TMAI directs nineteen training centers with 7,500 graduates in key global locations. Dr. MacArthur would frequently say, “You take care of the depth; God will take care of the breadth.” God has proved this to be true through the work of TMS and its partner TMAI. All these efforts ultimately strive to fulfill one goal: to build the church of Christ. In Matthew 16:18, Christ declared, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” TMS serves as God’s instrument through which Christ is building His church.

This 40th anniversary edition of *The Master’s Seminary Journal* offers a study of various topics related to pastoral ministry. In the first article, Irv A. Busenitz provides a brief history of The Master’s Seminary and the intentionality of having a seminary on a church campus (“Seminary Goes Back to Church: A Short History of The Master’s Seminary”). Then, a re-publication by John MacArthur exhorts pastors to exposit Scripture faithfully (“Preach the Word: Five Compelling Motivations for the Faithful Expositor”). Nathan Busenitz follows this with a call for pastors to be men of godly character and biblical convictions (“The Fundamentals of a Faithful Pastor: Godly Character and Biblical Convictions”). After this, Mark Zhakevich expositions the theme of discipleship in the Gospel of John and the benefits God promises His disciples (“Follow Me’: Jesus’ Call to Discipleship in the Gospel of John”). Brian Biedebach addresses the responsibility and practice of discipleship in the local church

⁵ See “Producing Preachers Since 1986,” at <https://tms.edu/mission/>.

⁶ See the 2024 TMS Annual Report at <https://tms.edu/annual-report/>.

(“Will You Disciple Me?: A Busy Pastor’s Response to a Common Question”). John D. Street, Jr., then, describes the power of God to transform sinners repenting of homosexuality—in their conduct and in their heart (“Can a Homosexual Change?: A Counseling Question in Pastoral Ministry”). Focusing on the Old Testament, William D. Barrick underscores the importance of properly interpreting and teaching the doctrine of creation (“Pastoral Ministry and Creation Doctrine”). Keith Essex further helps pastors prepare to preach Old Testament narrative, and includes a sample sermon on Ezra-Nehemiah (“Preaching the Old Testament: The Book of Ezra-Nehemiah”).

Finally, Abner Chou emphasizes the importance of hermeneutics for interpreting Scripture and introduces The Master’s Seminary Statement on Hermeneutics (“We Declare All They Intended: A Preamble to The Master’s Seminary Statement on Hermeneutics”). The journal closes with two parts: The Master’s Seminary Statement on Hermeneutics, listing thirty-five articles on the accurate interpretation of Scripture, and a list of the TMS faculty names and signatures, affirming this statement on hermeneutics.

Forty years after being established, TMS remains firm in its focus. The TMS faculty wholeheartedly affirm that “The founders of The Master’s Seminary were united in sound doctrine and committed to the quality, integrity, and vision of the seminary. Today, we remain true to their convictions.”⁷

⁷ <https://tms.edu/mission/>.

THE CORE TENETS OF REFORMED THEOLOGY



A collection of five essays by John MacArthur, *The Doctrines of Grace* articulates the core tenets of Reformed theology. This book anchors these glorious doctrines in the text of Scripture, showing that God has clearly revealed His divine prerogative to save desperate, unworthy sinners through His matchless grace alone. Any reader will be encouraged with the reminders of one's absolute inability to secure or earn salvation, God's unconditional election of sinners, His provision of actual atonement, His effectual call of them unto salvation, and His preservation of them in persevering faith in eternal life.

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SEMINARY GOES BACK TO CHURCH: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MASTER’S SEMINARY

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* * * * *

The history of The Master’s Seminary (TMS) is a testimony of God’s faithfulness to build His church. In line with Paul’s charge to Timothy, TMS has sought to train men for ministry—to produce churchmen (2 Tim 2:2). With this mission as its primary objective, TMS employs a curriculum that equips men with both rigorous study of Scripture (e.g., biblical languages, theology, hermeneutics) and practical ministry skills (e.g., preaching, discipleship, counseling). The TMS campus is strategically based on the premises of Grace Community Church to provide the men with a model of a biblical church, so that they could observe a commitment to expository preaching and to compassionate shepherding. The global influence of TMS over the past forty years can be attributed to nothing other than the mighty work of God.

* * * * *

Introduction

With the Vietnam War winding down and a growing number of men leaving the military, many veterans were contemplating what to do with their lives. Having become eyewitnesses of the travesties of war and the dire need for spiritual leadership in the church, the number of men who sensed God’s call to meet that need was growing rapidly. At the same time, the Jesus People movement was taking root as well. Churches were reaching out to the hippy, anti-war culture, focusing on beach and campus evangelism. Parachurch organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ,¹ InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and the Navigators joined in.

With that exponential growth, seminaries began contemplating the idea of starting extension campuses. Bethel Seminary in Minneapolis, MN, launched an

¹ Later known as CRU.

extension campus in San Diego, CA. Western Seminary in Portland, OR, followed suit, opening campuses in Phoenix, AZ, San Jose, CA, and Sacramento, CA. Starting daughter campuses provided a simple way to fill the void and meet the growing need for ministry training in this expanding market. It was during this time that Talbot Theological Seminary approached Dr. John MacArthur about the prospect of launching an extension campus at Grace Community Church of the Valley located at the northern edge of Los Angeles. It was a fitting choice. Following MacArthur's graduation from Talbot in 1964, he had served as a traveling representative for the seminary, holding Bible conferences across the nation for a few years prior to accepting the call to pastor Grace Community Church in February, 1969.

The Vision

“The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2).

When MacArthur began his ministry at Grace Church, he was deeply committed to following the example of the Apostle Paul (Acts 19:8–10).² Growing up in a pastor's home and being the fifth generation in a line of pastors, he witnessed firsthand the biblical mandate for building a strong foundation and the importance of passing the torch of a ministry founded on “the whole counsel of God” (20:27). It was not long before he organized a men's leadership study on Saturday mornings to study theology, beginning with ecclesiology—the New Testament pattern for the church. His pursuit of this commitment soon led to the development of the Logos Bible Institute, church-based seminars designed “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12).

The impact was both immediate and remarkable. Within a few years, the Moody Monthly magazine published an article entitled: “The Church with 900 Ministers.”³ Soon, the church was sending a busload of future pastors and church leaders an hour down the freeway to attend Talbot Theological Seminary in La Mirada, the place where MacArthur himself had completed his seminary studies less than a decade earlier.

To accommodate the growing number of students commuting to the La Mirada campus multiple times each week, Talbot and Grace Church entered into an agreement to establish an extension campus at the church in Fall 1977.⁴ This relationship would allow Talbot to serve pastors and church leaders who lived at a distance by providing them the opportunity to attend seminary. And, equally important, it would permit Talbot to broaden its influence without the need to expand its physical footprint.

Orthodoxy with Orthopraxy

While a fully accredited seminary education to students living at a distance from La Mirada was a benefit of the extension campus, it was not the driving motivation—

² While on his third missionary journey, Paul met daily with a group of disciples for a period of two years in the school of Tyrannus, a training directly related to the local church in Ephesus (cf. Acts 20:17–32).

³ Lowell Sanders, “The Church with 900 Ministers,” *Moody Monthly* (June 1972).

⁴ Cf. Memorandum of Understanding, November 29, 1978.

at least not from MacArthur's perspective. Rather, it was his desire to initiate a unique church-seminary relationship, one that would provide an in-depth integration of the academy with practical ministry training, all within the environment of a local church. It was a strategic and intentional re-engagement of the local church in the training of men for ministry. Historically, seminary training was an integral part of the local church; churches would prepare their own pastors. But over time churches began to realize that, while they were able to prepare their young pastors in the practical duties of ministry, they found it difficult to provide the necessary training in theology and the biblical languages. As a result, church denominations began deferring the role of training pastors to their seminaries. Not surprisingly, this arrangement made pastoral training less than effective; seminaries soon became bastions of the academy at the expense of practical ministry training. Educators and pastors alike increasingly realized the need to integrate the church and the seminary in a more intimate manner. No longer was it possible to send a man away to seminary for three or four years and then have him return fully prepared to undertake the responsibilities of pastoring a church. He had mastered the academic but felt ill-equipped to provide the pastoral skills.

It was not Talbot's goal to address this bifurcation by placing a seminary extension on the campus of Grace Church. It was not their intention to renew the historical role of the local church in seminary preparation. Rather, their desire was simply to provide a place where this growing pool of students could train. As with most seminaries, they recognized the need to incorporate practical ministry courses into the curriculum, hoping that this would adequately satisfy the practical training so necessary for an effective pastoral ministry. But the outcome was a struggle to accomplish. Unable to achieve an effective balance of both, the seminaries became increasingly academic at the expense of developing ministry skills. Consequently, integrating the seminary classroom within the environment of a vibrant local church was truly imperative to effectively amalgamate orthodoxy with orthopraxy.

In contrast, by integrating the academic with the practical, MacArthur and Grace Church sought to reunite the church and the seminary. When approached about hosting an extension campus, they seized the opportunity to reverse the historical trend. It was not a campus where the young men were taken out of the local church for three or four years of seminary. It was not a campus where the doctrine of the church was viewed predominately through the eyes of the academician. On the contrary, the presence of a seminary on the campus of Grace Church addressed and enhanced the training and intensified the modeling (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 2 Tim 2:2). Not only were students exposed visually to the inner workings of the body of Christ, but they were taught in the classroom by academically trained professors who were also pastors and elders. Seminaries were beginning to recognize the need to hire professors who can teach out of their pastoral experiences, bringing real life situations into the classroom and amalgamating the academic training with the acquisition of ministry skills. It was their way of avoiding the ivory tower syndrome.

Thus, from its inception, The Master's Seminary designed its curriculum to give close attention to the ministry preparation of its students, not only in their use of the biblical languages and theology, but also in their ministry skills. This unique campus integration provided a model community in which ministry students could be nurtured in the *sine qua non*s of biblical ecclesiology and, at the same time, be

disciplined in the practical skills by ministering in/to the flock. In many respects, it was like attending a medical school based at a teaching hospital. Seminary students, even those who attended churches other than Grace, were continually exposed to and impacted by the very thing they were being trained to do. From its beginning, the ministry training was tangibly and uniquely immersed in a ministry setting which extended beyond the students' personal involvement in the local church; their academic preparation in the biblical languages, theology, and church history were inextricably intertwined with the acquisition of ministry skills.

Christianity Today, noting the uniqueness of this approach, observed: "This program combines classical seminary education—languages, theology, church history, hermeneutics—with the practical training required for the pastorate.... Instead of taking young people out of the church for three or four years of seminary, Grace has moved the seminary campus in-house to give its young people on-the-job training."⁵ Surrounded daily by all the elements of church life, it is in many respects a continual field education experience. As James Boice notes, "The church and seminary complement each other.... Neither can function effectively without the other. The seminary needs the church. The church needs the seminary."⁶

Unique Schedule

Not only was the concept of a church-based seminary education enticing, but the Tuesday/Thursday weekly class schedule was equally attractive. Initially designed to give students the opportunity to commute to the La Mirada campus on Wednesdays and Fridays, it proved to be advantageous in other ways as well. It reduced the number of days the students needed to commute to the extension campus. Attending classes only two days per week made it more conducive to engage in ministry and/or employment opportunities during the rest of the week. And it reduced commuting costs as well. As a result, a growing number of students from across the southern California region chose to attend the extension campus. Even some students who were relocating from across the nation were choosing to matriculate at the extension campus.⁷

Resident Leadership

Having taught at Talbot for two years (1974–1976), Dr. Irv Busenitz became acquainted with many of the students commuting from GCC. After completing the majority of his doctoral residency at Grace Theological Seminary in the summer of 1977, Busenitz was invited to oversee the launch of the Talbot Valley Extension Campus and teach Old Testament language and Bible.⁸ In addition, he was

⁵ David Singer, "Seminary Goes to Church," *Christianity Today* (February 10, 1978): 17.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, "Church and Seminary: A Reciprocal Relationship," *Christianity Today* (January 2, 1979): 15.

⁷ By the start of the third year, the student enrollment had expanded from sixty-eight to 104.

⁸ *Grace to You*, vol. 77, no 10, October 1977. "Irv Busenitz, a graduate of Talbot and a Th.D. candidate at Grace Seminary in Indiana, will be serving as the Seminary coordinator for the extension campus. He will also teach as an assistant professor at Talbot. Irv and his wife, Karen, presently live in La

responsible for the administrative oversight of the curriculum, student counseling, and alumni. With enrollment growth came the need for additional faculty. Dr. Marc Mueller, a recent graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, joined the extension faculty in the fall 1978 semester, teaching theology. The remaining academic classes were taught by faculty commuting from the La Mirada campus; ministry classes were taught by Grace Church pastoral staff and augmented by pastoral staff from the local area.

Remarkable Growth

While Talbot was concerned the enrollment might be insufficient to cover its financial obligations that first year, Grace Church was not.⁹ To alleviate any concerns, the church agreed to cover unanticipated expenses, should enrollment fail to reach forty-five. As the church anticipated, sixty-eight students enrolled that first semester. The first semester began on September 20, 1977, with a full slate of classical seminary courses, including Hebrew, Greek, Church History, Hermeneutics, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Missions/Evangelism. Over the next few years, additional classes were added to the campus offerings, making it possible for students to reduce the number of days needed to commute to the La Mirada campus.

With its enrollment growth and expansion of classes, the campus soon became known less as an extension site and more as a full-fledged seminary.¹⁰ To reflect this development, the name was changed to Talbot Valley Campus to more accurately communicate the extent and quality of what was being offered.

The Birth

After Grace Community Church had hosted the Talbot Valley Extension Campus for nine years, The Master's Seminary was birthed in the summer of 1986. The name, The Master's Seminary, was chosen to note its relationship with The Master's College¹¹ and to emphasize the ownership of the new seminary. It belonged to The Master, Jesus Christ.

Reflecting on the remarkable occasion, Dr. Mayhue recounts:

Together with the faculty, staff, and local pastors, ninety-five students gathered on August 28, 1986 for the inaugural convocation chapel. Word of the seminary's birth spread quickly. A well-defined focus on godly character, biblical knowledge, and ministry skills not only attracted prospective students

Mirada, but are moving to the Valley to be a part of the Grace family. They are expecting their first child in February.”

⁹ With his office located above the rear of the chapel, Busenitz recalls how daily he would enter the chapel and pray that the Lord would one day fill the chapel with men preparing for ministry.

¹⁰ In preparation for the start of the new Talbot extension campus, a small library of approximately 5,000 volumes was hurriedly assembled. A majority of the copies came from the Narramore School of Psychology, which had recently merged with BIOLA.

¹¹ The Master's College, originally founded in 1927 as the Los Angeles Baptist Seminary, became The Master's College in 1985 and The Master's University in 2012.

from across America and from many other countries, but additionally impressed the regional accrediting association: “The seminary has been very intentional in its development of an M.Div. program with few analogies in the US, distinguished above all by its almost single-minded commitment to the preparation of ordained pastors. Combining church-based involvement, personal discipleship, and academic study..., the seminary is on the cutting edge of reform.”¹²

Knowing that education is caught as well as taught, Grace Church opened wide her arms to the men coming for training. Students continually observe firsthand the biblical characteristics of ministry. The pastoral staff give their time and expertise to provide a full package of ministry preparation. Our students receive solid, biblical training in the classroom and also experience a vital, dynamic church community in which to be disciplined and nurtured. TMS and GCC in partnership serve as a “living lab” to train future pastors.¹³

The move to end the relationship with Talbot and begin its own seminary was not unexpected. When the Talbot Valley Extension Campus was launched in 1977, Dr. Vern Doerksen, the Associate Dean at Talbot, confided that Talbot was uncertain how long the new extension campus would maintain its relationship with Talbot. It was common knowledge, he noted, that MacArthur had expressed a desire to start his own seminary. In 1985, MacArthur was invited to become the President of The Master’s College. The college was originally founded as the Los Angeles Baptist Seminary in 1927. Two decades later, an undergraduate division was added. Then, in 1971, the seminary division separated from the college and moved to the Pacific Northwest to occupy the newly acquired Weyerhaeuser mansion in Tacoma, WA. With a seminary being a part of the school historically, coupled with MacArthur’s lifelong desire to train men for the pastoral ministry, it was a natural step to entertain the development of a seminary alongside The Master’s College.

There were a number of factors that prompted such a move at this time.

The Cost

The cost of seminary tuition across the nation was beginning to increase exponentially. The responsibility to carry the cost of training for full-time ministry was being placed upon those least able to handle it—pastoral and missionary trainees. As a result, many students, some of whom were already carrying debt from their undergraduate studies, were experiencing increasing difficulty to pay their seminary tuition. Although the extension campus was generating revenue in excess of its own expenses, Talbot continued to raise the cost of tuition.

¹² Richard Mayhue, “Editorial,” *TMSJ* 17, no. 1 (2006): 1.

¹³ Mayhue, 1.

The Counsel

Dr. Roberta Hestenes, an ordained Presbyterian faculty member at Fuller Theological Seminary and a well-known egalitarian, was invited by BIOLA to lecture the Talbot faculty on how to relate to women students. This occasion seemed unusual in light of the fact that BIOLA had numerous women faculty members that could have fulfilled this request. Instead, the executive leadership of BIOLA began promoting an egalitarian agenda contrary to the biblical understanding of the Talbot faculty.

The Control

It was during this time that BIOLA began moving toward becoming a university. Born in 1952 under the leadership of Dr. Charles Feinberg, Talbot Seminary operated for twenty-five years with relative independence from the BIOLA administration. With the retirement of Feinberg¹⁴ and the development of the university model, Talbot lost its independence, being subsumed under the University as one of the schools. Once adopted, the Rosemead School of Psychology, the School of Intercultural Studies, and the School of Arts and Sciences, began to exert their influence on Talbot's curriculum and hiring decisions. The synergistic model began to make inroads into the operation of the seminary and to redirect its historical philosophy of ministry.

The Circumstances

In 1983, Dr. Wendell Johnston was named the new Dean of Talbot School of Theology. It was well known that Dr. Johnston had accepted the position with the intention of making this his final ministry appointment before retiring. Contrary to his intentions, the BIOLA administration repeatedly opposed his leadership at Talbot, causing him to resign abruptly after only three years. As the Director of the Talbot Valley Campus, Busenitz was aware of the difficulties Johnston faced and thus felt the time had come to terminate the formal relationship between Talbot and the Valley campus. On Monday, March 31, 1986, Busenitz made an appointment with President MacArthur to discuss the recent developments and concerns at Talbot. Agreeing with the prognosis and given the relatively short time before the start of the fall 1986 semester, MacArthur asked Busenitz to put together two plans of action, one for starting that fall and one for a fall 1987 start.¹⁵

On May 20, 1986, Dr. MacArthur had lunch with BIOLA President, Dr. Clyde Cook, and with Dr. Bob Ricker, a member of the BIOLA Board of Directors, hoping to circumvent the start of a new seminary. Following that meeting, Dr. MacArthur came to Busenitz's office and announced, "We're on for this fall."

¹⁴ Once the age of sixty-five was reached, BIOLA's employment contracts were extended only on a year-by-year basis. Eager to chart a different course institutionally, the administration chose to no longer permit Feinberg to serve as Dean of the seminary.

¹⁵ See "Contingency Plans" memo (dated May 2, 1986) and "Suggested Transfer Steps" memo (dated May 5, 1986).

The following week, Busenitz and Mueller were summoned to the La Mirada campus to meet with the BIOLA/Talbot School of Theology administration. Both men were specifically asked to move to La Mirada and continue with Talbot. Both declined and thanked them for the privilege of serving at Talbot for the better part of a decade.

The Foundation

Starting the new seminary on short notice required generating a plethora of announcements. Both current and prospective students needed to be alerted regarding the new developments and how these might impact their plans for the upcoming fall.¹⁶

But while these required the attention of the administration, there were crucial decisions that mandated consideration—decisions that would significantly chart the future direction of the new school.

Unified Doctrine

To maximize the impact of the church on the new seminary, it was imperative that the seminary have a carefully articulated doctrinal statement, one that was identical to The Master's College and Grace Community Church. If each institution was tasked with the responsibility of keeping the other accountable, then they must share and embrace a common doctrine.¹⁷ To avoid doctrinal drift, it was agreed that a doctrinal review of the seminary should be conducted every three years by a committee of elders from GCC. In the event that the doctrinal stance of GCC should drift from its present compatibility with the doctrinal position of the college and seminary, The Master's College and Seminary Board of Directors would, by unanimous vote, select another church faithful to this charter to provide accountability.¹⁸

Mandated Charter

Cognizant of the propensity of a school's faculty to move away from its biblical moorings, the Board of Directors of The Master's College and Seminary (TMCS), wrote a charter

to secure the future theological integrity of The Master's College and Seminary. Knowing that many schools have begun with strong biblical positions yet over

¹⁶ See packet entitled "Inaugural Procedures."

¹⁷ More than a century earlier, Robert Shindler had warned: "The first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred scriptures. All the while a man bows to the authority of God's word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary to its teaching.... But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him" ("The Down Grade," in *The Sword and the Trowel* [April 1887]: 168). Charles Spurgeon added: "Our warfare is with men who are giving up the atoning sacrifice, denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and casting slurs upon justification by faith" ("Another Word Concerning the Down Grade," in *The Sword and the Trowel* [August, 1887]: 399).

¹⁸ Cf. Purpose Statement of TMCS, adopted October 7, 1986.

the years have moved away from those positions, and that the diversity of an educational environment can tend toward a complex pluralism rather than a unified focus around the dominance of the Word of God, and that there is a tendency to compromise under the pressure of financial needs, academic pride, student or faculty opinion, and also knowing that Satan will work to destroy any institution that is on the cutting edge of the Kingdom of Christ as it slides into the dominion of darkness, the Board of Directors affirms that adherence to the following charter will by all present and future leaders be mandated.¹⁹

Unreserved Purpose

“The Master’s College and Seminary exist to advance the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ by equipping men and women for excellence in service to Him in strategic fields of ministry and vocation through unreserved commitment to worshipping God, submitting to the authority of the Scriptures, nurturing personal holiness, serving the local church, and penetrating the world with the Truth.”²⁰

Philosophy of Ministry

In light of its rapid launch, TMS maintained the same curriculum as the previous nine years under the leadership of Talbot Seminary. However, in anticipation of and in preparation for the second year and beyond, the President called a meeting for July 30, 1986, to plan, pray, and ponder the seminary’s basic commitments and distinctives.²¹

1. A Commitment to the Local Church

It was deemed imperative that the students, faculty, and staff should be faithfully involved in a local church which exalts the Lord Jesus Christ, faithfully teaches His Word, and is in accordance with the Statement of Faith. During the early years of the seminary, there were thoughts of relocating the seminary from GCC to the TMC campus. The proximity of the seminary to the undergraduate campus, it was argued, would integrate the graduate students into the lives of the college students. Furthermore, it could provide an instant campus, avoiding the need for a significant and costly building program that would otherwise be required if staying on the GCC campus.

While there were some positive reasons to consider this, the philosophy that undergirded the training of seminarians mitigated against such a move. Believing that the local church is the proper laboratory for ministry preparation, it provided significant impetus for keeping the seminary on the campus of Grace Church. As noted earlier, it would provide an unequalled pedagogical dynamic, exposing the students to a comprehensive and realistic framework of ministry. While some

¹⁹ Preface to The Master’s College and Seminary Charter, October 7, 1986.

²⁰ Purpose Statement of TMCS, adopted October 7, 1986.

²¹ Cf. July 21, 1986 memo from John MacArthur.

students would be ministering in other area churches, their presence on the campus of a large, vibrant church would provide daily exposure to ongoing ministry.

Therefore, the location for ministry training was judged to be strategic. Pastoral preparation is more than being grounded in theology or learning the biblical languages. Being prepared in the practical aspects requires modeling. It is something that is caught as well as taught. The practicalities of ministry are under the spotlight. Because of the vital relationship between the academic and practical in-church training, the seminary agreed to maintain its residence on the church campus. The location is an integral part of the seminary's unique approach to theological training.

2. *A Focus on Ordination*

Believing that Scripture limits the role of pastoral leadership to men, the seminary from its beginning was committed to maintaining a singular focus of training men only. While the seminary is not opposed to women receiving theological training *per se* (attested by the number of women enrolled in biblical and theological courses at TMU), it was determined that The Master's Seminary would focus on training with a view toward ordination to pastoral ministry. In order to achieve that, a class specifically designed to prepare graduates for ordination was incorporated into the curriculum.

The majority of students studying at the Talbot Valley Campus were enrolled in the Master of Divinity, a degree program focused on ordination to pastoral ministry. However, a few were matriculated in the Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministry. In the transition, TMS informed its current students that the new seminary would allow students to transfer straight across—all credits earned at Talbot would be accepted at TMS. However, with the new seminary's focus on ordination, it was the intention of TMS to admit men only. Consequently, it was decided that the new seminary would allow the handful of M.A. students previously enrolled at the TVC to finish at TMS.

3. *The Centrality of Biblical Languages*

While most seminaries are pursuing a reduction or elimination of biblical languages in the core curriculum, TMS is committed to maintaining a robust requirement of learning the Hebrew and Greek languages. The value of studying a biblical text in the language in which it was revealed cannot be overstated. God's propositional revelation of Himself calls for learning the language in which it was revealed.

4. *Building Character through Discipleship*

Convinced that the primary cause of failure in ministry is a lack of personal holiness, TMS reiterated its unreserved commitment to developing personal holiness in the life of each student. To give more than mere lip service to this endeavor, each faculty member was committed to nurturing Christlikeness in the life of each student, meeting weekly with a small group of students to focus on issues of spiritual character.

Assembling the Administrative Team

After becoming the president of The Master's College in 1985, MacArthur's first action was to invite Dr. Robert Provost to fill the role of Executive Vice President at TMC. This appointment reflected MacArthur's overarching commitment from the very beginning to inculcate into the heart of every student an ardent passion for reaching the lost. Providentially, Provost had an undergraduate degree in International Business with a minor in the Russian language. After God saved him, he enrolled at Grace Theological Seminary in Warsaw, IN, and became increasingly active in missions.

During that first year, Provost hired Dr. Charles Smith to serve as the head of the Biblical Studies division at TMC and begin the process of starting a new seminary as a part of TMC. While a student at Grace Seminary, Provost was significantly impacted by Smith's teaching and, as a result, a strong bond developed between them. Smith was a gifted teacher with a heart for discipleship. He had a passion for preparing men not only academically, but also for discipling them spiritually. To facilitate this passion, a weekly Discipleship Lab, led by faculty members with a small group of students, was incorporated into the seminary's curriculum. As stated in the June 1986 press release: "Locating the seminary on the campus of Grace Community Church is an integral part of The Master's Seminary's unique approach to theological training. Not only will seminary classes meet on the church campus..., but seminarians will also be trained in the dynamic multiple ministries of the growing church. The seminary will also provide a strong discipleship emphasis."²² As a result, the weekly gathering of each faculty member with a group of students morphed into a Pastoral Ministry roundtable. These Discipleship Groups became a staple of the seminary's endeavor to impact the lives of students.

In light of Busenitz's March 31 meeting with MacArthur, the plan to develop a new seminary as a part of TMC was altered slightly. Instead of building a totally new seminary from the ground up, the Talbot Valley Extension Campus would join The Master's College, with Smith serving as the Vice President and Dean and Dr. Irv Busenitz as the Associate Dean. A few weeks later, MacArthur officially announced the birth of The Master's Seminary, informing both current and prospective students of the focus of the new seminary. He wrote: "The essential emphasis of the new seminary may be summarized in the phrase, 'Building a man of God.'"²³

Some years prior, after completing his MDiv and ThM degrees at Talbot, Dr. Irv Busenitz was hired by Dr. Charles Feinberg to cover the absence of Dr. James Rosscup, a Talbot professor who was granted an extended sabbatical to pursue a PhD in Aberdeen, Scotland. After teaching Old Testament and Bible for two years on Talbot's La Mirada campus, Busenitz moved to Winona Lake, IN, to pursue a ThD at Grace Theological Seminary. At the end of his residency in the summer of 1977, Talbot, at the request of Grace Community Church, invited him to move to the San Fernando Valley that fall and oversee the launch of the Talbot Valley Extension Campus (TVEC). Upon completing his ThD in 1980, he continued to

²² June 10, 1986 press release.

²³ Cf. "Dear Prospective Student" (June 11, 1986), and "The Birth of a Seminary" press release (June 17, 1986).

give leadership to the TVEC until the birth of The Master's Seminary in 1986. He served as Associate Dean of the new seminary until 1994, when he was promoted to Vice President of Academic Administration. He was named Dean of Faculty in 2014 and retired in 2018.

At the beginning of TVEC's second year (1978), Talbot invited Marc Mueller to join the extension campus faculty to teach in the area of Theology. He had just completed his Master of Theology degree at Dallas Theological Seminary that spring. He was a gifted teacher and deeply loved by the students. In the early 1980's, he was granted a sabbatical to complete his PhD studies at Cambridge University in England. In 1990, he resigned to serve in a pastoral position in the Pacific Northwest. He had served alongside Busenitz for twelve years and was greatly missed after his departure. He had a profound impact on the theological perspectives of the seminary students and Grace Community Church.²⁴

Shortly before the passing of Smith in 1990, Dr. Richard Mayhue was appointed as the Executive Vice President and Dean of The Master's Seminary, a position he held until his retirement.²⁵ Mayhue had joined The Master's Seminary in 1989 as Professor of Pastoral Ministries. His rich academic background, coupled with significant pastoral experience, equipped him well to lead TMS for almost three decades. After graduating from Grace Theological Seminary, he served as an Associate Pastor at the Columbus, OH Grace Brethren Church. Among his many ministries, he was given the responsibility of developing and overseeing its lay Bible Institute program before returning to his alma mater to lecture in theology and complete his ThD.

In the spring of 1980, MacArthur was the featured Bible Conference speaker at Grace Theological Seminary. As a result of this providential encounter, Mayhue was invited by MacArthur to join the Grace Church pastoral staff as his personal assistant and to launch the annual Shepherds' Conference. After four years at GCC, he accepted an invitation to serve as the Senior Pastor of the historic Grace Brethren Church in Long Beach, CA.

Cognizant of Smith's rapid spread of lung cancer and his imminent retirement, MacArthur invited Mayhue to join the TMS faculty in the fall of 1989 as the Director of Pastoral Ministry and to prepare to transition into the leadership at TMS.²⁶ He was well-qualified to give leadership to the seminary, causing the seminary to blossom under his guidance. His varied ministry assignments and educational opportunities prepared him well for his next assignment—leading The Master's Seminary.

²⁴ One of the greatest impacts Mueller left was on the Lordship Salvation issue. Mueller had studied under Drs. S. Lewis Johnson and Edwin Bloom at Dallas Seminary, both of whom were strong advocates of the issue.

²⁵ At his retirement, MacArthur named him Research Professor of Theology, Dean of The Master's Seminary Emeritus, and named the Annual Faculty Lectures as the Dr. Richard L. Mayhue Faculty Lectures Series.

²⁶ See the feature article from *Grace Today* 6, no. 26 (July 1, 1990).

Developing the Curriculum

Since the decision to launch the new seminary was not made officially until the end of May 1986, it was decided to offer the same core curriculum offered during the previous nine years. Everything was in place. Syllabi were printed and ready to go. Teaching commitments for full-time faculty had been made. Adjunct professors were arranged as well. With rare exception, students knew what classes they needed to complete their degree requirements. This made it possible to avoid rushing into premature curricular decisions.

The following January, a three-day faculty retreat was convened for the purpose of reviewing the seminary's *raison d'être* and articulating the impact of that on the curriculum.²⁷ After much prayer and discussion, it was concluded that the focus of the curriculum should be driven by three desired outcomes: what the TMS graduate is to **BE** (character), **KNOW** (biblical knowledge), and **DO** (ministry skills).

With the desired outcomes agreed upon, each faculty member was given a blank sheet on which to identify his desired model. President MacArthur, for example, lobbied for six semesters of both Hebrew and Greek language and exegesis. Smith wanted a curriculum that included the study of every book of the Bible. Busenitz argued for six semesters of preaching. While everyone agreed the suggested courses were worthy of consideration, they were equally cognizant of the need to limit the length of the Master of Divinity degree program to the "industry standard" of approximately three years.

After grappling with how to distribute the limited credit hours, the faculty agreed the curriculum should reflect the following:

Exegetically Grounded. If BEING, KNOWING, and DOING represent the ultimate outcome of the curriculum, it must be guided and instructed by the Scriptures rightly divided. The faculty was aware that, by the end of the nineteenth century, most denominational seminaries were moving away from an emphasis on the original languages and replacing them with electives on social issues. With the growing abundance of electronic helps, it was argued that the credit hours required for learning Hebrew and Greek could be better used in other ways. However, since the Scriptures are God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16) and conveyed through divine servants (2 Pet 1:21), then the pastor, "whose whole business it was as a preacher to expound the 'Word of God,' must indisputably possess a competent knowledge of the languages in which the word was conveyed to men."²⁸

Textually Focused. It was equally agreed that the Word preached must be textually driven. Expository preaching requires sermon outlines that are derived from the grammar and syntax of the text, taking the people through the divinely inspired emphasis of the text, word by word and phrase by phrase.

²⁷ Cf. Faculty Retreat on January 29–31, 1987.

²⁸ J. M. Powis Smith, "The Value of the Old Testament in the Curriculum," *Biblical World* 53 (July 1919): 373.

Missions Impassioned. As the Iron and Bamboo Curtains began to fall, Dr. MacArthur's passion for missions began to infiltrate every fiber of the college and seminary. Ministry opportunities began to open in these heretofore closed countries. In 1991, Ukrainian churches invited Dr. MacArthur to come and speak at a pastors' conference, igniting the opportunity for TMS faculty members to come preach, teach, and develop pastoral training centers. News about underground churches revealed the presence of vibrant churches wanting theological grounding and pastoral training.

With invitations in hand and Drs. MacArthur and Provost leading the way, various faculty members were prepared to travel to survey the possibilities and confirm the opportunities. At the same time, The Believers Foundation began to aggressively underwrite the missionary endeavors of TMS graduates, enabling them to come alongside the churches in the former Soviet Union and begin training centers. Buoyed by the financial backing promised by The Believers Foundation, a growing number of the seminary's early graduates began serving overseas.

To facilitate the careful growth and stimulate the development of these training centers around the world, The Masters Academy International (TMAI) was launched in 2004. The roots of TMAI go back to 1991 when leaders of the Baptist Union from Ukraine first invited graduates of The Master's Seminary to help train their pastors. Since then, TMAI has grown from one training center to nineteen member schools and over 7,500 graduates.

Institutional Writing Projects

Academic research and publishing are valuable endeavors for a seminary faculty. *The Master's Seminary Journal (TMSJ)* has provided the TMS faculty and alumni a great opportunity to expand the seminary's influence around the world. Two anthologies of *TMSJ* articles, *The Master's Perspective Series*, were released by Kregel in Summer 1998. Two additional volumes followed in Summer 2002.

The first of a three-volume trilogy, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* was the first faculty-written volume. Published by Word Publishing in May 1992, the book was designed to bring the seminary curriculum together at the confluence of Bible exposition. It was awarded the Gold Medallion Award. A companion volume, *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry*, was released by Word Publishing in Spring 1995. Also authored by the seminary faculty, it addresses a broad spectrum of practical issues faced in ministry. A third volume, *Rediscovering Biblical Counseling*, was co-authored by faculty members at the University and Seminary.

The MacArthur Study Bible, published in 1997, was a major collaborative effort undertaken by the seminary faculty. Utilizing the preaching notes of Dr. MacArthur and enriched by the research of the TMS faculty, the MSB was completed in less than two years. Over the past twenty-five years, the Study Bible has been translated into nearly two dozen languages and published with five different English language translations—the New King James (NKJV), the New American Standard Bible (NAS), the English Standard Version (ESV), the New International Version (NIV), and the Legacy Standard Bible (LSB).

Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth was published in 2017. Garnered from a lifetime of study by John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue and augmented by TMS faculty, this one-volume magnum opus is comprised of more than 1,000 pages. Its comprehensive presentations are easily accessed with Scripture indexes and glossaries.

Pursuing Accreditation:
Western Association of Schools & Colleges
1986–2017

With the inauguration of the new seminary just a few short months away, the seminary immediately notified the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the regional accreditation association. The Master's College was already accredited by WASC; however, having begun the seminary without first securing the approval of WASC placed the accreditation of the undergraduate institution in jeopardy. Accreditation of TMC was imperative, allowing her to qualify for state and federal tuition grants. Without it, the college would not be able to exist. Though the seminary was not dependent on state and federal scholarships, regional accreditation through WASC was important. For one thing, it enabled men who had served in the military to receive assistance through the GI Bill. It also allowed graduates of TMS to qualify for post-graduate programs at other institutions and to serve as chaplains in the various branches of the military.

Consequently, the college immediately notified WASC to initiate the application process for accrediting the seminary. Under normal circumstances, this process requires a minimum of two years. Because the new seminary had been launched outside the normal process, Drs. Smith, John Stead (the TMC academic liaison officer), and Busenitz were summoned to the WASC headquarters in Oakland, CA, to answer why TMS should not be put on “probation” or “show cause” status.²⁹ WASC did not accept the explanation and rationale for our action. Instead, at their June 25–27, 1986 meeting, they stipulated that, because the seminary had been launched without prior Commission approval, TMS would not be allowed to enroll any new students at the graduate level for the fall 1986 semester.

Upon appeal, however, WASC graciously granted the seminary some reprieve. In light of the fact that a significant number of approved TMS applicants, including some international students, had already relocated to the campus for the fall 1986 semester, WASC granted a limited number of students to enroll. They also offered to accelerate the on-campus accreditation visit, making the seminary eligible for consideration at the Commission's February 1987 meeting.³⁰ Encouraged by their “olive branch,” the seminary vigorously began the application process, pouring significant energies and time into the Substantive Change application process. On October 10, 1986, the seminary submitted an application to the accrediting agency in preparation for a spring 1987 on-campus visit with WASC.³¹

²⁹ Cf. June 30, 1986 letter to Dr. MacArthur from WASC/Kay Andersen.

³⁰ See June 10, 1986 response by Kay Andersen to Dr. MacArthur.

³¹ See October 10, 1986 Substantive Change Report.

After submitting the application and hosting a team of educators assigned by WASC, TMS was given its official accreditation in June 1988. As a result of the second full accreditation visit, the regional accrediting association (WASC) stated in their February 1992 report:

The seminary has been very intentional in its development of an M.Div. program with few analogies in the U.S., distinguished above all by its almost single-minded commitment to the preparation of ordained pastors for leadership in the local church.... Given the fundamental focus of the Seminary, the structure of the M.Div. program seems well-oriented to its goals. The model itself, combining church-based involvement, personal discipleship, and academic study, is worth applauding, and it is not insignificant that at the level of degree structure, the Seminary is on the cutting-edge of reform in seminary education in this regard. In all three areas of the formal aspects of the academic curriculum—Bible, Theology, and Pastoral Ministries—a logical progression is detected, and discussions with the Faculty indicated a high degree of familiarity with how one aspect of the program integrates with other aspects. All of the interviewed alumni expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program, believing that the Seminary prepared them well for the ministries in which they are currently involved. (pp. 23–24)

Pursuing Accreditation:
Association of Theological Schools
2018–2026

In Fall 2018, the Board of Directors authorized the seminary to investigate the benefits of pursuing accreditation with the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).³² Initially, Dr. MacArthur was apprehensive regarding ATS accreditation. British author, Iain Murray, had very clearly noted the negative influence of AATS on the theology of graduate institutions in the twentieth century.³³ Consequently, TMS chose to maintain its accreditation with WASC, feeling that would be adequate.

Though the seminary greatly values its regional accreditation through WASC (now WSCUC), the school's administration became increasingly aware of the added benefits that come from specialized accreditation in the area of theological education.

Having completed and submitted their self-study in Fall 2023, a team of seven ATS colleagues arrived on-campus March 25–28, 2024 to assess their capability. As a result of the meeting, the ATS commissioners, having commended the seminary for the excellence of the program, approved the TMS application for membership in June 2024.

³² Initially known as American Association of Theological Schools (AATS), the name was changed to Association of Theological Schools (ATS) to accommodate the inclusion of schools outside the U.S.

³³ Cf. the concerns expressed by Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 187–97.

Building a Library

Over the nine years of existence as the Talbot Valley Extension Campus, a small library of approximately 5,000 volumes was accumulated. When the Rosemead School of Psychology merged with BIOLA in 1977, their Bible and theology collections were unneeded in the Talbot library and thus amalgamated into the Talbot Valley library. Later, when TMS was born, these volumes were purchased from Talbot. Additional current research materials were made accessible via the purchase of microfilm and microfiche readers.³⁴

In 1987, Smith invited Mr. Jim Stitzinger to join TMS as the Director of Library Services, bringing his library building skills to the seminary. A graduate of Grace Theological Seminary and the Library Director at Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary in PA, Stitzinger had a business buying libraries across the US. His skill in finding and purchasing sizeable graduate study libraries paid significant benefits. Within his first year, eight major collections were integrated into the TMS library, giving the seminary a total of 65,000 volumes on the shelves. The next year, an additional 25,000 volumes were purchased, processed, and integrated. On November 15, 1988, the seminary took possession of the general collection of periodicals from the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, Illinois. This collection of religious, theological, and pastoral periodicals numbered approximately 2,000, providing the seminary with a working collection of 5,000 periodicals. To accommodate this rapid expansion, the library moved from a small room across campus to the basement of the four-level Tower classroom building. The seminary also acquired GRAMCORD, a grammatical concordance of the Greek New Testament that allowed students to research any particular grammatical phrase or construction in the Greek New Testament.³⁵

Within a few years, the library grew from approximately 5,000 volumes to a major theological collection numbering over 250,000 volumes, with access to several million full-text online documents. Eleven major collections were acquired and merged into the collection, providing a rich depth and breadth of holdings in a wide spectrum of theological thought. Additional important collections representing various disciplines were purchased for the purpose of reaching back and obtaining original scholarship in the critical areas of biblical and theological studies with a view toward building a comprehensive collection in these disciplines.

During its early years, the library occupied the basement of the Tower building. But it was soon evident that the growth of the seminary created a pressing need for a facility in which to house the seminary library and protect the mammoth investment.³⁶ The goal was to provide a state-of-the-art facility,

³⁴ See memorandum dated June 9, 1986.

³⁵ See Dec 14, 1988 memo from Irv Busenitz to Dave Ball.

³⁶ On one occasion, a large downpour exposed the insufficient drainage capacity on Roscoe Blvd. Excess water from the street poured down the steps and inundated the library. Books along the bottom shelves got soaked. A Los Angeles firm that restored wet books was located and the damaged books were eventually reclaimed and returned to the shelves. In spring 1990, Stitzinger notified the administration and faculty that periodicals and books were “disappearing” from the library shelves. Occasionally, the contents of books were removed with a razorblade and then returned to the shelf, leaving no trace of any impropriety (see April 11, 1990 memo from Jim Stitzinger to faculty identifying the lost periodicals).

including administrative and faculty offices and a room from which to broadcast live around the world. Study carrels were added as well, each equipped with electronic hook-ups.

A groundbreaking service for the state-of-the-art library and office building took place immediately following the morning service on February 2, 1997. It was dedicated on March 8, 1998. The entire student body sang at both morning services (cf. *Grace Today*, March 8, 1998). On Thursday, April 2, 1998, classes were cancelled and the entire collection of books was hand carried from the basement of the Tower Building into the new library. In addition to shelving for 175,000 volumes, the facility included Library Archives for John MacArthur's Ministry, study space for 135 students, twenty-five faculty offices, conference rooms, private study areas, biblical manuscript room, reference and periodical areas, and a computerized research center.³⁷

Firmly committed not to burden current and future students with servicing an indebtedness, the 23,000 square foot The Master's Seminary Library opened its doors in March 1998, debt-free. The library is highly respected as an important resource center for biblical and theological studies on the west coast and serves as the major resource center for The Master's Seminary and the congregation of Grace Community Church.

Discipleship

A focus on discipleship was very important to Dr. Smith, the seminary's founding Dean. He strongly believed that pastors did not fail in ministry because of a lack of knowledge or an inability to preach. Rather, he was convinced that the primary cause of failure in ministry was due to the absence of personal holiness. In a June 17, 1986 letter, he writes: "I know that you can sense that from my perspective this is one of the most important aspects of our seminary training so I certainly want us to find a 'slot' for it."³⁸

And that we did. The seminary deemed it crucial to provide a setting in which the faculty and students were engaged in discussions relating to character and personal holiness. Consequently, an aggressive discipleship program was inaugurated, one that would ensure every student the opportunity to be nurtured toward Christlikeness in and through personal relationships with faculty, staff, and

³⁷ Owning a personal computer was just coming into vogue during the start of the new seminary. They were extremely beneficial, but they were expensive, especially for seminary students. In an effort to make computers available to its students, educational institutions were providing computer labs, usually located in the library. In a conversation with John Bates, an IBM Account Executive in early 1987 (cf. notes of phone conversation March 23, 1987), he encouraged Busenitz to "take the plunge," strongly encouraging TMS to require each student to buy a computer. He argued that it "was a bold but necessary statement and step ... that students of today need to be equipped to interact with computers." This was "cutting edge" stuff. TMS was one of the first seminaries in the country requiring students to purchase a personal computer, and to insert into the curriculum a class on how to use computers and their software in the ministry. Entitled "Pastoral Research and Records," the class was designed to prepare students on how to use various software programs for research and Bible study. Initially, there was some significant push back, primarily because of cost. But within a few years, the students knew more about computers than the instructor did! As a result, the class was removed from the curriculum.

³⁸ Letter from Charles Smith to Irv Busenitz, June 17, 1986.

other students. From that opening day, The Master's Seminary has continued to weave personal discipleship into the fabric of its students, its faculty, its curriculum, and its *raison d'être*. Efforts to achieve this goal have taken place in a number of ways:

1. Discipleship Labs. Driven by the passion of Dr. Smith, TMS made personal discipleship a *sine qua non* of the new seminary. Faculty members or local church pastors meet weekly with a small group of students to focus on issues of spiritual character. TMS, being one of the first in the country to make this a part of the curriculum, received many calls and letters asking what was being done and how.
2. Candidacy Review. Toward the end of each semester, the faculty devotes an entire faculty meeting to review each student's progress with regard to academics, character, family leadership, finances, and church involvement. If a student is not making appropriate progress in any one of these areas, a faculty member is tasked to meet with the student to address areas of concern and ascertain how the seminary might be able to come alongside him and assist him.
3. Chapel Services. Convinced that preparation for effective ministry is more than the pursuit of academic knowledge, the seminary sets aside an hour each week to pray, worship, and receive instruction from the Word. Not only does it provide spiritual refreshment and fellowship; it also gives opportunity to model expository preaching by the professors and pastors from the local area.
4. Seminary Wives Discipleship. The pastoral epistles place a premium on the commitment of the pastor to his family. Recognizing the unprecedented attack on marriage and the family, the seminary is committed to equipping the wives of future pastors in a number of ways. Wives are invited to attend classes with their husbands free of charge. They are also encouraged to attend the seminary-sponsored, Seminary Wives Discipleship (SWD) program. The program was inaugurated and developed by Elizabeth George, the wife of the Director of Admissions and Placement, Jim George, and Karen Busenitz, the wife of Irv Busenitz. When Elizabeth George retired, "B" Mayhue stepped in to provide excellent leadership for many years until her husband retired. Bethany Busenitz together with Crystal Grauman currently give oversight. The SWD program gathers multiple times each semester to provide biblical instruction and discussion, fellowship, and encouragement.

Giving the Seminary Away

From its opening day, TMS was committed to making the seminary as affordable as possible, i.e., to giving the seminary away. This, of course, requires developing a strong donor base. In the early years of the seminary, MacArthur provided major assistance in building donor relations. Mayhue and Busenitz shared considerable responsibility as well. Busenitz was assigned the responsibility to raise all scholarship funding, with no scholarship funding provided in the seminary budget. Mayhue carried the majority load of the Office of Development. In the early years, a major donor stepped up to underwrite the seminary's financial need of \$600,000 each year. However, during the first year of Mayhue's leadership at the seminary, the donor withdrew his financial support because the seminary did not endorse his theological perspective. With the sudden loss of this funding, the Chairman of the TMUS Board, Jim Rickard, and Mayhue called the faculty and staff together to announce an immediate 10% cut in salaries and to spend the day in prayer.

In God's providence, a strategic partnership began between The Believers Foundation (TBF) and The Master's Seminary—providing a shared commitment to expository preaching and global pastoral training. That relationship was the beginning of a long and profound generosity intersecting with the pressing mission to equip men who would faithfully preach the Bible across the US and around the world. In the years that followed, TBF invested in scholarships for students and resources that strengthened the training of pastors. It is not a relationship of mere financial transactions but of a deep trust and a shared mission.

From the outset, it was the seminary's desire to reduce the cost of tuition and, by doing so, to make it possible for every seminarian to graduate debt free. Achieving that was not easy, given the fact that a growing number of students were enrolling in seminary with significant undergraduate debt. As a result, graduates were finding it difficult to engage in ministry immediately after graduation; all too often, it became necessary to seek secular employment to liquidate their indebtedness before engaging in ministry. In a sense, graduates had put "God in a box." They couldn't go to the mission field or accept an invitation to a small church; they couldn't pay enough to earn a living and, at the same time, to service their debt.

To address this issue, TMS gave renewed commitment to some strategic actions.

1. Lower tuition. The first action the seminary took was to lower the cost of tuition. As the cost of housing in California was becoming difficult for students moving in from other states, the seminary considered purchasing an apartment complex to serve as student housing. A donor encouraged the seminary to find an apartment complex that he would purchase to provide low-cost student housing. After some searching, the seminary concluded that it was not in the housing business. Rather, the seminary would continue to concentrate on lowering the tuition and thereby reduce the overall cost of living in southern California.

2. **Matching Funds Scholarships.** The seminary encouraged its students to request scholarship assistance from their home church. TMS promised to match, dollar for dollar, any financial assistance (up to \$500 each semester) sent by their home church. This program was phenomenally successful. Donors were delighted to know that their gifts were being doubled. Within a year or two, the success of the program required the seminary to increase the match, promising students that TMS would provide a dollar for every two dollars sent by their home church (up to a total of \$1500 per semester). Eventually, the seminary provided \$1 for every \$3 given by their home church, up to a total of \$2000 per semester.
3. **The MacArthur Trust Scholarships.** The ultimate goal was reached when the seminary offered free tuition to students who are enrolled full time at the LA campus. This was made possible by the MacArthur Trust Scholarship. Not only did this make seminary affordable; it also encouraged prospective students to enroll at the home campus.

Taking the Seminary to the Students

Moving to the Los Angeles area can be difficult for students. As graduates are spreading around the world, they are eager for their young “Timothies” to receive the same ministry preparation they had enjoyed. International students are especially impacted. TMS began exploring various possibilities that would reduce the length of a student’s residency and thereby ease the financial commitment. To mitigate the financial impact, a number of things are employed:

1. **Online Classes.** With the completion of the seminary library and office building, some rooms were equipped with state-of-the-art electronic equipment, providing live-streaming capabilities. Students are able to engage in live audio/video classroom lectures with their professors. Initially, the online classes were focused primarily on Old Testament Studies and New Testament Studies. But soon, the first semester Hebrew Grammar Textbook and Workbook were made available, making it possible for students to complete approximately a semester of classes before arriving on campus.³⁹ International students especially are finding these opportunities very helpful, permitting them to become acquainted with the rigors of seminary studies and reduce their class load while in residency.
2. **Distance Locations.** In fall 2015, two distance locations were begun, one in Bozeman, MT and the other in Washington, DC. The goal was to attract students who could not otherwise move to the Los Angeles campus. Local

³⁹ When the COVID-19 virus hit a few years later, live two-way interactive classes were already up and running, resulting in a relatively seamless transition.

churches hosting these classes are carefully chosen and must embrace the TMS educational philosophy. Additional campuses have been started in Anchorage, AK, Dallas, TX, Kingsburg, CA, Walnut Creek, CA, and Spokane, WA.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades, the Lord has opened doors of unanticipated opportunity—more than one could ask or think. Men have come from across the globe to train at TMS and, upon graduation, have responded to God’s call and embraced ministries that are calling for help.

From its opening day until the present, discipleship has been woven into the fabric of The Master’s Seminary. With the seminary on the campus of Grace Church, the training has been enhanced and the modeling intensified. For forty years, the training for ministry has integrated the academic with the practical. Surrounded by the elements of church life, the preparation for ministry has, in a real sense, incorporated on-the-job training.

The Master’s Seminary is fulfilling the apostle Paul’s charge of 2 Timothy 2:2—entrusting the gospel to faithful men who will teach others also. One pivotal relationship has become a worldwide movement of Word-centered ministry, proving that the generous obedience in one generation can equip thousands of pastors for generations to come. “For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom 11:36).

**PREACH THE WORD:
FIVE COMPELLING MOTIVATIONS
FOR THE FAITHFUL EXPOSITOR¹**

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* * * * *

For the biblical expositor, 2 Timothy 4:2 majestically stands out as sacred ground. It is precious territory for every pastor who, following in the footsteps of Paul, desires to faithfully proclaim the Word of God. In this single verse, the apostle defined the primary mandate for God-honoring church ministry, not only for Timothy, but for all who would come after him. The minister of the gospel is called to “Preach the Word!”

* * * * *

Introduction

As Paul penned the Spirit-inspired text of 2 Timothy 4:2, he knew he was about to die.² The words of this verse stand at the beginning of the last chapter he would ever write. Alone in a bleak Roman dungeon, without even a cloak to keep himself warm (v. 13), the unwearied apostle issued one final charge—calling Timothy and every minister after him, to herald the Scriptures without compromise. Paul understood what was at stake; the sacred baton of gospel stewardship was being passed to the next generation. He also knew that Timothy, his young son in the faith, was prone to apprehension and timidity. That is why he prefaced his exhortation to pastoral faithfulness with the strongest possible language:

¹ The current article originally appeared in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 22, no. 2 (2011): 163–77, and is used by permission.

² Along these lines, R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell note, “The heat of the apostle’s focus was intensified by the burning realization that he himself was in truth a dying man.... The charge in verses 1–5 initiates the final thoughts of what is the old apostle’s ministerial last will and testament.” *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 242.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. (2 Tim 4:1–2)

The heart of that brief passage, *preach the word*, summarizes biblical ministry in one central mandate. That command is consistent with what the apostle had earlier explained to Timothy about the qualifications for spiritual leadership. In 1 Timothy 3:2, Paul noted that—in addition to numerous moral and spiritual qualifications—overseers and pastors must possess one universal skill: the ability to teach. They must be competent Bible expositors—men who are able to both clearly explain the text and effectively exhort the congregation.

But being called to preach and teach is not just a sacred privilege. It is also a serious responsibility—one that the minister is expected to carry out *at all times*. He is to fill his pulpit “in season and out of season.” Whether it seems acceptable or unacceptable, wise or unwise, his mandate and his mission never change. The man of God has been summoned to boldly preach the message of God to the people of God, no matter how often the winds of popular opinion swirl and shift.

Faithfulness to the Word demands, furthermore, that the minister preach *all of it*. Timothy was not to focus solely on the positive, heart-warming aspects of pastoral ministry. He was also to “reprove, rebuke, [and] exhort” the flock, refusing the temptation to shy away from Scripture’s warnings and corrections.³ Yet, his reproof was to be balanced out with “great patience and instruction”—his fiery firmness tempered by his compassion and tenderness toward those under his spiritual care. For the faithful shepherd, patience toward people is of paramount importance.

But, while his shepherding is characterized by gentleness and longsuffering, his preaching must not be marked by uncertainty or ambiguity. Instead, the faithful minister proclaims the truth of God’s Word with the confidence and certainty that it deserves. Authority in preaching does not come from the pastor’s office, education, or experience. Rather, it derives from the highest possible source—God Himself. Insofar as the sermon accurately portrays the biblical text, it comes with the Author’s own authority. The power of the pulpit, then, is in the Word preached, as the Spirit uses His sword to pierce human hearts (Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12). Consequently, the pastor’s task is to faithfully feed the flock with the pure milk of the Word (1 Pet 2:1–3), trusting God for the resulting growth.

In the verses surrounding 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul provided his protégé with much-needed motivation to stand firm and persevere to the end. For Timothy, the command was clear: *preach the Word*; and the calling was deadly serious: souls were at stake. In order to equip him for the task, Paul gave Timothy five compelling reasons to

³ As Homer A. Kent, Jr., explains, “He must proclaim as a herald (*kēruxon*) the message which has been given to him by his Lord. He must announce it in its completeness (Acts 20:27), without alteration, addition, or subtraction. He must proclaim, not philosophize or argue.... To proclaim God’s Word involves all the themes of Scripture, not picking out some and ignoring others. The Word of God in its entirety is the basic material of the preacher’s message.” Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 283.

persevere in ministry faithfulness. These motivations, found in 2 Timothy 3:1–4:4, are as applicable today as they were when the apostle wrote them nearly two millennia ago.

Motivation 1: Preach the Word Because of the
Danger of the Seasons (2 Tim 3:1–9)

In 2 Timothy 3:1, Paul warned Timothy “that in the last days difficult times will come.” Used here, the phrase “the last days” refers not merely to the end of the church age, but to the entirety of it, from the Day of Pentecost to the *Parousia*.⁴ Paul’s point is that, until the Lord comes back, the church will continually experience difficult times. As commentator William Hendricksen explains, “In every period of history, there will be a season during which men refuse to listen to sound doctrine. As history continues onward toward the consummation, this situation grows worse.”⁵

The phrase “difficult times” does not refer to specific points of chronological time, but rather to seasons or epochs of time.⁶ And the term “difficult” carries with it the meaning of being “savage” or “perilous.”⁷ Paul is expressing the reality that, throughout the church age, there will be seasons of time in which believers are savagely threatened. With his execution imminent, the apostle certainly knew a great deal about the difficulty that Christians might face. He also understood that Timothy was facing persecution and hostility; and that his young apprentice would be tempted by sins of cowardice and compromise. But that was exactly why Timothy needed to preach the Word. The looming threat made his ministry mandate all the more necessary and urgent.

In 2 Timothy 3:13, Paul wrote, “Evil men during these dangerous epochs will proceed from bad to worse.” Such men are “lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (3:2–4). They are externally religious, “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power,” as they “enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (vv. 5–7). Being of a depraved mind, they are filled with sin, error, and destruction. They oppose sound doctrine and reject the faith.

⁴ C. Michael Moss correctly observes, “[The phrase] ‘the last days’ is [also] used elsewhere in the NT to refer to the Messianic age from Jesus’ coming until the final consummation at the end of time (cf. Acts 2:17; Jas 5:3; 2 Pet 3:3; Heb 1:2). The language and concept really represents an OT idea (cf. Joel 3:1; Isa 2:2).” C. Michael Moss, *1, 2 Timothy & Titus*, College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2003), 224.

⁵ William Hendricksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), 311.

⁶ Cf. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 544.

⁷ The term *difficult* “is translated ‘times of stress’ (RSV) and ‘dangerous’ (Norlie). It is used in Matt 8:28 to describe the bizarre actions of a pair of demons.” Thomas D. Lea, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 223, n. 22.

Significantly, based on Paul’s description, it is clear that the greatest threat to the church comes not from hostile forces without, but from false teachers within. Like spiritual terrorists, they sneak into the church and leave a path of destruction in their wake. They are wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matt 7:15); and it is their treachery that makes the *difficult times* of the last days so perilous.

The church has been threatened by savage wolves and spiritual swindlers from its earliest days (cf. Acts 20:29). Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44), has always sought to undermine the truth with his deadly errors (1 Tim 4:1; cf. 2 Cor 11:4). It is not surprising, then, that church history has often been marked by difficult times—seasons in which falsehood and deception have waged war against the pure gospel. Consider, for example, the havoc created by the following errors:

Sacramentalism

One of the earliest deceptions to infiltrate the church on a massive scale was *sacramentalism*—the idea that an individual can connect with God through ritualism or religious ceremony. As sacramentalism gained widespread acceptance, the Roman Catholic Church supposed itself to be a surrogate savior, and people became connected to a system, but not to Christ.⁸ Religious ritual became the enemy of the true gospel, standing in opposition to genuine grace and undermining the authority of God and His Word. Many were deluded by the sacramental system. It was a grave danger that developed throughout the Middle Ages, holding Europe in a spiritual chokehold for nearly a millennium. Though sacramentalism was exposed, by God’s grace during the Reformation, it still represents a lingering threat. Even today, it continues to thrive in the apostate systems of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, destroying those who are doctrinally ignorant.

Rationalism

Not long after the Reformation, a second major wave of error crashed upon the life of the church: *rationalism*. As European society emerged from the Dark Ages, the resulting Age of Enlightenment emphasized human reason and scientific empiricism, while simultaneously discounting the spiritual and supernatural. Philosophers no longer looked to God as the explanation for the world; they rather sought to account for everything in rational, naturalistic, and deistic terms. In the words of one historian, “As a result of the Enlightenment, no longer was it as easy or acceptable for educated, intellectual people to say with the majority of Christian thinkers through the ages, ‘I believe in order that I may understand.’”⁹

As men began to place themselves above God and their own reason over Scripture, it was not long until rationalism gained access into the church. Higher

⁸ Two excellent treatments on the development of the Roman Catholic sacramental system are: William Webster, *The Church of Rome at the Bar of History* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2003); and Norman L. Geisler and Joshua M. Betancourt, *Is Rome the True Church?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁹ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 523.

critical theory—which denied the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible—infiltrated Protestantism through seminaries in both Europe and America. So-called Christian scholars began to question the most fundamental tenets of the faith, as they popularized quests for the “historical Jesus” and denied Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch.

The legacy of that rationalism, in the form of theological liberalism and continual attacks on biblical inerrancy, is yet alive and well. As such, it represents a continued threat to the truth.

Orthodoxism

A third historic threat to the church might be labeled *orthodoxism*. With this movement came the desire to return to orthodox Christianity. But the primary means used to accomplish this goal was the imposition of external standards. The end result was not true Christianity, but a cold formalism and superficial moralism. This kind of dead orthodoxy was prevalent, for example, in early eighteenth-century England, where the church had become a spiritual desert.¹⁰ Even in Puritan New England at that time, the spiritual climate was characterized by apathy and hypocrisy.¹¹

Though the truth was accessible, genuine belief was severely lacking. True conviction was exchanged for a lifeless indifference to the Word of God; true conversion for a shallow pretense of spirituality. It was in the midst of this spiritual deadness that the Spirit of God sparked a revival—both in England and in colonial America—through the ministries of George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and John and Charles Wesley. Yet, dead orthodoxy still persists in the church today. Twenty-first century congregations are filled with cultural Christians—professing believers who look good on the outside but who internally do not truly know God.

Politicism and Ecumenism

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially in America, the church grew increasingly fascinated with government and political power. Many Christians became convinced that the best way to influence the world was through civil action and social activism—whether the issue was prohibition or, more recently, prayer in public schools. Over the last 150 years, and especially in recent decades, millions of man hours and billions of dollars have been spent attempting to legislate morality. Yet, the results have been less than encouraging as American society grows continually worse.

¹⁰ Historian Michael A. G. Haykin describes the spiritual temperature of that time period: “Few ... preached anything but dry, unaffected moralistic sermons. The *mentalité* of the first half of the eighteenth century gloried in reason, moderation, and decorum. The preaching of the day dwelt largely upon themes of morality and decency and lacked [spiritual passion]... Even among many of the churches of the Dissenters, the children of the Puritans, things were little better.” Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Revived Puritan* (Dundas, Ontario: Joshua, 2000), 28–29.

¹¹ The Half-Way Covenant of 1662 exemplifies the spiritual state of New England in the late 17th- and early 18th-centuries.

In its preoccupation with politics, the church has neglected the fact that its primary purpose on earth is not *political* but *redemptive*. The Great Commission is a call to *make disciples*, not to *change the government*. If society is to be truly changed, it must be through the transformation of individual sinners. But that kind of heart renewal cannot be legislated; it is only possible through the preaching of the gospel by the power of the Spirit.¹² Sadly, the church's desire for political influence opened the door to rank ecumenism. In their quest to moralize America, some evangelicals began to view other religious groups (like Roman Catholics and Mormons) as political allies, rather than the mission field. The assumption was that by partnering with such groups, the church could increase its influence in society.¹³ But nothing could be further from the truth; when the gospel is compromised, any real influence is lost (cf. 2 Cor 6:14).

Experientialism, Subjectivism, and Mysticism

In the 1960s and 70s another dangerous doctrine arose called the Charismatic Renewal Movement, as Pentecostal *experientialism* began to infiltrate the mainline denominations. As a result, the church was tempted to define truth on the basis of emotional experience. Biblical interpretation was no longer based on the clear teaching of the text; but rather upon feelings and subjective, unverifiable experiences, such as supposed revelations, visions, prophecies, and intuition.¹⁴

In the 1980s, the influence of clinical psychology brought *subjectivism* into the church. The result was a man-centered Christianity in which the sanctification process was redefined for each individual, and sin was relabeled a sickness. The Bible was no longer deemed sufficient for life and godliness; instead, it was replaced with an emphasis on psychological tools and techniques.¹⁵

Mysticism arrived in full force in the 1990s, ravaging the church by convincing people to listen for a paranormal word from God rather than seeking out truth in the written Word of God. People began neglecting the Bible, looking instead for the Lord to speak to them directly. Consequently, the authority of Scripture was turned on its head.

All three of these movements attacked the sufficiency of Scripture. Whether people supplemented the Bible with supposed miraculous gifts, or with the human wisdom of psychology, or with their own imagined intuitions, many in the church began to seek something beyond the pages of God's Word.

¹² For more on the Christian's relationship to politics, see John MacArthur, "God, Government, and the Gospel," in *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2009), 121–30.

¹³ For an excellent treatment on the history of contemporary evangelicalism's infatuation with popularity and influence, both in the United States and in Great Britain, see Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000).

¹⁴ For a survey of some of the extreme errors that characterized the charismatic movement during this time period, see John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

¹⁵ A helpful critique of the "Christian Psychology" movement of the 1990s is found in Ed Bulkley, *Why Christians Can't Trust Psychology* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993). For a biblical alternative to psychology, see John MacArthur and Wayne Mack, eds., *Introduction to Biblical Counseling* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005).

Pragmatism and Syncretism

At the end of the twentieth century, the church was also greatly damaged by the Trojan horse of pragmatism. Though it looked good on the outside (because it resulted in greater numbers of attendees), the seeker-driven movements of the 1990s quickly killed off any true appetite for sound doctrine. Ear-tickling became the norm as “seekers” were treated like potential customers. The church adopted a marketing mentality, focusing on “what works,” even at the expense of a biblical ecclesiology.

Pragmatism inevitably gave way to *syncretism*, because popularity was viewed as the standard of success. In order to gain acceptance in a postmodern society, the church became soft on sin and error. *Capitulation* was masked as *tolerance*; *compromise* redefined as *love*; and *doubt* extolled as *humility*. Suddenly, interfaith dialogues and manifestos—and even interfaith seminaries—began to sprout up on the evangelical landscape. So-called evangelicals started to champion the message that “we all worship one God.” And those who were willing to stand for the truth were dismissed as divisive and uncouth.

The church today is the hodgepodge product of these accumulated errors—from sacramentalism to subjectivism to syncretism. The “difficult times” that Paul spoke of certainly characterize the contemporary situation. Yet, in the midst of this chaos and confusion, faithful ministers are still required to carry out the very task that Paul gave to Timothy. In fact, the only solution for the church today is for pastors to diligently fulfill their God-given responsibility to *preach the Word*.

Motivation 2: Preach the Word Because of the Devotion of the Saints (2 Tim 3:10–14)

The faithful preacher is also motivated by his love and appreciation for those believers who have gone before him. Like a great cloud of witnesses (Heb 12:1), the examples of steadfast spiritual leaders from generations past spur the biblical expositor on toward greater commitment and ministry effectiveness.

In Paul's case, he reminded Timothy of his own example and urged him to follow suit. Thus, he says in 3:10–11, “Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, sufferings. Such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured and out of them all the Lord rescued me!”

The gospel Paul taught, Timothy was to continue preaching. The conduct, confidence, and Christlikeness that marked the apostle's ministry was likewise to characterize his son in the faith. Even the suffering that Paul endured, Timothy was to embrace as well. The young pastor was to stay the course and follow in the same path as his mentor.¹⁶

¹⁶ Along these lines, Lea, *I, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 44, observes, “This is a personal word to a beloved follower. He reminded Timothy of their longtime acquaintance (3:10–11) and appealed to his loyalty to Pauline teaching (1:6–14; 2:1–13; 3:10–4:5). To Paul this was also loyalty to Christ (see 1 Cor 11:1)... No doubt the memory of Timothy's warm affection and sharing of difficulty gave warmth to the lonely, weary heart of the apostle.”

The integrity of Paul’s ministry had been obvious to Timothy. In their travels together, Timothy had witnessed the consistency between Paul’s public teaching and his private practice.¹⁷ The testimony of the apostle’s life was one of unwavering conviction—a fact that Timothy knew firsthand. Thus, Paul is able to commend himself to Timothy and encourage him not only to preach faithfully, but also to follow the same God-centered purpose: to passionately pursue faithfulness in his own life.

Throughout his missionary journeys, Paul had suffered greatly for the sake of the gospel. Even as he wrote this letter, he was suffering for Christ. Timothy surely felt the weight of Paul’s words, when the apostle added, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (v. 12). Yet, Paul is clear, such tribulation is no reason to shy away from following the way of faithfulness.

The world will continue to grow darker, and “evil men will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (v. 13). Nonetheless, Timothy must not capitulate or be deceived. His task was not easy, but it was simple: to stay true to the Word of God and preach it carefully and consistently. Thus Paul challenged Timothy with these words, “You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them” (v. 14).

In exhorting Timothy to hold fast and endure, Paul called on his disciple to remember his own example. Timothy did not need a new strategy. He simply needed to follow the pattern of faithfulness he had observed in the man of God who had gone before him.

Paul understood that uniqueness and novelty in ministry is deadly. The right approach is not to reinvent the paradigm but rather to follow in the well-worn paths of those who have come before. The faithful preacher appreciates his spiritual heritage—recognizing that he is linked to a long line of godly men from whom there can be no separation. Moreover, he understands that it is his responsibility, as part of the current generation of church history, to guard the truth that has been entrusted to him. Then, one day, he will pass it on to those who come after him.

That this was Paul’s expectation is clear from his instruction in 2:2: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” The four ministerial generations described in that verse include Paul, Timothy, faithful men, and others also. From generation to generation, the truth was to be safeguarded by each generation and then passed on without innovation or deviation.

It is the brash folly of young men today that tempts them to disregard the wisdom of previous generations and instead to glory in their own cleverness or originality. Those who scorn the faithful examples of saints now in heaven, and instead prize their own self-styled, inventive approaches to ministry, do so to their own peril. But, as evidenced by Paul’s instruction to Timothy, the faithful preacher is motivated by

¹⁷ Sound teaching is one of Paul’s primary emphases in the pastoral epistles. As Raymond F. Collins notes, “More than two-thirds of the New Testament’s uses of the term ‘teaching’ (*didaskalia*) are found in the Pastoral Epistles.” Raymond F. Collins, *I & II Timothy, Titus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 255. The author goes on to highlight, in this epistle, “just how much and how faithfully Timothy has learned from Paul (see 1:13–14; 2:2, 8–9, 11–13). Thus, [in 3:10] it is Paul’s teaching, ‘my teaching,’ that Timothy has followed.”

the heritage left by prior generations of church history. And like the spiritual giants of past centuries, he is committed to the same ministry mandate as they were. It is a privilege to stand on their shoulders. But it is also a responsibility to carry on their legacy. Therefore, through both his life and his lips, he must *preach the Word*.

Motivation 3: Preach the Word Because of the Dynamic of the Scriptures (2 Tim 3:15–17)

The faithful expositor is motivated, thirdly, by the nature of the Bible itself. He understands that Scripture is no ordinary book; it is the inspired revelation of God Himself. If the pastor desires to honor the Lord in his ministry, or to see the Holy Spirit's work unhindered in the lives of his people, he has no other alternative than to preach the Word faithfully.

Timothy experienced the power of God's Word from a young age. Paul reminded him of that reality with these words: "From childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15). It was clear to Timothy where the power and authority in ministry lay.

The term Paul used for "childhood" refers to an infant. From the time Timothy had been a baby in the arms of his mother he had been exposed to the Word of God. And it was through the Scriptures he had come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle appealed to Timothy's past, essentially asking, "Why would you do anything other than preach the Word when you know, from your own personal testimony, that it alone is the wisdom that leads to salvation?" When the mission is to present the message of salvation in all its Spirit-empowered fullness, the only option is to faithfully proclaim the truth of God's Word.

Having already appealed to Timothy's upbringing, Paul reinforced his point by emphasizing the Bible's true nature and dynamic effectiveness: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (3:16–17). This sacred book is "inspired by God," or more literally, *God-breathed*.¹⁸ And, as these verses indicate, it is not only powerful to save (v. 15), but also to sanctify.

The Word of God is *profitable*, or useful toward sanctification, in four ways. First, as the sole source of divine truth, it provides the doctrinal content for *teaching*. Second, it is the authority for admonition and *reproof*, because it confronts sin and error. Third, it provides the vehicle for *correction*. The Scriptures not only expose wrongdoing; they also show transgressors how to be restored to an upright position.

¹⁸ Paul Enns, *Approaching God* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1991), 55, explains that: "The word 'God-breathed' [in v. 16] is not active, as though the Scriptures are purely a human product, but passive, meaning that the Scriptures have their origin with God, not man. That is also consistent with many Old Testament passages that state, 'God spoke all these words' (cf. Exodus 20:1; Deuteronomy 5:22), or, 'the Lord speaks' (Isaiah 1:1), or, 'thus says the Lord' (Isaiah 44:2), or, 'the word of the Lord came to me saying' (Jeremiah 1:4). The emphasis in those passages is that God spoke, and the result was a perfect word. That is the idea of the Scriptures as stated in 2 Timothy 3:16. God spoke forth, and the Scriptures were the result."

Finally, after the truth of God’s Word has torn down sin and error, it builds up the believer through *training in righteousness*. Clearly, the function of the Scriptures in the life of the believer is a comprehensive work.

The result of this all-encompassing work is that the man of God and everyone under his influence is made mature, whole, complete, and equipped for every good work (v. 17). The first student of the Word is the preacher, who himself must be impacted. He is the primary beneficiary, and his ministry to others flows out of the Word’s transforming work in his own heart.

With such a comprehensive work of both salvation and sanctification available through the power of the Scriptures, why would anyone be tempted to preach anything else? The pastor who cares about the spiritual growth of his people must make God and His Word the centerpiece of his ministry. In order to do that, he must *preach the Word*.

Motivation 4: Preach the Word Because of the Demand of the Sovereign (2 Tim 4:1–2)

Up to this point, Paul has prefaced his command to preach by warning Timothy about the dangerous seasons that will come, and by pointing to his own example and to the supernatural power of Scripture. But in 4:1, the apostle escalated his exhortation to an even greater level. Invoking God Himself, Paul expressed the seriousness of the situation in explicit terms: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and do so by His appearing in His Kingdom.”

Those piercing words should strike holy fear into the heart of every preacher. They stand as the apex of Paul’s previous statements, and they should serve as the most compelling motivation in the life of the expositor. The Scottish Reformer John Knox certainly understood this reality. Upon being commissioned to preach, and feeling the weight of that responsibility, Knox “burst forth in most abundant tears and withdrew himself to his chamber.”¹⁹ He was completely overwhelmed by the awesome accountability of that duty.

Timothy’s call to preach came not simply from Paul but from the Sovereign King by whom he was commissioned, and before whom he would one day give an account. Jesus Christ is the One who will judge the faithfulness of his ministers.²⁰ As men of God, they are under holy scrutiny from the Lord himself. This is nowhere made clearer than in Revelation 1:14 where Christ is portrayed as surveying His church with penetrating eyes of fire. Those who are called to preach are under inescapable

¹⁹ Marion Harland, *John Knox* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1900), 16. Prior to this reaction, a fellow preacher named John Rough read Knox a charge very similar to Paul’s words in 2 Timothy 4:1.

²⁰ William B. Barclay, *1&2 Timothy* (New York: Evangelical, 2005), 284, writes, “Christ is not just the King; he is also the Judge.... This reality impacts on the servant of Christ in two ways. On the one hand, it gives confidence that the opponents of the gospel will be judged. On the other hand, it reminds believers that they, too, will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give account for what they have done (2 Cor. 5:10). They must be about the work of the kingdom.”

divine observation (cf. Prov 15:3). There is no relief from His gaze, no hiding from His evaluation (cf. Ps 139:7–12).

It is for this reason that James exhorted his readers, “Let not many *of you* become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment” (Jas 3:1). This is why the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 4:3–4 that it was a small thing to him what men thought of him, including what he thought of himself, because he was accountable to God. Hebrews 13:17 plainly states that leaders “will give an account” for their ministry. The most dominant force in the preacher’s life and ministry is the realization that he will one day give an account to God (cf. 2 Cor 5:10).

Consider the following anecdote from Spurgeon’s ministry. A young preacher once complained to Charles Spurgeon, the famous British preacher of the 1800s, that he did not have as big a church as he deserved.

“How many do you preach to?” Spurgeon asked.

“Oh, about 100,” the man replied.

Solemnly Spurgeon said, “That will be enough to give account for on the day of judgment.”²¹

Serious ministry is motivated by that weighty reality. Popularity with people, recognition from peers, winsomeness in the pulpit—these are not the standards of success. God’s opinion is the only one that ultimately matters. And His measure of success is *faithfulness* (cf. Matt 25:21, 23). Knowing this, the biblical expositor is driven to carefully, clearly, and consistently *preach the Word*.

Motivation 5: Preach the Word Because of the Deceptiveness of the Sensual (2 Tim 4:3–4)

Having reminded Timothy of the ultimate accountability, Paul continued by warning him that *faithful* preaching will not necessarily be *popular* preaching. As the apostle explained, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4).

Sinners, throughout all of church history, have refused to heed the truth that saves and sanctifies.²² Instead, hardening their hearts, they seek out soft-pedaled messages that accommodate their sin. Thus, they search for preachers who make them feel

²¹ Cited from Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications, 2001), 2:254.

²² Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 227, explains, “The time will come—future for Timothy, but already here for those living after him—when people will not ‘endure’ sound teaching. Paul chooses an intriguing Greek word, translated ‘endure,’ which means ‘to be patient with, in the sense of enduring possible difficulty.’ The idea is that they find the truth of God to be so torturous to their sinful desire that they must ‘endure’ in the same manner Christians must ‘endure’ hardship.”

good, not guilty. And false teachers are happy to oblige, tickling the ears of their audiences with man-centered messages and false hopes.

In the process, the seriousness of sin is downplayed and disregarded; greed is promoted with promises of prosperity; worship is reduced to vain emotionalism; and felt needs are ignited while the true gospel is ignored. These false teachers are the same people who, according to 2 Tim 2:16, pursue worldly, empty chatter that leads to further ungodliness. Their worldly message may be popular, but like gangrene, its spread is deadly.

Paul's words certainly describe the scene in contemporary American Christianity. *Doctrine* has become a bad word; *truth* is viewed as relative; and *numbers* have been made the measure of ministry effectiveness. The temptation to tickle ears is great, since the preachers who attract the largest crowds are deemed the most successful. But to pervert the truth by watering down the gospel is a deadly form of wickedness. The minister who caters his message to the whims of the world, telling unregenerate hearts only what they want to hear, has sold out.

By contrast, the faithful minister is willing to boldly speak the whole truth, even when it is not popular to do so. The only way to see lives transformed from sensuality to salvation is to faithfully proclaim the message of the gospel. If those who wish to have their ears tickled are to be radically transformed, they must be confronted with the truth. To that end, the faithful expositor will not cease to *preach the Word*.

Faithful to the End

Paul was under no delusions that the commission would be easy for Timothy, or for the faithful men coming after him. It had not been easy for Paul either. Yet, in spite of the many trials he faced, the apostle had remained true to the end. As a result, he could say, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (4:6–7). In this, his last appeal to Timothy, he invited the young pastor to likewise run the race with endurance (cf. Heb 12:1–2).

But Paul went to his grave not knowing how the story would end for Timothy. He had to trust that the Lord would preserve him. Would Timothy remain faithful to the end?

The book of Hebrews offers an initial answer to that question. In Heb 13:23, the author told his readers, "Take notice that our brother, Timothy, has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you." These words, written after the death of Paul, indicate that Timothy had been in prison, but was soon to return to the work of ministry. The implication is clear: Timothy had been persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Yet, like Paul, he had remained faithful and steadfast in spite of the suffering he faced.

Church history provides a later glimpse into Timothy's legacy of faithfulness. According to *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*,

Timothy was the celebrated disciple of St. Paul, and bishop of Ephesus, where he zealously governed the Church until AD 97. At this period, as the pagans were

about to celebrate a feast called Catagogion, Timothy, meeting the procession, severely reprov'd them for their ridiculous idolatry, which so exasperated the people that they fell upon him with their clubs, and beat him in so dreadful a manner that he expired of the bruises two days after.²³

To his dying day, Timothy courageously confronted the culture around him with the truth of the gospel. That unwavering commitment cost him his life. Like Paul, he was martyred for his faithfulness.

At the end of Timothy's life, he too was able to look back on a ministry that had been devoted to honoring Christ through the preaching of His Word. In the same way that Timothy had received a legacy of faithfulness, he passed it on to the next generation of Christian leaders. Bible expositors today, though removed by many centuries, are the recipients of that faithful heritage. The motivations that drove Paul and Timothy ought to compel the current generation of preachers and teachers. God is still delivering His divine mandate to faithful men: Preach the Word!

²³ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. William Byron Forbush (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 7.

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THE FUNDAMENTALS OF A FAITHFUL PASTOR: GODLY CHARACTER AND BIBLICAL CONVICTIONS¹

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* * * * *

Paul spent substantial time training the next generation of church leaders. His investment in pastoral training presents a model to emulate for the seminary that seeks to develop pastor-teachers. Paul's address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus reveals his two non-negotiables: character and convictions. He reminds these elders of who they are to be, pointing to his own example, and what they are to do, issuing sober exhortations. All this is done in faithfulness to the stewardship the minister receives from the Lord, finishing the course that is set before him.

* * * * *

Introduction

Pastoral training was a consistent reality in Paul's ministry. Paul invested his life in others, raising up future church leaders. His instruction of Timothy and Titus—recorded in the epistles to these two men—grounds much of the institution known today as the seminary. Additionally, the final words Paul delivered to the Ephesian elders at Miletus provide yet another example of his burden for pastoral training. He exhorted the elders, saying,

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will

¹ This article is adapted from a Shepherds Conference seminar, titled "Mobilizing the Master's Men." I want to express my gratitude to Karl Walker and Iosif J. Zhakevich for reworking this lecture into the current article. For biblical support on seminary education, see Nathan Busenitz, "Editorial," *TMSJ* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 1–4.

arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:28–35)

Paul's exhortation to these elders evidences the significant burden Paul had for pastoral ministry. He had spent three years, night and day, training the men to become shepherds (Acts 20:31). He was resolved to raise them up as pastors who would shepherd the flock of God.²

But what was the focus of Paul's training? What subjects would he have taught them? What were the prevailing matters of his teaching? One can certainly speculate as to what the curriculum was in terms of the instruction Paul gave while he had been in Ephesus. On his third missionary journey, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. So it is plausible that the topics he addressed in 1 Corinthians were also lessons he had discussed with the men at the school of Tyrannus in Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10).³ Not much later, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, and so those truths, even the heartaches of ministry, are likely topics Paul also covered with his disciples in Ephesus.⁴ Shortly after leaving Ephesus, he wrote the book of Romans.⁵ So even the content of Romans could have been part of the curriculum Paul imparted to his students as he met with them daily in this school. The wording of Acts 20:27 fleshes out this point a bit further, where Paul says, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God." In other words, Paul's pastoral training of these elders was comprehensive.⁶

Paul also manifested his burden for pastor training in that he sought every opportunity to prepare men for ministry. As he traveled to Jerusalem (in the context of Acts 20), he determined to see the elders in Ephesus in order to impart to them the Word of God and encourage them to persevere in their shepherding work. After the riot in Acts 19, Paul had left Ephesus (Acts 20:1). He had gone across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia and visited the Philippian. He had gone down to Greece and spent three months in Corinth; then, he had gone back to Macedonia and back across the Aegean Sea. Then, in Acts 20:6–12, he arrived in Troas, where he was

² As some have noted, Paul's address to the Ephesian elders shares parallels with Paul's theology of shepherding in other Pauline epistles. See Colin J. Hemer, "The Speeches of Acts: I. The Ephesians Elders at Miletus," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (May 1989): 77.

³ See Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 110.

⁴ See the outline of Paul's Corinthian correspondence in Andreas J. Köstenberger, Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016), 546.

⁵ See Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 25–26.

⁶ For a list of verbal parallels between this speech and Paul's other letters, see Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 117.

preaching in an upper room late into the night and where a young man named Eutychus, unable to stay awake, fell out of a windowsill and died (Acts 20:7). But this event did not stop Paul. He raised Eutychus up back to life (20:10–12) and continued teaching the men in the upper room. Then, Paul and his traveling companions, including Luke and Timothy, made their way further south toward Jerusalem (20:16). Though Paul sought to arrive in Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16), he desired to see his brothers in Ephesus one more time. Therefore, when he arrived in Miletus, he summoned the Ephesian elders to meet him there, so he could further instruct them (Acts 20:18ff).⁷ He took advantage of every opportunity to encourage men of God to do the work of God.

Paul's address to the Ephesian elders can be compared to a seminary graduation address. This was Paul's charge to his former students. Many of those men who trained at the school of Tyrannus were sent out, but many of them stayed, and the men who remained were trained up to be elders and leaders in the church in Ephesus. This address was particularly poignant because Paul revealed to them that they would never see him again on this side of heaven (20:25). His instruction to them was to take what they had learned from him at the school of Tyrannus and apply it in ministry. Paul essentially summarized the entirety of his instruction to them in a few brief words, words that underscore the focus of his pastoral training.

As Paul delivered this address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18–35, he devoted the first half of his address to looking back on his time and instruction with the men in the past (vv. 18–27). He then devoted the second half to looking forward and charging the men to serve faithfully in the future (vv. 28–35).

These two halves can also be viewed in the two categories of Paul's own example (vv. 18–27) and Paul's exhortation (vv. 28–35). Paul charged the men with his expectation both of who they were to be and what they were to do. As he first reflected on his example, he emphasized the character they needed to display. As he then articulated the exhortation, he emphasized the convictions they needed to obey.

Since Paul himself had taught these men, he knew they had the content, the information, and the theology.⁸ Therefore, he focused not on methodology but on character and convictions. He assumed that if they were men of character, they would stay faithful to the truth; and if they were men of conviction, they would live out that truth in a way that was consistent with the calling of a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, this article will examine Paul's example of character in verses 18–27 and his exhortation to biblical convictions in verses 28–35.

⁷ Bruce notes that Miletus was thirty miles from Ephesus, so Paul would not have had the time to make the journey from Miletus to Ephesus and back before the ship departed from harbor. He also suggests that these events took place in AD 57. See F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 340–41.

⁸ The first mention of Paul in Ephesus is in Acts 18:18–22, though the text does not state that Paul began a church during his first stay there. He arrived with Priscilla and Aquila where those two remained and encountered Apollos, strengthening him in the faith (Acts 18:24–28). Paul departed Priscilla and Aquila for Corinth but returned to Ephesus following his ministry there. This was the three-year period described in Acts 20:31. See Lee Martin McDonald, "Ephesus," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 319.

Character

Paul began his address by accentuating the importance of the shepherd's character, in order to have a God-honoring and an impactful ministry. In articulating his discourse on godly character, Paul reflected on his own commitment to serve the Lord. He essentially called the Ephesian elders to imitate him as he sought to serve the Lord (1 Cor 11:1).

Paul's Mindset for Ministry

Focusing on godly character, Paul first described his devotion to ministry while he had been in Asia (20:18), underscoring that his pursuit was to serve the Lord (20:19). Paul's mindset was a mindset of service. His motivation was a motivation of service. In 2 Corinthians 5:9, Paul wrote, "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him." Paul was living this principle out as he spent time in Asia Minor and in Ephesus, and as he met with the men daily in the school of Tyrannus. The men could see that Paul's heart was set on serving the Lord.

His service to the Lord manifested itself in three specific ways. According to verse 19, Paul was serving the Lord with all humility, with tears, and with trials. As Paul carried out his ministry, these three features described his life. In 2 Corinthians 11, for example, Paul outlined a variety of trials he had suffered: he had endured various plots on his life from the Jews,⁹ he was beaten innumerable times, scourged, shipwrecked, and imprisoned (2 Cor 11:24–28). Yet, at the end of all these trials, it was the care of the churches that weighed most heavily on his soul.

Paul's ministry was also defined by many tears, not only because of the trials but also because of his love for believers. Most people do not think of Paul as someone who cried much, but rather as a rough-and-tough kind of missionary. And he certainly was! But he explicitly mentioned his tears in verses 19, 31, and 37. He wept as a result of the trials in his life, and he wept on account of his love for his brothers in the Lord. In fact, many tears were shed at this graduation ceremony with the Ephesian elders because this is the brotherly affection of lives shared in the foxholes of ministry. This is the kind of kinship partners in ministry know because they have those kinds of relationships. Paul saw these men not as products of a program but as brothers and co-laborers in whom he had invested to the point of weeping.

In all his trials and all his tears, Paul persevered in his selflessness to serve the church, thus demonstrating his absolute humility in his ministry. Paul utterly expended himself for the sake of the believers. In 2 Corinthians 12:15, he said, "I will most gladly spend and be fully spent for your souls." That is what Paul did and that is what humility is—sincere service.¹⁰

⁹ The plots (ἐν ταῖς ἐπιβουλαῖς) of the Jews likely refers to the event mentioned at the beginning of chapter 20, in which the Jewish leaders schemed against Paul (see also 9:24; 13:50; 23:30). See Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 618.

¹⁰ J. Oswald Sanders describes humility as "the hallmark of the man whom God can use ... the spiritual leader will choose the hidden pathway of sacrificial service and the approval of His Lord rather than the flamboyant assignment and the adulation of the unspiritual crowd." J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1986), 80.

Paul's Message of Conviction and Courage

Second, not only did Paul have a mindset of ministry, but he also preached a message of conviction and courage. He said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). In verse 21, he emphasized that he was fulfilling the solemn testimony to both Jews and Greeks that God had given him to declare—a message of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul had the right mindset and the right message.

Paul did not shrink back but spoke courageously and continually, in private—house to house; and in public—in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.¹¹ He was speaking clearly to everyone, Jews and Greeks, because he knew the message he needed to communicate.

This principle alone would save many of today's seminaries and institutions from straying from God's design. If, in proclaiming God's message, they would stand with conviction and courage, instilling the same in the lives of their students, they would remain faithful to God's calling.

Paul's Mission of Enduring Obedience

Third, Paul revealed his mission as a mission of enduring obedience. In verses 22–23, Paul noted that he was on his way to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, and that he did not know what awaited him there.¹² All he knew—revealed to him by prophets through the Holy Spirit—was that everywhere he went, chains and afflictions awaited him. Paul did not need to know what would happen to him to understand what his mission was. He had already committed his life to obeying His Lord Jesus. As he explained in verse 24, "But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself." This is self-denial. Paul was determined to fulfill his mission of obedience to Christ, as he said in verse 24, "so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."

This was his mission: to finish the course in obedience to Christ—to be faithful as a steward to the ministry he had received from the Lord Jesus, a ministry that focused on the declaration of the gospel of the grace of God. Paul was not confused about his mission. He did not know what would happen to him when he arrived in Jerusalem. He understood he would likely suffer. But trials and tribulations did not thwart his devotion to his mission because the One who had set him on that mission was his Lord Jesus Christ. Paul was willing to die to himself so that he would finish

¹¹ See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Tyrannus," in *AYBD*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:686.

¹² Rapske observes that the word δεδεμένος ("bound"; Acts 20:22) suggests that Paul's purposed decision to go through Macedonia and Achaia on the way to Jerusalem (19:21) was indeed bound by the Spirit (20:22). See Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, vol. 3, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 404.

his course and complete the ministry he had received (20:24).¹³ Paul committed to completing his mission by his enduring obedience to Christ.

Paul's Measure of Success

Fourth, Paul revealed that his measure of success was faithfulness. Paul had arrived to the final meeting he would have with the Ephesians in person, after which he would never see them again. This moment was an expected point to examine his level of success in ministry. Acknowledging the finality of this gathering, Paul said to the Ephesians, "I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face" (v. 25). This was a true graduation in the sense that, once this meeting ended and Paul got on the boat, he would never see them again until glory.

Yet, Paul's response to that reality suggests that he perceived a level of success in the work he did with the Ephesians. He hinted at this in verse 26, when he said, "I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men." His conscience was clear in the sense that he fulfilled the mission he had been tasked by God to carry out with the Ephesians.¹⁴ Explaining this further in verse 27, Paul said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."¹⁵ Paul's conscience was clear because he preached the whole purpose of God to the Ephesians. How then did Paul measure success? By his faithfulness to carry out the mission to which God had called him.

Paul did not measure his success by the number of converts he saw, nor by the number of those, from among his converts, who remained faithful to Christ. Rather, it was by remaining faithful to his calling. Acts 19 records that there were those in Ephesus who rejected Paul's message. There were even those who rioted because of how much they hated Paul's message. According to Acts 20:29–30, Paul also anticipated that some of his students would defect. Second Timothy 1:15 confirms that not everyone Paul trained remained faithful.¹⁶ But Paul measured success not by the number of his followers but by the degree of his faithfulness. He was faithful to accomplish his God-given mission—to declare the truth with which he had been entrusted.

There are many in the evangelical world today who are confused about God's standard of success. There are many who think that success is measured in terms of numbers: the number of people on a Sunday, the number of followers on a social media platform, the number of likes and subscribers. But when you stand before Christ, He is not going to say to you, "Well done, good and *popular* servant." Rather,

¹³ Like Jesus (Luke 9:24; 14:26–27; 17:33), Paul took up his own cross, denied himself, and ultimately lost his life. See David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 566.

¹⁴ Elsewhere, Paul exhorts Timothy to pursue a "clean heart" (1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22), and a "clean conscience" (1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3). See Friedrich Hauck and Rudolf Meyer, "καθαρός," in *TDNT*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3:425.

¹⁵ "Purpose" (βουλή) refers to the outworking of the divinely appointed plan in redemptive history. See John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 76 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75–77.

¹⁶ See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 393.

He will say, “Well done, good and *faithful* servant” (Matt 25:21). Consider the ministries of Jonah and Jeremiah. Who had the more successful ministry, Jonah or Jeremiah? Jonah had more converts; he had the numbers; he had the results. But while Jeremiah was rejected, he was faithful. Paul measured his success by his faithfulness to Christ. His measure of success was vertical, not horizontal.

So, in Acts 20:18–27, Paul served as an example by demonstrating a mindset of humble service, a message of conviction and courage, a mission of enduring obedience, and a measure of success determined by faithfulness to proclaim the truth.

Convictions

Paul then shifted his focus from his own faithful life to the future ministry of the Ephesians. In verses 28–35, Paul delivered his final exhortations to the Ephesians—to hold fast to biblical convictions. The weight of Paul’s faithful life is what gave weight to his fervent exhortations. Having invested three years of his life in these men—two of these years being in the school of Tyrannus—Paul charged the men with three convictions that were to define their ministries as they aspired to be faithful shepherds of the flock of God. Paul exhorted the men to guard the sheep, to guide the sheep, and to give themselves for the sheep.

Guard the Sheep

Paul first called the Ephesians to guard the sheep (vv. 28–30).¹⁷ He said to them, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).¹⁸ Why were they to guard the sheep? Verse 28 provides two reasons. First, they were to guard the sheep because of the position in which God had placed them. God has providentially ordained every shepherd to serve Christ and His church faithfully, and Paul was charging the Ephesians to fulfill this role. Second, they were to guard the sheep because God had purchased the church with His own blood. This exclamation is one of the clearest attestations in the New Testament to the deity of Christ. In saying that God shed His own blood, Paul referred to the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, God in human flesh.¹⁹ Paul’s point was that the church is precious to God. The church is so precious to God that He would sacrifice His own Son on her behalf to redeem a people for His own possession. This precious church is the body God entrusts to His under-shepherds. He is the Chief Shepherd; we are

¹⁷ “Guard” (προσέχω) means to “pay attention to, listen to”; and when it occurs with either *ἀπό* or a reflexive pronoun, the word may be translated as “watch out” or “be on guard.” Robert Horsz Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 3:169.

¹⁸ For the distinction between *πρεσβύτεροι* (Acts 20:17) and *ἐπίσκοποι* (20:28), see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 845n1816.

¹⁹ As MacArthur and Mayhue note, “Paul’s comment in Acts 20:28 does not mean that the divine nature has blood, for God is spirit (cf. John 4:24). But because ‘blood’ is a property of Christ’s human nature and ‘God’ is a property of his divine nature, Paul can say of Jesus that God purchased the church with his own blood.” See John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 265.

the under-shepherds. God has positioned us in our roles as under-shepherds to guard His church, which He purchased with His own blood.

As under-shepherds, however, we must not think we are above the flock. We also are sheep.²⁰ A good illustration might be that we are like sheepdogs. We can be useful to the Master if we honor and obey the Master. But the fact is that we are more like the sheep than the Shepherd.

In light of this reality, Paul proceeded to warn that some under-shepherds would defect; therefore, every under-shepherd must be committed to personal holiness in order not to stray from the truth. He explained, “After my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (vv. 29–30). This is one of the most sobering texts in all the New Testament. After spending three years with these men—men in whom he had invested his very life—Paul said that false shepherds would arise even from among them and lead the sheep astray. Thus, Paul exhorted these elders to be on guard for themselves first (v. 28). From whom? From themselves; from their sinful flesh. If a pastor is to protect the flock, he must first protect his own heart (cf. 1 Tim 4:16).

Robert Murray McCheyne is attributed the statement that, “The greatest need of my people is my own personal holiness.”²¹ When a pastor watches his life and his doctrine closely, he will be able to safeguard not only himself but also those under his spiritual care. Paul declared this charge to Timothy, when he said, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Tim 4:16). Paul recognized the great threat that ministerial failure represents. When men fail, the results are catastrophic not only for the man who failed but also for the flock. Therefore, Paul exhorted the Ephesians to guard themselves.

The New Testament mentions various men who did not finish the course, who did not run the race without being disqualified. Judas is the most well-known case of someone who defected for the love of money (Matt 26:14–16; John 12:6). Demas defected for the love of this world (2 Tim 4:10). Diotrophes defected for the love of self (3 John 9). Paul had other names on that list also: Phygelus (2 Tim 1:15), Hermogenes (1:15), Hymenaeus (2:17), and Philetus (2:17).²² It is possible that those men also trained in Ephesus. Their failure demonstrates that no matter the quality of one’s instruction or the stature of the person from whom he received it, defection is always a real threat. Therefore, Paul delivered the charge: Guard

²⁰ The paradox of the shepherds also being sheep is evident when Jesus commands Peter to follow Him (the Shepherd) and yet immediately commands Peter to feed His sheep (John 21:18–19). Timothy Laniak observes that “following Jesus meant following him as their Shepherd.” Peter followed Christ as a sheep follows the shepherd, and fed Christ’s followers as a shepherd feeds his flock. The under-shepherd Peter, was both a sheep and a shepherd, ultimately serving the chief Shepherd (cf. 1 Pet 5:2–4). See Timothy Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Leicester, England: Apollos, 2006), 243.

²¹ While this quote may have been only stated and not written down, McCheyne’s personal correspondences with other ministers mention the utmost importance for the minister’s personal holiness. See Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 94, 145, 149, 155, 281, 289, 295.

²² See Florence Morgan Gillman, “Hermogenes,” in *AYBD*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:157 and 3:348.

yourselves! Guard your hearts! Guard the truth! Guard your sheep! Finish your course like Paul did. Then, you will hear the Savior say, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt 25:21).

Guide the Sheep

The second conviction with which Paul charged the Ephesians was to guide the sheep (vv. 31–32). To *guard* the sheep is to protect them from all the threats of this world; to *guide* the sheep is to lead them in the truth.

First, Paul explained the negative aspect of guiding the sheep, saying, “Be on the alert” (v. 31).²³ A key message Paul sought to instill in the men was to be watchful and to avoid error. Paul had given this instruction to them previously, saying that “night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears” (Acts 20:31). Paul’s wholehearted investment into these men—night and day, with tears—indicates that this was not merely an academic exercise for Paul; this was his life. This warning is similar to the caution Jesus declared concerning false prophets, when He said, “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15).²⁴ The message is the same: Be watchful! Be vigilant! While attacks from false teachers may come with seasons, Paul called the elders to be on the alert without ceasing.

But, secondly, the pastor is not only a guard dog, but also a guide dog for God’s people. So, Paul exhorted the elders, “And now I commend you to God and the word of His grace, which is able to build *you* up and to give *you* the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). The pastor is to lead the sheep and to feed the sheep. He is not only to protect them from damaging influence but also to take them to the source of truth. David’s poetic portrayal of the ultimate Shepherd in Psalm 23 serves as an example for every pastor to emulate. David wrote, “He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (Ps 23:2–3). The responsibility of every shepherd is to bring the sheep to the source of truth—the Word of God (John 17:17).

Because Paul understood that the Word of God is the ultimate source that sustains the flock, he entrusted the Ephesian elders and all the flock of God to the care of God and His Word. As Paul planned to proceed to Jerusalem, he knew that in his absence, God’s Word of grace would build them up (v. 32). The source of edification, spiritual growth, spiritual nourishment, spiritual life, and all that is needed for life and godliness, is revealed in the Word of God (2 Tim 3:14–17; cf. 2 Pet 1:3). As the shepherd guides the flock to the Word of God, he both edifies them and ensures that they will have a part in the believer’s inheritance with Christ Jesus, for the believer is an heir of God and a coheir with Christ. In Christ is the hope of eternal life, of forgiveness, and of being in His presence for all of eternity. This

²³ For a discussion on false teachers and those who defected from Paul, see John B. Polhill, *Acts*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 428.

²⁴ Grant Osborne notes that Jesus uses the same word *προσέχω* that appears in Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders (translated, “be watchful” or “beware”). See Grant Osborne, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 271.

promise is shared by all those whom the Lord has sanctified through His work on the cross and whom He is sanctifying through His work in the Scriptures, through the power of the Holy Spirit. One day, our positional status as believers will become a practical reality, for then we will be holy when we see Him, for we will be like Him (1 John 3:2).

So, Paul exhorted the pastor to fulfill the work of guiding the sheep. There is only one true compass, one true source, and one true guide—the Word of God that points to the God of the Word.²⁵

Give Yourself for the Sheep

A final conviction Paul delivered in his discourse is for the shepherd to give himself for the sheep (vv. 33–35). To illustrate this principle, Paul drew on the way he conducted his own life of ministry. In verse 33, he remarked, “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes,” indicating that the treasures of this world were not the goal of his life. Rather, he had strived to take care of his own needs: “You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my *own* needs and to the men who were with me” (v. 34). Paul led his ministry in such a way that he would not depend on the support of other believers.

Paul, however, is not saying that every minister must be bi-vocational. In 1 Corinthians 9:8–12, Paul affirmed that a laborer is worthy of his wages, thus indicating that a pastor deserves to be financially supported in his work of gospel ministry.²⁶ But Paul’s point in his discourse to the Ephesian elders was that he did not take advantage of the Ephesians. Instead, Paul declared that, “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (v. 35). Paul was saying that rather than acquiring riches, he expended his own time and energy for the sake of ministry (vv. 18–19). He gave them the truth (vv. 20–21). He gave them his life (vv. 22–24). He gave everything, including the whole purpose of God (vv. 25–27). While Paul’s exclamation that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (v. 35) has implications for financial matters, in the context of his exhortation this statement concerns ministry.²⁷ Giving oneself in ministry is far greater than receiving any possession or treasure this world may offer.

Paul’s example of giving of himself entirely should be encouraging and motivating. Some pastors may feel like they have given everything and that they cannot give any more. Some might even feel that it is now time to give up. However, this text challenges the pastor with the truth that there is blessing in giving everything because it means giving everything for the One who gave us everything. David

²⁵ For discussion on sufficiency and clarification on misnomers surrounding this doctrine, see John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 681–714.

²⁶ As David Peterson notes, “[Paul’s] other letters encourage believers to finance gospel ministry (1 Cor 9:13–14; Gal 6:6), and he himself accepted gifts from some churches (Phil 4:10–19), but not others (1 Cor 9:6–18; 2 Cor 11:7–11; 12:16–18).” Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 573.

²⁷ For some discussion, see John B. Polhill, *Acts, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 429–30; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary, Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3067.

Livingstone, the famous missionary explorer to Africa, after more than three decades of fighting danger and disease in ministry in that continent, delivered lectures at Cambridge about his time there. In one of his lectures, he addressed the common notion that his ministry was a sacrifice, saying,

For my own part, I have never ceased to rejoice that God has appointed me to such an office. People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay?—Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter?—Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.²⁸

The apostle Paul would have said the same thing: to serve as a minister of Christ is no sacrifice at all; it is only a privilege. This was the perspective Paul sought to instill in the Ephesian elders as well.

Paul's charge to hold to these convictions was a timeless exhortation for pastors of all generations. When Paul delivered this exhortation, he was on his third missionary journey, around AD 57.²⁹ Ten years later, when Paul was in the Mamertine prison and about to die in AD 67, he wrote a similar charge in his last epistle—his second letter to Timothy.³⁰ Timothy had been pastoring in Ephesus, and Paul sought to encourage him to be a faithful pastor. So, Paul called Timothy to guard the truth (2 Tim 1:14). He then charged Timothy to guide his flock in the Scriptures (3:14–4:5). Finally, he reminded Timothy that he, Paul, had given of himself as a sacrifice, a drink offering, and he encouraged Timothy to do likewise (4:6–7). In Acts 20, Paul had said that he sacrificed his life “so that I may finish my course,” and in 2 Timothy 4:7, Paul said, “I *have* finished the course” (emphasis added).³¹ These convictions were timeless. The timelessness of these truths is further demonstrated in that Timothy had already heard Paul deliver this discourse. Timothy was with Paul when Paul delivered this exhortation to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 (see Acts 20:4). He was with Paul on his third missionary journey and he was with Paul at Miletus. Though Paul knew that Timothy had heard this exhortation, Paul reiterated these truths to Timothy again—ten years after his initial discourse in Acts 20. As Timothy pastored the flock in Ephesus, away from Paul, Paul reminded Timothy of these timeless convictions in this final epistle to exhort him to persevere faithfully in shepherding the flock.

²⁸ William Monk, ed., *David Livingstone's Cambridge Lectures* (London: Deighton, 1858), 23.

²⁹ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 387.

³⁰ See Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 40.

³¹ For observations on the Greek wording τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα (2 Tim 4:7) and ὡς τελειῶσαι τὸν δρόμον μου (Acts 20:24), see George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 459–60.

Conclusion

As Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to faithful ministry—in a kind of first-graduation charge—he focused on the character the pastor is to embody and the convictions he is to embrace. But though Paul delivered this specific message to a specific group of Ephesian elders, he intended it to be proclaimed to pastors throughout the ages. In 2 Timothy 2:2, Paul wrote to Timothy, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these things to faithful men who will teach others also.” As Paul invested in his disciples in the school of Tyrannus, and as he encouraged Timothy to persevere in his ministry, so also do Paul’s words apply to pastors today—to maintain a godly character and uphold godly convictions. As a faithful pastor invests in the next generation, God uses his faithfulness for global gospel ministry.

FOLLOW ME: JESUS' CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN¹

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What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus? This article explores John's theology of discipleship and its surrounding themes in the fourth Gospel. As John explains the command to follow Jesus, he provides numerous rewards that incentivize faithful obedience. These rewards motivate the disciple to persevere in faith and obedience, such that the disciple experiences the blessings of sonship, friendship, and fellowship with the Triune God. As the disciple partakes of these blessings, he comes to realize the magnitude of the eternal life which God has given.

* * * * *

Introduction

Ignatius, a bishop of Antioch, an historic city in early Christianity, had a reputation of being a “God-bearer.”² He faithfully preached Christ and followed Christ. He thereby earned the nickname “God-bearer.” Ignatius bore the name of God until AD 108 when he was martyred. As Ignatius traveled to Rome, he wrote a letter to the church in Rome: “Through the abuse of the ten soldiers on the road to Rome I am learning to become more and more of a disciple.... But I still need the wild beasts

¹ This article is adapted from a two-part sermon series delivered on January 21 and 28, 2018 at Grace Community Church, titled, “Follow Me: Jesus' Call to Discipleship in the Gospel of John.” Akin to the sermon, this article endeavors to deliver a summary of my book, *Follow Me: The Benefits of Discipleship in the Gospel of John* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2021). Published with permission from Bloomsbury, Fortress Academic. This article also relies on my PhD dissertation completed at the University of Edinburgh (2017). Many thanks to Karl Walker and Iosif J. Zhakevich for reworking this material into the current article.

² Bryan M. Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 46.

awaiting me in the arena.... I know that this is best for me. I am beginning to be a true disciple."³ Ignatius continued:

May nothing at all, whether of this world or the invisible world above, fight against me and prevent me from reaching Jesus Christ. Bring on the fire and the cross; the hordes of wild beasts! Let the cutting and dissections begin! The wrenching of my bones, the dicing of my limbs, the grinding of my entire body, the hideous tortures of the Devil—let all this befall me; only let me attain to Jesus Christ! Nothing from one end of the earth to the other end matters to me anymore. The kingdoms of this age are meaningless. I would rather die for Jesus Christ than to rule the entire world. He alone is the one I seek, the one who died for us. He is my desire, the one who rose again for our sake.⁴

Ignatius was ultimately torn to pieces by the lions in an arena in Rome.

What sustained Ignatius in his commitment to Jesus? The answer emerges in a letter he wrote to his friend, Polycarp, in which he said: “Be thou watchful as an athlete of God. That which is promised to us is life eternal, which cannot be corrupted, of which things thou are also persuaded.”⁵ The promise of eternal life held him fast. But where did Ignatius pick up the theme of eternal life as a motivation for faithful discipleship, even in the face of the most horrific physical persecution and pain? Who inspired him to stay the course and follow Jesus while facing the lions in Rome? None other than his personal discipler: the Apostle John. This theme of eternal life pervades the Gospel of John.

John refers to (eternal) life fifty-three times.⁶ In John 3:16, John records Jesus saying, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” In 10:27–28, Jesus proclaims, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them.” And in 17:3, Jesus says, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” John appealed to his readers with the theme of eternal life evidently to mitigate against a different experience that was familiar to his audience—a fleeting life frequently cut short by those who hated Christ and Christians.

The Context of Following Jesus

The Gospel of John reveals that persecution was reality for Jesus’ followers. The Apostle John was the last surviving disciple of Jesus, which suggests that he observed more persecution than other followers of Jesus. So, the Apostle John offers an unparalleled point of view on discipleship.

John both endured persecution personally and observed others suffer as well. In Acts 4, Luke describes Peter and John as the first disciples to be arrested after Jesus’

³ Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories*, 48.

⁴ Litfin, 48.

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, “The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Mary and Irenaeus*, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1885), 99.

⁶ See the discussion in Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 53.

ascension. John was later exiled to Patmos for being a Christian (Rev 1:9). But being the last surviving disciple, John also carried the burden of seeing friends and disciples martyred for their faith as he mourned one Christian friend and ministry partner after another. His brother James was executed with a sword by Herod (c. AD 44; Acts 12:1–2); Paul was beheaded;⁷ and Peter was crucified upside down.⁸

In Acts, after the disciples begin to preach Christ, every chapter after chapter four contains instances of persecution except two chapters. In Acts 10, Luke records a private meeting between Cornelius and Peter. And in Acts 15, Luke describes a private meeting of the disciples at the Jerusalem council. So, John witnessed persecution firsthand during his many years of following Christ. He understood and could affirm that there was a high cost to following Christ.

But this did not suddenly happen after Jesus ascended to heaven; this was true even during Jesus' time. Every chapter in the Gospel of John mentions opposition to Jesus or persecution of His followers.⁹ Consider the following examples:

- 1:11: "He came to His own and His own did not receive Him."
- 5:16, 18: "For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus.... For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him."
- 8:59: "Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple."
- 9:28: The Jewish leaders reviled the blind man and said, "You are His disciple, but we are disciples of Moses."
- 11:53: "So from that day on they planned together to kill Him."
- 12:10–11: "But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus."
- 15:18–20: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you.... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you."
- 16:2: "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God."

On account of such opposition to Jesus and His followers, there was a high level of fear that dominated the people, which John conveys in his Gospel.¹⁰

- 7:13: "Yet no one was speaking openly of Him for fear of the Jews."
- 9:22: The parents of the blind man refused to answer questions about the blindness of their son "because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue."

⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Loeb Classical Library 153, trans. Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2.25.5, 189.

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.25.5, 189.

⁹ See 1:11; 2:18–21; 3:11, 36; 4:1–3, 44; 5:16–18; 6:60–66; 7:1, 13, 19–20, 25, 30, 32, 44; 8:20, 37, 40, 59; 9:22, 28, 34; 10:39; 11:8, 46–53, 57; 12:10, 19, 42, 13:2, 21; 14:1, 27, 30; 15:18–27; 16:2, 33; 17:14; 18–19; 19:38; 20:19; 21:18. This hostility stems from "the world" and "the Jews." See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 162–63.

¹⁰ Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 164.

- 12:42: Even though some of the rulers believed in Him, “because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue.”
- 19:38: Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus “because of his fear of the Jews.”
- 20:19: After the crucifixion of Christ, when the disciples gathered together, “the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews.”

The common people, the disciples of Jesus, and even some Jewish leaders (such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) all had various degrees of fear of the retribution they would face from Jewish leadership. The Jewish leaders had decided to expel from the synagogue anyone who followed Jesus (9:22; 12:42; 16:2).¹¹

To be expelled from the synagogue was to be ousted from life in the Jewish community. Such a penalty amounted to losing one’s social identity, which was connected to membership in the synagogue. Membership in the synagogue guaranteed access to participation in social life.¹² Many of the significant events of Jewish life took place at the synagogue—from weddings to daily education to weekly worship to the court system (e.g., Luke 4:16). To be cast out of the synagogue was to become a social leper. This context of persecution permeates every chapter in the Gospel of John.

But in addition to persecution and hostility that kept people from believing and confessing Jesus as Messiah, Jesus also demanded a high cost of His followers. In John 12:25–26, Jesus declares, “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal.”¹³ In 6:53–54, Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life.” Jesus taught that His disciples had to internalize Him and His teaching.

This demand, however, pushed people away from Jesus. In John 6:60 and 66–67, John writes, “Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this* said, ‘This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?’.... As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.” Many followers began to defect from Jesus. So Jesus turned to His disciples and asked: “Will you abandon me also?” (6:67). Jesus’ question to his disciples was fraught with despair and disappointment. Jesus had come to give life (6:54) and to satiate hunger and thirst (6:48, 51), but the people rejected and abandoned Him. Jesus knew that some of His closest followers would abandon Him. He knew that Judas would not only walk away but in fact betray Him, let alone with a kiss (6:70–71).

¹¹ This expulsion was likely done in an unofficial way by the Pharisees exerting pressure on the surrounding community. Bernier describes this action as “something closer to lynching than to formal proceeding.” For further analysis, see Jonathan Bernier, “Jesus, *Ἀποσυνάγωγος*, and Modes of Religiosity,” in *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context*, eds. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 127–33.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 143–46.

¹³ The reader should note the change from *ψυχή* to *ζωή* in the verse that denotes a difference between physical life now and *ζωή*, the spiritual life that John describes throughout his Gospel. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 527 n75.

John portrayed in his Gospel that to be a follower of Jesus was potentially a perilous commitment. It would lead to suffering, shame, and even persecution. Yet, it is in this context of conflict, opposition, persecution, fear, and death that Jesus broadcasts the command: "Follow Me."

The Command to Follow Jesus

The theme of following Jesus echoes throughout the Gospel of John (1:37, 38, 40, 43; 6:2; 8:12; 10:4, 5, 27; 12:26; 13:36, 37; 18:15; 21:19, 20, 22). John challenges every reader to begin the journey or to evaluate if they are truly and faithfully following Christ. John emphasizes this theme by placing it in the opening and in the closing chapters of the book, using an *inclusio* to stress a point of great importance.¹⁴ In John 1:43, Jesus commands Philip, "Follow Me." Then in John 21:19, Jesus tells Peter, "Follow Me." When Peter sees John behind them, he asks Jesus, "And what about this man?" (21:21). But Jesus responds, "What is *that* to you? You follow Me!" (21:22). Jesus wanted Peter to make sure that he himself was following Christ; that needed to be his primary objective, and that is what Jesus called him to do when He reiterated to him: "You follow Me!" Christ's call is directed to each individual: "Follow Me!"

The theme of following Jesus in the Gospel of John depicts six characteristics of a true follower of Jesus.

Belief

First, John depicts belief as a marker of true discipleship. He mentions belief ninety-eight times,¹⁵ and he uses the verb "believe" to stress the active expression of belief in Jesus Christ. Belief is not merely a response that affirms certain truths but one that appropriates them and lives them out. In John's Gospel, belief is mentioned in a variety of contexts. A person has belief in His name (John 1:12), in Jesus as Messiah (3:15–21, 35; 11:27; 20:31), as the Son of God (3:18, 36, 6:40, 11:27, 20:31), as Savior (4:42), in His word (4:41, 50), as One who is sent by God (5:24, 38, 6:29, 11:42, 16:27, 30, 17:8, 21, 25–26), as Son of Man (9:35–38), as the holy One from God (6:69), as "I am" (8:24), as the Light (1:4, 12:26, 44–46), as One unified with the Father in purpose and work (10:30), as the One who satisfies (6:35, 14:10–12), in Jesus' works affirming Him as God's messenger (10:37–38), and in Jesus Christ as the resurrection and the life (11:25–26).

Furthermore, John refers to belief in God's testimony about Jesus Christ. John records Jesus saying, in 14:1, "Believe in God, believe also in Me." John stresses that true disciples believe that God sent Jesus. In 17:8, the identifying mark of Jesus' true disciples is that they received Jesus, His teaching, and His claim that He is from God.

Additionally, followers of Jesus believe the Scripture about Jesus Christ. They believe the prophecies about Jesus Christ as the coming prophet in the likeness of

¹⁴ Bauckham notes other features of the prologue and epilogue that function as an *inclusio*, such as the priority of belief (1:7; 20:31) or the importance of witness (1:15; 21:24); see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 364–68.

¹⁵ Refer to the analysis in Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 4.

Moses (5:39, 46–47). In John 4:19, the Samaritan woman remarks: “Sir, I see that You are a prophet.” In John 6:14, the crowds, after being fed, conclude, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” In John 7:40, after Jesus promises to provide water of life, the crowd affirms, “This truly is the Prophet.” In John 9:17, after the blind man is healed, he calls Jesus the prophet. The mark of true discipleship (as opposed to false discipleship) is both affirming that Jesus is the prophet and continuing to believe this truth—that is, continually abiding in Jesus’ teaching. As Jesus says in John 8:31, “If you abide in My word, *then* you are truly My disciples.”

Thus, John first depicts belief as a foundational characteristic of a true disciple of Christ.

Love

True belief, then, leads to affection, so John presents love as the second characteristic of discipleship. In John 21:15–17, Jesus crafted the perfect scene to restore Peter after he denied Him in the garden near a fire that warmed Peter (John 18:18). As the resurrected Jesus waited for His disciples on the shore, He stood near a fire which would have reminded Peter of his denial of Jesus near a fire (cf. 18:18; 21:9). As Peter now sensed the smell of fire on the shore near Jesus, the context was set for Jesus to ask Peter the key questions that would prove or disprove Peter as a disciple. Jesus did not ask if Peter regretted the betrayal. Jesus did not ask if he confessed his sin to others. He did not chastise him. Instead, Jesus asked a single question, “Do you love me?” This is the ultimate display of discipleship—love.

Then, immediately after posing the question three times, Jesus charges Peter, “Follow Me” (21:19).¹⁶ Jesus thereby shows that there is a bond between loving and following Him which is manifested in obedience. True love for Jesus Christ is displayed in obedience.

Obedience

John indicates that obedience is a key distinctive of true discipleship. As Jesus says in John 14,

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.... He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love Him and will disclose Myself to him.... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me. (14:15, 21, 23–24)

Obedience is the measure of true love and discipleship, and Jesus Christ expects the believers to love not only Him but also the others whom He saved. Jesus says in John

¹⁶ Jesus’ command for Peter to follow Him connects back to Jesus’ earlier statement in 13:36 that Peter would eventually follow Him to death on a cross. See George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 409.

13:35, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Consider John 15:12 and 17, in which Jesus says, “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.... This I command, that you love one another.” Evidence of true love for Jesus is obedience to the commands of Jesus.

Fruit-Bearing

John then links the expectations of obedience and love with the element of bearing fruit. Jesus says, “You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would abide, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He would give to you” (John 15:16). Jesus is promising lasting and effective fruit for those who have been chosen by Him who are His disciples.

When John records this, he is not necessarily speaking of a certain type of fruit, but because the word “fruit” appears in different contexts in John (4:36; 12:24), it is a term that broadly includes all the fruits of a Christian life.¹⁷ It refers to the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). The importance of fruit in the Christian life is stressed by John in 15:8, when Jesus explains, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples.” Fruit proves the authenticity of discipleship. Fruit-bearing is “the visible sign of being a disciple.”¹⁸ Jesus said that a true disciple who bears fruit is engaged in His mission.

Witness

Fruit-bearing is directly related to fulfilling Jesus’ mission and being His witness, which is the fifth expression of true discipleship. Jesus declares in John 4:36–38,

Even now he who reaps is receiving wages and is gathering fruit for life eternal; so that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this *case* the saying is true, “One sows and another reaps.” I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored and you have entered into their labor.

Jesus came to fulfill God’s mission of making His name known. Upon His ascension to heaven, Jesus engages each of His disciples in that same mission. He prays in John 17:18, “As You sent Me into the world, I also sent them into the world.”¹⁹ He also says to His disciples in John 20:21, “Peace *be* with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Believers are to serve as witnesses of Christ.

¹⁷ In contrast to Carson, who suggests that the fruit is “new converts.” See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1991), 523.

¹⁸ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 475.

¹⁹ This witness and the disciples’ preparation is one of the primary themes in Jesus’ prayer in John 17; see Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 203.

In John 15:27, Jesus Christ tells His disciples they will be His witnesses because they had been with Him from the beginning.²⁰ John features the requirement for the true disciple to witness and testify for Christ. He uses this verb “witness” (μαρτυρέω) thirty-three times in the Gospel of John.²¹ Followers of Jesus are called to faithfully proclaim the same message that they had believed, even in times of opposition and persecution.

However, many may not respond to this witness. John records in 12:42–43, “Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory of men rather than the glory of God.” This is John’s explanation as to why people refused to fully commit to Jesus and confess Him—the fear of losing prestige before men. In John 5:44, Jesus accuses the Jewish leaders of preferring human glory over belief in Him. In verse 44, He emphatically places glory at the front of the statement and in juxtaposition to belief, saying: “How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the only God?” Jesus condemns them for preferring human glory over the glory that comes from God.

The irony is that in pursuing human glory people forego true divine glory. As Jesus prays in John 17:22, He says, “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one.” Jesus extends to every person true affirmation, greatest accolades, and approval from God, but the fleshly obsession with human approval causes people to forfeit eternal glory. So, how does one resist the allure of human accolades? John addresses this in the final expression of discipleship.

Hate Your Life

John affirms that a true disciple of Christ loves Christ more than he loves his own life. In fact, he even hates his life in comparison to his undivided love for Christ. In John 12:25–26, Jesus states, “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal. If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him.” The context of John 12:23–26 is death. Jesus declares that the hour of glory has come and that His glory will come through His death on the cross (12:23).²² Jesus’ illustration of a seed dying in the ground reiterates the point of the fruit that results from Jesus’ death (v. 24). In verse 25, Jesus articulates the principle that in order for life to mean something, the disciple must be willing to die. The disciple

²⁰ This command to witness is inseparably linked with the role of the Spirit, the Helper whom Jesus will send from the Father (John 15:26). The Spirit Himself will witness, suggesting that “this witness of the Paraclete is not a phenomenon apart from that of the disciples, but inseparably associated with it.” See Beasley-Murray, *John*, 276–77.

²¹ The verb is used only thirty-five times in the Gospels. The two uses outside of John are found in Matthew 23:31 and Luke 4:22.

²² This is a significant shift within John’s Gospel in the way he uses the word “hour.” Carson observes that previous uses of “hour” are anticipatory (2:4; 4:21, 23; 7:30; 8:20), looking ahead. However, now John notes that the “hour” has come (12:23), namely the hour of Christ’s glorification. This sets the tone for references to the hour moving forward (12:27; 13:1; 17:1). See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 437.

must be willing to sacrifice his life for something that will outlast it. Oswald Sanders states, "The great use of one's life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."²³

What awaits the believers on the other side of this passing life is eternal life (v. 25), presence with Jesus (v. 26), and honor from the Father (v. 26). In 12:25–26, Jesus gives the promise that, "The Father will honor" the faithful disciples of Christ. The preference of God's glory and honor will drive Christ's disciples to hate their life (v. 25) and to serve Jesus Christ (v. 26) in order to gain eternal life (v. 25).

By exhorting believers to hate this life and to focus on eternal life, John encourages believers to not be preoccupied with human approval but to be committed to God's glory and honor. In 12:26, John features "following" as the key to fulfilling this requirement. The way one would hate his life and serve Christ is by following Him, which is the focus of this study.²⁴ To be a disciple is to be in a student-teacher relationship; it is to demonstrate commitment and loyalty.

This is the essence of the word "disciple," which John uses seventy-eight times (seventy-four times for followers of Jesus Christ). John uses the word "disciple" more often than any other Gospel, and John uses this term to refer not only to the twelve disciples, but also to anyone who faithfully believes and follows Jesus. Discipleship is personal allegiance to Jesus that shapes the whole life of a person. This is the commitment to which John is inviting his readers, a personal attachment to Christ. John is not inviting his readers to a relationship he himself was not personally committed to; rather, he was a follower of Jesus and he was inviting his audience to follow Christ as well.

The Model to Follow

Portraying discipleship in a concrete and specific way, the Gospel of John depicts John as a man who was transformed into a disciple of Jesus and who demonstrated exemplary commitment to Christ. The Gospel reveals what propelled John forward in his life of faith and what drove him to live for Christ even in the face of opposition, arrests, beatings, imprisonment and exile. John, therefore, serves as a model to imitate in the pursuit of following Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

John the Model Disciple

John spent three years following Christ, he was one of the three closest disciples (along with Peter and James), and he reclined on Jesus' chest at the final meal before the crucifixion (13:23).²⁵ In John 1:18, the intimacy between the Father and the Son is

²³ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 114.

²⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: I–XII*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 474–75.

²⁵ The association of Peter, James, and John is found at numerous points throughout the Synoptic Gospels as they witnessed exclusively some miracles or events (Mark 1:28; 5:37; 9:2–4; 13:3; 14:33). See Raymond F. Collins, "John (Disciple)," in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 3:884.

described using similar language: “[the Son] is in the bosom of the Father.”²⁶ John uses the intimacy between the Father and the Son to describe his friendship with Jesus Christ.

But John was not always the example to emulate. John was transformed by Christ from being a man of thunder who wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village that would not welcome Jesus (Luke 9:54) to being a man designated as the beloved disciple.²⁷ He was changed from one who wanted to burn down the Samaritans to one who devotes an entire chapter to the conversion of a Samaritan woman and her village (a story no other Gospel records). John had been aggressive, impatient, self-promoting, sectarian, ambitious, and explosive. In Mark 9:38, he boastfully comes to Jesus to inform Him that he had forbidden another follower of Jesus to minister just because he was not part of the twelve. Yet by the time he writes his Gospel, he applies the term “disciple” to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ. Anyone can believe and follow, even those outside the circle of the twelve.

Moreover, it was John and his older brother James who, immediately after Jesus described His upcoming crucifixion, demanded of Jesus: “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on *Your* left, in Your glory” (Mark 10:37; Matt 20:28). They assumed they were superior to the other ten disciples. They felt entitled to such preference plausibly because they were the sons of Zebedee, a wealthy man who had multiple servants in his fishing business. Their father was well-established, known even to the High Priest in Jerusalem, which might suggest that the Zebedee family was prominent.

But the three-year journey with Jesus transformed John. By the time of Jesus’ crucifixion, John was not as brash; he was, instead, caring. When Jesus wanted to entrust the welfare of His mother to someone, He entrusted her to John (19:27). John learned compassion and faithfulness in following Christ.

Peter the Faltering Disciple

John’s devotion to Christ can be contrasted with Peter’s faltering faith who initially denies Christ but ultimately repents and follows Him. When Jesus was arrested and taken to Annas and Caiaphas for interrogation (John 19), Peter displayed frailty in his commitment to Christ. Peter was confronted of being Jesus’ follower (18:17), but instead of affirming this claim, he was so afraid that he denied Jesus. In John 18:18–19, Peter is standing with the enemies of Christ and warming himself with the fire, a symbol of warmth, communion, intimacy, and fellowship with those

²⁶ This wording signifies a close, personal relationship, “the most intimate human relationship,” in the words of Klink. Elsewhere, it is used for “marriage (Deut 13:6), mother and child (1 Kgs 3:20), and God’s care for Israel (Num 11:12). See Edward W. Klink III, *John*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 118.

²⁷ Carson points out that John’s description of himself in the third person is customary for John’s Gospel (cf. “that disciple whom Jesus loved”; John 21:7). See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 582. The request to call fire down upon a Samaritan city alludes to the Elijah-Ahaziah narrative (2 Kgs 1:1–18). In a similar location (1:2–3), Elijah proves his status as a “man of God” by calling down fire upon the messengers of Ahaziah (1:10, 12, 14). In a context where Jesus is believed by many to be Elijah (Luke 9:8, compare with 9:19, 30), Jesus implies that He is greater than Elijah by refusing to submit to the request of James and John (Luke 9:54–56). See David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 414.

who hate Christ. Though the people call him a disciple of Jesus (vv. 17 and 25), significantly he is not even with Christ at that moment.

As in verse 25, other servants seemingly recognize Peter, and ask, "You are not also *one* of His disciples, are you?" But again he denies his relationship to Christ. However, then a man definitively recognizes Peter, and says: "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" (v. 26). This man is certain of Peter's identity because Peter had cut off the ear of his relative (v. 26). But for the third time Peter denies Christ (v. 27). In fact, in Mark 14:71 it says Peter began to swear, putting himself under a curse that if he is lying, then God should judge him.²⁸

Peter's fear of man overpowered his commitment to Christ. Peter would rather be condemned by God than identified as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is the same Peter who no more than a few hours prior had said, "Lord, why can I not follow You right now? I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). Peter had three opportunities to stand for Jesus and to witness about Him, and he failed every time. Peter followed Jesus Christ until it became a threat to his reputation and life.

While in his denials Peter serves as a negative example of following Christ, John stands as a model disciple. John goes into the inner court to be with Jesus. Of all the disciples, John alone stands at the foot of the cross with Jesus when the others abandon Him. At the end of the story, around the campfire in John 21, after Jesus forgives and recommissions Peter, Jesus *has* to tell Peter to follow him, but in contrast to Jesus' command to Peter, John follows Jesus with no command. It was his determination to follow Jesus.

In seeing the consequences of being a disciple of Jesus, a question arises: Is it worth it to follow Jesus? Is it worth it to forego the pleasures of this world and to follow Christ? John answers this question affirmatively by delineating the reward of following Christ.

The Reward of Following Jesus

As John's readers faced persecution, they began to question whether following Jesus was worth it. Following Jesus as Messiah became difficult and dangerous. But John's reply to this question is that the call to follow Jesus Christ is precisely the call to suffer and, if need be, to die for Jesus. The disciple of Jesus must forego the accolades of men and indeed hate his life, in order to obtain honor and glory from God. John understands the risk and the consequences of following Jesus, so he writes a Gospel to motivate his readers to faithfully follow Christ.

Jesus' command "Follow Me" comes in a tension-filled religious environment. Capturing the essence of Jesus' words, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes,

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.... Suffering ... is the badge of true discipleship.... Following Christ means suffering....

²⁸ For discussion on Peter pronouncing a curse, see James A. Brooks, *Mark*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 246; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 665.

Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.²⁹

On account of the persecution that comes from following Jesus, John writes the Gospel of John to motivate his readers to remain loyal to Jesus. He wants his readers to believe in Jesus and to keep following Him. In 20:30–31, John writes, “Therefore many other signs Jesus also did in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” This is John’s aim: to persuade the readers to believe and to keep believing, which would be manifested in following Christ faithfully.

Distinct Gospel

As John seeks to encourage his readers to follow Christ, he writes a Gospel that includes ninety-two percent of content that is distinct from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. He incorporates new stories, miracles, conversions, discourses, and details about the pre-incarnate Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and the resurrected Christ that are only found in the Gospel of John. Expecting his readers to be familiar with Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he complements these three biographies of Jesus with this new content to further encourage the believers to remain loyal to Christ. Drawing his Gospel to a close, as noted above, John explicitly tells his readers in 20:30–31 that he composed the new material to motivate them to believe and to continue believing in Jesus as Messiah. The charge to believe continuously is made clear through the present tense use of the verb “believe.”³⁰ That is John’s intent: to provide encouragement to the followers of Jesus to remain faithful in their commitment to Him.

As John seeks to motivate his readers toward continuous belief, he permeates the entire Gospel with promises, benefits, and rewards for following Christ. He deploys twenty-six such themes that are intended to incentivize believers to faithfully follow Christ.³¹

| Benefit | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Life (eternal) | 1:4; 3:15–21, 36; 4:10, 14; 5:21, 24, 38–40; 6:27, 33, 51–58; 8:51; 10:10, 27–29; 11:24–26; 12:25–27, 50; 14:6, 19; 17:2, 3 |
| Resurrection | 5:25–30; 8:51–53; 11:24–27 |
| Adoption into God’s family | 1:12; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 11–12, 24; 18:9; 20:17; 21:5 |

²⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 99–101.

³⁰ For an expanded discussion of this point, see Mark Zhakevich, “Jesus’ Love for His Own: The Remnant in John,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2024), 244, especially n. 4.

³¹ See Mark Zhakevich, “The Compensatory Benefits of Discipleship in the Gospel of John” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2017), 230.

| | |
|---|--|
| Salvation | 3:17; 10:9 |
| You do not perish | 3:16 |
| No judgment | 3:17–19; 5:22–30; 12:47–50 |
| Avoid God's wrath | 3:36 |
| Walk in the Light/Do not remain in darkness | 3:19–21; 8:12; 12:36, 46 |
| Abiding with the Father and the Son | 14:1–3; 14:15–24 |
| Future presence with Jesus | 12:26; 14:1–3; 17:24 |
| The presence of the Paraclete | 7:37–39; 14:15–27; 16:7; 20:22–23 |
| Freedom from sin | 8:21–24, 8:31–36, 39–47, 51; 9:41 |
| Possession of the Truth | 8:31 |
| Protection from the Father | 10:28–29; 17:11–13 |
| Knowledge of the Father and the Son | 10:14–15, 27–29; 14:20; 15:15; 17:26 |
| Honor from the Father | 12:25–26 |
| Performance of greater works | 14:12–15 |
| Answered prayer | 14:12–14; 15:7, 16; 16:23–26 |
| Peace | 14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21, 26 |
| Joy | 15:11; 16:20–24; 17:13 |
| Fruitfulness | 4:36; 12:24; 15:2–8, 16 |
| Friendship | 15:13–16 |
| Unity | 11:52; 14:20; 17:6, 11, 21, 22, 23, 26 |
| Love | 13:1; 14:21, 23; 15:9–17; 16:27; 17:23, 26 |
| Glory | 17:22, 24 |
| Forgiveness | 20:22–23 |

These twenty-six themes can be grouped under three primary promises that reflect three relationships uniquely highlighted in the Gospel of John. There are three primary promises John features through their strategic placement in the Gospel, frequency of occurrence, and peculiarity to the Gospel. Each of these three themes attracts multiple lesser-repeated themes in the Gospel.

So, John includes three major rewards that are unique to the Gospel of John in that the other Gospel writers either never mention the theme or do not develop it to the same depth that John does. Each theme represents a relational benefit that John weaves into the tapestry of his Gospel in order to encourage his readers to believe

and continue believing that Jesus is the Messiah (20:30–31). These three rewards are sonship, friendship, and fellowship.³²

Sonship: Adoption into the Family of God

John wastes no time informing his readers of the good news that those who believe in Jesus Christ are adopted into the divine family. He writes,

He came to what was His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (1:11–13)

Adoption into God’s family is the first promise made in the Gospel of John (1:12), and John continues this theme in the rest of the Gospel through references to the Father, the Son, children, little children, orphans, brothers, and the mention of the Father’s house as the future destination. The family theme permeates the entire Gospel. But John uniquely shines a spotlight on this promise in chapter one by making it central in his opening section—the prologue. John places the promise of sonship right in the middle of the prologue through his usage of a chiastic structure.³³

A Word with God (1:1–2)

B What came to be through the Word: Creation (1:3)

C What we have received from the Word: Life (1:4–5)

D John sent to testify (1:6–8)

E Incarnation and response of the World (1:9–10)

F The Word and His own (1:11)

G Those who accepted the Word (1:12a)

H Those who became children of God (1:12b)

G’ Those who believed in the Word (1:12c)

F’ The Word and His own (1:13)

E’ Incarnation and response of the community (1:14)

D’ John’s testimony (1:15)

C’ What we have received from the Word: Grace (1:16)

B’ What came to be through the Word: Grace and Truth (1:17)

A’ Word with God (1:18)

The climax is in verse 12b: “to them He gave the right to become children of God.” John arranges his opening thoughts in such a way so as to declare that the main benefit in the coming of Jesus is that His followers are embraced by the Father and are welcomed into the divine family.

³² Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 155.

³³ Zhakevich, “Jesus’ Love for His Own,” 247; see Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 6–7 n21, and 29–30; R. Alan Culpepper, “The Pivot of John’s Prologue,” *NTS* 27 no. 1 (1980): 14; compare with Andreas Köstenberger’s chiasm in *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 20–21.

But John spotlights adoption into the family of God not only through this chiasmic structure but also through the family motif in the beginning (i.e., in the prologue, as just noted) and at the end of his Gospel. In John 20:17, Jesus tells Mary, “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’” Until this point, Jesus had not yet addressed His disciples as “brothers.”³⁴ But through His death, Jesus created a new family of God. In effect, He can call His followers “brothers.” In 21:5, Jesus calls His disciples “children,” another familial term.³⁵ So, John features the family idea in chapter 1 and in chapters 20 and 21, impressing on the minds of his readers that the followers of Christ are now in the family of God.

Additionally, at the end of His public ministry, which appears in the middle of the Gospel in chapter 12, Jesus calls the public to follow Him and become part of the family as well.³⁶ His final words to the public are, “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light” (12:36). This also is how John had opened his Gospel, saying, “There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens everyone.... But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name” (1:9, 12). In John 12:36a, Jesus calls people to believe in Him as the Light and become His sons. Thus, just as the theme of sonship opens and closes the entire Gospel, so also it opens and closes the subsection in the Gospel: the beginning of the Gospel and the end of Jesus’ public ministry toward the middle of the Gospel. This structure stresses the importance of this promise to those who believe—that those who believe in Jesus are welcomed into the family of God.³⁷ This is God’s reward for belief.

But why would the promise of being in God’s family incentivize people to believe and follow Christ? In the Ancient Near East, life revolved around family. The family was the most important element of anyone’s life. The family would define one’s social status, and the last name would affect one’s success. For this reason, John stresses birth in John 1:13 (“who were born ... of God”). Being born into nobility or even the royal family is extraordinary, but John reaches even higher: he declares that a follower of Jesus is born into the family of God.

Birth, however, was not the only means of entry into a prestigious family; adoption was another. In Rome, the adoption process included three phases. The adopted son would renounce his biological father, and the biological father would renounce his relationship to his son three times. Then the adoptive father would

³⁴ J. Ramsay Michaels, *The Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1001. Michaels observes that until this point, brothers and disciples have been distinguished by believing in Jesus (2:11–12); however, this text shifts the definition of “brothers.”

³⁵ Klink notes that John’s typical way of referring to Christians is with *τέκνα* whereas *υἱός* is generally reserved for Jesus Christ. See Klink, *John*, 104. However, the promise of sonship is offered with the word *υἱός*, such as in John 12:36 (“While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons [υἱοὶ] of Light”).

³⁶ Chapters 1–12 is Jesus’ public ministry while 13–17 is Jesus’ private ministry. The rejection of the Jews (12:36–43) as well as the arrival of Gentiles at Passover (12:20) signals the shift in audience within John’s Gospel. Chapters 1–12 are thus referred to as the Book of Signs, whereas the latter half is labeled the Book of Exaltation. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 369.

³⁷ Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 29.

accept the son three times, thereby permanently sealing his new family relationship.³⁸ From that moment forward, the adopted son would be treated as a biological son; he would be considered a true heir—he would gain all the possessions, slaves, all the debtors, and political relationships of his new father.³⁹ Through adoption, “a son could be raised up from the bottom of society and installed among the nobility.”⁴⁰ That is how the first emperor of Rome became prominent. Since Julius Caesar had no sons, he adopted his nephew Octavius and made him his heir.⁴¹

When God adopted the believers, their status changed from being slaves of sin to becoming sons of God, from being children of the devil to becoming children of God. Just as ancient adoption brought benefits, so also John associates sixteen benefits that followers of Christ gain through adoption. These benefits are:⁴²

- Love (17:23)
- Knowledge of God (10:14–15)
- Knowledge of the truth (8:31–32)
- Freedom from sin (8:34, 36)
- Walking in the light (12:35–36; 8:12)
- Salvation (3:17)
- Avoidance of condemnation (3:16–19, 36)
- Protection (10:28–29; 17:11, 12, 15)
- Performance of great works (14:12)
- Confirmation of genuine discipleship (8:31; 15:8)
- Honor (12:26)
- Glory (17:22)
- Unity/Oneness with the Father/Son/Spirit (17:21)
- Unity with other disciples (17:22–23)
- Resurrection (5;24, 29; 6:54)
- Eternal Life (17:3)

All these benefits appear throughout the Gospel of John and are associated with the theme of familial terminology.

But a theme that stands out above the rest and that always appears in the Gospel of John in the context of familial terminology is the theme mentioned last on the list above: the benefit of eternal life. John mentions life and eternal life fifty-three times. He wants his readers to understand eternal life within the context of membership in

³⁸ Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 58.

³⁹ Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World*, 54.

⁴⁰ Peppard, 57.

⁴¹ While there may be questions surrounding Julius Caesar’s adoption of Octavius, Gardner remarks that “it was a condition of Octavius’ inheritance that he take Caesar’s name; he seized the opportunity of making political capital out of the name, by representing himself as ‘adopted’ by the will.... The persistent belief among some modern scholars in the legal reality of ‘testamentary adoption’ rests entirely upon the subsequent action by Octavius, now calling himself C. Julius Caesar Octavianus.” For further reading, see Jane F. Gardner, “The Dictator,” in *A Companion to Julius Caesar*, ed. Miriam Griffin (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 66–68.

⁴² See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 182.

the family of God. Birth from above signifies entrance into the divine family; and eternal life signifies the believer's continuous participation in the divine family. However, while eternal life is often conceived of as a future experience, John presents it as a present experience.

John carefully distinguishes between eternal life that is in part experienced in the present and resurrection which is a future reality. He records Jesus' words saying, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him up on the last day" (John 6:54). Jesus clearly states that eternal life is experienced in the present while resurrection refers to the future.⁴³ In John 5:24 and 5:29, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes on Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life ... and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." Again, believers in Jesus experience eternal life in the present while the final resurrection is reserved for the future.

So, if eternal life is not synonymous with resurrection or living forever, then what is eternal life? John answers this question in John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." At the heart of eternal life is knowing God and Jesus. Knowledge of God is a progressive experience.⁴⁴ In 10:38, Jesus explains, "So that you may know and continue knowing that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father." John intentionally switches tenses to stress the initial and the continuous commitment of a disciple.⁴⁵ He makes the point that people are to believe so that they may *begin* to know and *continue* to know. Eternal life is participation in the life of God through the knowledge of God, as empowered by the Holy Spirit; and so, the intimacy of one's relationship with God fluctuates in proportion to one's knowledge of God.⁴⁶

In effect, it is possible to have an improved quality of eternal life through a deeper knowledge of God. This knowledge of God will continue to become deeper and more intimate until the believer enters into God's presence. First Corinthians 13:10–12 teaches that when the perfect comes, the believers will see Him face to face and that they will know Him as they are known. Revelation 22:4 says that believers will see His face in eternity.⁴⁷ Followers of Christ have eternal life today which continuously grows and deepens, but it will reach its apex in the resurrection when believers see God face to face.

The believer's knowledge of God today is a preview of their eternal presence with God in the future. Therefore, eternal life is not merely something a believer will receive only in the future; it is something every believer possesses today. However, eternal life reaches its full completion in resurrection. Investing into the relationship with God is investing into eternity. This is what John promises to every believer who chooses to follow Jesus Christ: spiritual participation in the life of God that begins

⁴³ Zhakevich, "Jesus' Love for His Own," 246 n8; Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 71.

⁴⁴ Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 56.

⁴⁵ Zhakevich, 56.

⁴⁶ Zhakevich, 51.

⁴⁷ See John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 12–22*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 2000), 288.

today and extends into eternity. So, Jesus' promise of an abundant life in John 10:10 ("I came that they may have life, and have *it* abundantly") is not a promise for the future; it is available today through the knowledge of God.

It is eternal life that gives meaning and satisfaction to believers today. John describes eternal life as the water of life (4:10) and the bread of life (6:48) because it satiates our spiritual hunger and thirst. If someone feels like his spiritual life is stagnant, stale, and flat, it is because he is not filling himself with the water of life and the bread of life which is found in the knowledge of God (Deut 8:3). True believers crave time with God because He satisfies them. True children of God treasure those moments of focused, undistracted, thoughtful, and awe-inspiring personal time with their God. Eternal life is learning more and more of God's thoughts that become precious to us (Ps 139:17–18). Because eternal life in the Gospel of John is always coupled with familial terminology, it is this life that gives the believers access to all the other benefits already noted.

But these benefits are juxtaposed with responsibilities that are embedded into one's membership in the family of God. Just as in the ancient family everything revolved around the father's name because he was the chief member of the family, so in the spiritual family everything revolves around God the Father who is the chief member of the divine family.⁴⁸ John refers to God as Father one-hundred-twenty times. The entire Gospel is about God. God is at the center of the story.

The Roman father had the authority in his family over life and death of every member, over marriage, divorce, and even over the decision to keep or disown a child.⁴⁹ In the Gospel of John, the Father is portrayed as the Author of life (5:20–21), all-powerful (10:29), one who owns everything (17:6, 9–10), one who commands (10:18), judges through the Son (5:22; 8:16), and seeks worship (4:23; 5:23).⁵⁰ God is presented as the main figure in the divine family and Jesus Christ is depicted by John as God's messenger who came to fulfill God's work (4:34; 6:38).

Consider the following three points about the mission of Christ, God the Son, to represent God the Father:

- Jesus Christ came to explain God (1:18).
- Jesus Christ is the way to God (14:6).
- Jesus Christ looks heavenward and declares, "I [have] finished the work which You have given Me to do ... I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me" (17:4, 6).

Jesus' assignment from the Father was to make the Father known, and after Jesus completed that work (17:12), He says in 17:18, "As You sent Me into the world, I also sent them into the world." Believers are to continue the work of Jesus and glorify the Father. This is the point of sonship—to elevate the Father, to honor the Father, and to glorify the Father. Everything believers do is to be done for the fame of God's Name.

⁴⁸ See Zhakevich, "Compensatory Benefits of Discipleship," 250.

⁴⁹ Craig S. Keener, "Man and Woman," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 587.

⁵⁰ Zhakevich, "Compensatory Benefits of Discipleship," 251.

This is what it means to be in God's Family. It means to be about God's work and God's honor. As members of God's family, God's children are loved by the Father like the Son is loved by the Father (17:23). Believers know God, they know the Truth, they are no longer enslaved to sin, they walk in the Light, they avoid judgment from God, they are protected by God and the Son from the Evil One (10:27–30, 17:15), they will receive honor and glory from the Father (12:26; 17:22), and they are unified with the Trinity and with one other. This is what drew people to Christianity—the ability to have a personal relationship with God, to call God “Father,” to know Him, and to spend eternity with Him.

One's birth from above grants access into the family of God, but eternal life is the quality of one's relationship within the divine family—with God first and then with other believers who share that same eternal life. Believers are united to God and to God's children.

Thus sonship is the first prominent benefit and promise that John features to motivate his readers to follow Christ faithfully. Next, John shifts the focus from the believer's new relationship with God to the believer's new relationship with Christ.

Friendship: Royal Friendship with Jesus

As John begins his discourse on royal friendship, he cites Jesus stating,

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down His life for His friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose You, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would abide, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. (John 15:12–16)

Immediately after this promise of friendship with Jesus Christ, Jesus warns about hatred from the world in verses 18–25. John placed this promise of friendship with Christ next to Christ's warning of hostility arguably to motivate Jesus' followers to be faithful in the face of upcoming hostility.

In the Ancient Near East, an individual was constrained to friendships within his social class and among his peers, lest a friendship with someone from a lower class hinder his social promotion; such was the case in the Greco-Roman world with the *cursus honorum*.⁵¹ In peer relationships, one does not command others nor interact with them as slaves; since they are equals, there is an expectation of mutual respect and honor. But in 15:13–16, John places an accent on disparity and inequality. He uses terms such as servants, master, friends, command, obedience, choosing, appointment,

⁵¹ Joseph Hellerman defines the *cursus honorum* as “a sequence of offices that marked the standard career for the Roman senatorial class, and which had been in place since the middle of the fourth century BCE” (Joseph H. Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Podorum*, Society for New Testament Monograph Series 132 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 51). He goes on to recount that “Ancient historians lament two ways in which social standards were compromised” (Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi*, 53). Violations of this social hierarchy in Rome were scorned by the surrounding culture.

and send.⁵² In John 15:15, Jesus refers to Himself as Lord. In John 13:13, He tells His disciples, “You call Me Lord and you are right in doing so.” In John 15:20, He refers to Himself as master and to His disciples as slaves. So, even while calling His disciples friends, Jesus retains the position of authority and lordship.⁵³ Jesus ensures His disciples understand that this friendship was not mutually agreed upon. He chose them (13:18; 15:19), and they are now to obey Him, serve Him, and fulfill His mission.

So, if superiors and inferiors were not friends in the ancient world, what kind of friendship is Jesus promising? There was a paradigm of the ancient practice of friendship that fits the Johannine description, that is, friendship with a king. In ancient writings, the king’s inner circle of confidants, associates, and advisers were “friends of the king.”⁵⁴ When Jesus tells His followers “I call you friends,” He is elevating them into the prestigious inner circle of being friends of the king. As a friend of a king or of Caesar, the individual would be treated with preference, honor, distinction, and protection from public insult.⁵⁵

As an example, this language “friend of Caesar” appears in John 19:12, in which John records the Jews saying, “If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar; everyone who makes Himself *to be* a king opposes Caesar.” Pilate was a friend of Caesar Tiberius, the Roman emperor at that time who granted Pilate the governorship over Judea.⁵⁶ In return, Tiberius expected loyalty from Pilate. Therefore, it was dangerous for Pilate to express any disloyalty to Tiberius because he was in his inner circle. When Jesus refers to His followers as His friends, He as king affirms a distinct and honorable relationship between Himself and His followers.

Establishing this royal friendship, John presents Jesus not only as the Messiah, the Son of God and the Son of Man, but also as a king. Nathanael says to Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel” (John 1:49). As a representative of the kingdom of God, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the means of entering God’s kingdom: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (3:3, 5). John depicts Jesus as a king.

Later in John’s Gospel, the crowd is eager to stage a coronation ceremony and make Jesus king by force. John records, “Therefore, when the people saw the sign which He had done, they were saying, ‘This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.’ So Jesus, knowing that they were going to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone” (6:14–15). Then at the triumphal entry, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey because kings in ancient Israel rode on donkeys (12:13, 15; cf. 1 Kgs 1:33). This scene is reminiscent of an ancient triumphal military procession and a royal entrance.

⁵² Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 116.

⁵³ Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 477.

⁵⁴ See the discussion on friendship in the ancient Greco-Roman world by Victor Alonso Troncoso in Michael Peachin and Maria Letizia Caldelli, *Aspects of Friendship in the Graeco-Roman World: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the Seminar für Alte Geschichte, Heidelberg, on 10–11 June, 2000*. Universität Heidelberg. Seminar für Alte Geschichte. *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. Supplementary series, no. 43 (Portsmouth: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 2001), 81–86.

⁵⁵ Philo, *Flaccus*, Loeb Classical Library 363, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 6.40, 325.

⁵⁶ Tacitus, *Annals*, Loeb Classical Library 322, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 15.44, 283.

Even Pilate's interrogation of Jesus (18:33–19:12) includes ten references to Jesus as king and three references to kingdom (18:33, 37 [2x], 39; 19:3, 12, 14, 15, 19, 21). Notably, the first question Pilate asks Jesus is: "Are You the King of the Jews?" (18:33). Of all the questions Pilate could have asked Jesus—"Are You the Messiah? Are You the Prophet? Are You an insurrectionist? Where are You from?"—Pilate instead focuses on Jesus' royal status.

This same question appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in each Gospel Jesus gives the same answer: Yes! In John 18:36, Jesus explains, "My kingdom is not of this world." Earlier, in 3:3–5, Jesus speaks of "God's kingdom," but here He says, "My kingdom is not of this world." So, there is a shift in John's depiction of the kingdom: in John 3, he presents it as God's kingdom; in 18:36, he presents it as Jesus' kingdom.⁵⁷

John's point is that Jesus is the king in God's kingdom, and He is the only king. He is the only anointed One by the Father as the ruler of the world. For this reason, John later writes that when Jesus returns, His robe and thigh will display: "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev 19:16; cf. 17:14).

Toward the end of Jesus' trial, Pilate walks Jesus out before the Jewish leaders and in John 19:14, he says "Behold, your King." But instead of submitting to Jesus' rule, the Jewish rulers declare: "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15).⁵⁸

The irony in this statement is that the Jews hated Caesar, they hated the Romans, and they hated all foreign interference into their rule, such that some became assassins and assaulted the Roman soldiers with daggers as an act of rebellion.⁵⁹ But their hatred for Jesus was so consuming that they were willing to side with their enemies rather than acknowledge God's royal Messiah.

Developing further the image of Christ as king, John shows that King Jesus is like no other king, in that He dies for His subjects. Jesus Himself exclaims in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." In John 10:11, Jesus says of Himself, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep" (vv. 11, 15, 17, 18).⁶⁰ The kingship of Jesus is

⁵⁷ See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 133. As Beasley-Murray observes, some commentators try to explain the difference between God's kingdom (3:3, 5) and Jesus' kingdom (18:36) by redefining Jesus' use of kingdom to mean "kingship" (e.g., Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John: Volume 3* [New York: Crossroad, 1982], 249). However, the recurrence of "kingdom" in 18:36 appears to be intentional on the part of Jesus, to declare that He is in the same role of authority as He described God to be in when He spoke to Nicodemus. Therefore, it seems best to treat these uses of "kingdom" (3:3, 5; 18:36) as describing the same entity. Beasley-Murray, *John*, 330.

⁵⁸ The history of the nation's dealings with God and kingship demonstrate this to be "the ultimate hypocrisy" (Borchert, *John 12–21*, 259). Borchert points out that God's desire was to be King over His people (Judg 8:23; Isa 26:13), but their rebellion was a rejection of His kingship (1 Sam 8:4–9), which culminated in the declaration of a pagan ruler to be their king. See Borchert, *John 12–21*, 259.

⁵⁹ Bruce notes the occurrence of these figures in both Josephus and the biblical record (perhaps Acts 21:38; Bruce, *New Testament History*, 98–99). The word "assassins" in Acts 21:38 translates the Greek word σικάρπιος (pl. σικαρίων) and describes "one who is intent on killing someone as part of an organized subversive political program" (William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 923). The word σικάρπιος could be connected to the usage of daggers in carrying out acts of extremism against Rome and other oppressors.

⁶⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John: XII–XXI*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 682.

significant in that it is paired with the self-sacrificing shepherd. Ancient writings describe kings, pharaohs, and emperors who perceived themselves as shepherds of their people.⁶¹ Alluding to this image of the shepherd-king, John strategically refers to Jesus laying down His life (only in John 10 and 15) in order to portray Jesus as the ultimate shepherd-king.⁶² Not only does He take care of His people as a shepherd takes care of his sheep; He in fact fulfills the ultimate sacrifice to demonstrate His love and care for His people. To summarize, then, this King Jesus both lays down His life for His sheep and embraces His followers as His royal friends.

As Jesus transforms His followers from being His servants to being His royal friends, additional benefits are experienced by those in their new status. To those who are His friends, Jesus promises:⁶³

- Knowledge of the Father (15:15)
- Access to the Father (15:7, 16)
- Answered requests from the Father (15:7, 16)
- Abiding fruit that glorifies the Father and confirms them as authentic disciples (15:8)
- Sacrificial love from their royal patron (15:9, 12)
- Complete joy (15:11)

But these benefits continue even beyond this life. One should not forget Jesus' words to Pilate in John 18:36: "My kingdom is not of this world." This means that beyond these benefits, more rewards await the believers in the future:

- Reigning with Christ (2 Tim 2:12)
- Receiving the crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8)
- Receiving the crown of life (Jas 1:12)
- Receiving the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet 5:4)
- Receiving the crown of life (Rev 2:10)

All these benefits await the believers in heaven inasmuch as the believers are friends of the Shepherd-King Jesus.

But John does not end his discourse on the benefits for faithfully following Jesus with the believer's new relationship with God the Father and God the Son; he also focuses on God the Spirit. In addition to adoption into the family of God and royal friendship with Jesus, fellowship with the Spirit is the third relational benefit John deploys in order to motivate believers to faithfully follow Christ.

⁶¹ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library 175 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 57.10.5, 137; Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars, Book 3: Tiberius*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 32.2, 359.

⁶² See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 138–39.

⁶³ See this list in Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 142

Fellowship with the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit mediates the permanent abiding presence of the Father and the Son to Christ's followers. Throughout the Old Testament, believers express a longing to dwell in the presence of God. David writes, "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps 16:11). Similarly, "For You make him most blessed forever; You make him joyful with gladness in Your presence" (21:6). He also writes, "As for me, You uphold me in my integrity, and You set me in Your presence forever" (41:12). The sons of Korah also exclaim, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?" (42:2). The Old Testament pilgrims such as Abraham, Moses, and David longed to see the face of God and to be in God's presence (e.g., Ps 27:4).⁶⁴ Hebrews 11:14–16 says they were seeking the heavenly country that is prepared for them by God. True believers yearn to be with God (cf. Phil 1:23).

Then, when Jesus comes on the scene, He encourages His disciples in John 14:1–3 with the promise that a place in heaven is already awaiting them:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places [μονή]; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also.

Jesus affirmed that God will satisfy the desire of the believers to be with God.

As Jesus makes this promise, He uses language that points to the trinitarian abiding with the believer. In John 14:2, Jesus employs the term "dwelling places" (μονή), and He then uses this same term again in John 14:23, saying, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling [μονή] with him." These two passages, along with the surrounding context (14:16–17), denote the reality that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit dwell with the believer.⁶⁵

However, while the promise in John 14:2–3 refers to the future dwelling in God's presence, John 14:23 promises God's presence with the believer today.⁶⁶ Jesus explains that this promise is fulfilled through the presence of the Holy Spirit who will be with the believer forever. Explaining the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says in 14:16–20:

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, that He may be with you forever; the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him. You know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a

⁶⁴ For a fuller treatment of this doctrine, see Samuel G. Parkison, *To Gaze upon God: The Beatific Vision in Doctrine, Tradition, and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024).

⁶⁵ The Greek term *μονή* in 14:23 indicates a sense of permanence in the Father's and the Son's abiding with the believer. See C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 456–57.

⁶⁶ See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 15, 92–93.

little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also. On that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

Jesus' promise not to leave His disciples as orphans is fulfilled through the coming of the Holy Spirit "on that day" (14:20). If "that day" were to refer to Jesus' second coming, then the disciples would be orphans in the intermediate time between His ascension and His return. However, since Jesus had the anointing of the Holy Spirit (3:34), since the Holy Spirit is the other Comforter (14:16), and since the ministry of the Holy Spirit is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus,⁶⁷ it is most appropriate to understand "that day" as the coming of the Holy Spirit. The following explanation of this view helps capture the meaning of this promise:

This interpretation coheres with the references to "in that day" in 16:23 and 16:26, since in both verses the disciples are encouraged to bring their requests directly to God in the name of Jesus, which implies that Jesus is not present with them when they bring their requests to God, since they would otherwise bring their requests directly to Jesus.⁶⁸

Thus, the Holy Spirit would mediate the relationship between the Father and the Son to the believer. The fulfillment of this promise takes place at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), as the Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost comports with Christ's promise to be with the believers ("you in Me, and I in you"; 14:20), which resulted in more miraculous activity to fulfill the mission entrusted to them by Jesus (7:37–39; 17:18; 20:21–23). Thus the Holy Spirit permanently abides with the believers, indwelling them (e.g., Rom 8:9) and empowering them to fulfill the mission of Jesus.⁶⁹

Ultimately, the permanent abiding presence of the Holy Spirit with the believers confirms that one day the believers will be with God forever, in the house of God (cf. Ps 23:6). Until then, the believer is expected to abide in Jesus, and in return, Jesus abides with the believer (John 15:1–11). If the believer habitually abides in Jesus, then Jesus empowers him to produce much fruit that glorifies the Father. Moreover, the disciple possesses assurance of his status as a disciple, his prayers are answered, he experiences the love of the Father and the Son through obedience, and his joy is complete (15:1–11). This is John's third primary reward that he promises to the believer who faithfully follows Jesus—the triadic abiding relationship with the Father and the Son sustained by the Holy Spirit, here and into eternity.

⁶⁷ See Zhakevich, *Follow Me*, 93–94.

⁶⁸ See Zhakevich, 93.

⁶⁹ The Greek verb for "dwell" in Romans 8:9 ("However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him") is the Greek verb *οικέω* which is closely related to its noun counterpart *οἶκος*, often translated "house." Furthermore, though the pronouns *ὑμεῖς* and *ὑμῖν* are plural ("you"), often signifying a reference to the believers corporately, the clarification of *τις*, a singular pronoun, suggests that Paul has the individual Christian in mind here. See Frank Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 385.

Conclusion

After writing about God dwelling with His disciples in the Gospel of John, John continued this theme in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 21:3–4, he describes the believer's presence with God in the following way:

Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things will have passed away.

John understood that the greatest motivation for committed discipleship to the Lord Jesus, no matter the threat, was the promise of eternal life in the presence of God. Thus, John brought this out in the Gospel of John and later in the book of Revelation.

The effectiveness of John's motivation can be observed in the history of Christianity. This article began with the story of Ignatius—a disciple of John—and with his faithfulness to Christ. But John had another disciple as well: Polycarp, who was martyred after Ignatius.⁷⁰ Polycarp was considered to be the spiritual father of all the Christians in Smyrna. He was a man honored for his virtuous and dignified life. So, when the Romans needed a martyr, they selected Polycarp.

To avoid death, Polycarp merely had to say “Caesar is Lord” and then offer incense to the emperor. But Polycarp refused and replied: “For eighty and six years have I been his servant, and he has done me no wrong, and how can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”⁷¹ In the end, Polycarp was burned at the stake in AD 156 at the age of eighty-six.

But what sustained Polycarp in his commitment to Jesus? The same promise that sustained Ignatius. Ignatius and Polycarp were friends, and at one point, Ignatius wrote a letter to Polycarp to encourage him in his faith: “Be thou watchful as an athlete of God. That which is promised to us is life eternal, which cannot be corrupted, of which things thou are also persuaded.”⁷²

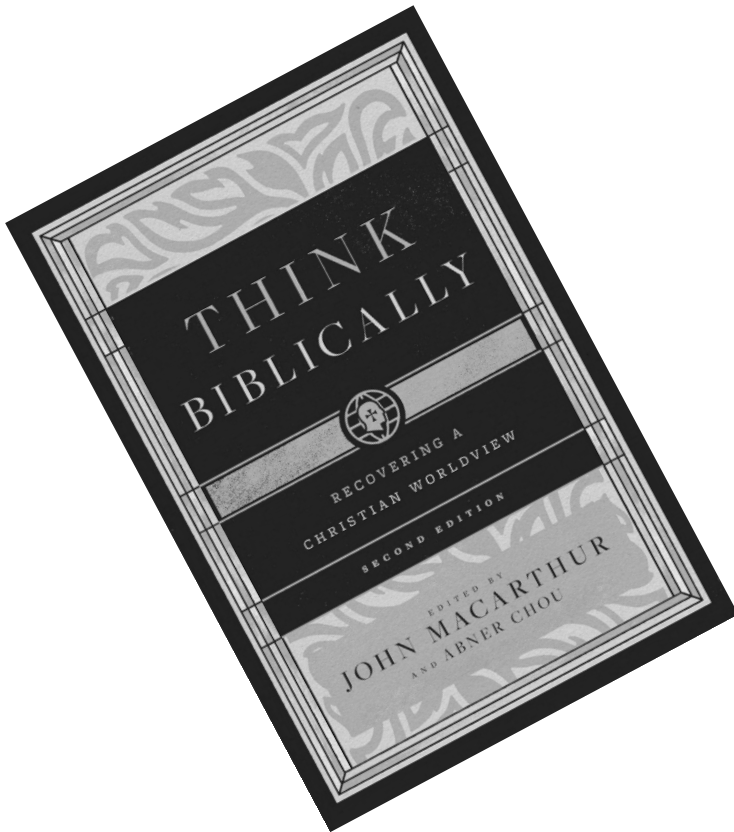
Both of these men leaned on the teaching they had learned from John who received it from Jesus: there are rewards for following Jesus, and in these two cases, the promise of eternal life fueled their commitment to follow Jesus Christ unto death. This promise is extended to everyone who believes in Jesus and perseveres in faithfully following Him, thereby experiencing the blessing of divine adoption, royal friendship, and triadic fellowship.

⁷⁰ The following account is taken from Eusebius' record in *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.15, 340ff.

⁷¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.15.20, 349.

⁷² Ignatius, “The Epistle of Ignatius to Polycarp,” 99.

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“WILL YOU DISCIPLE ME?”: A BUSY PASTOR’S RESPONSE TO A COMMON QUESTION

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* * * * *

Every pastor wrestles with the dilemma of discipleship—how to shepherd the flock effectively. The limited time and resources of the pastor require intentional choices, such that he allocates himself to the most important tasks of discipleship. This article helps the pastor think through this dilemma by providing clarity on what discipleship is. Then, it examines two warnings for the pastor about misplacing the role of human effort and confining discipleship to a one-on-one setting. Each pastor must focus on the pulpit ministry, recognizing that a strong pulpit ministry provides the basis for all the discipleship ministries within the church. Finally, the article examines four guiding questions for the busy pastor who desires to shepherd souls personally.

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Introduction

“Will you disciple me?” This is a question pastors might long for and dread at the same time. This question is a joyous one because there is great joy when a member of one’s church desires to grow spiritually and, of course, how could a pastor say no? On the other hand, if forty men from one’s congregation all desired individual discipleship from their pastor, is that the best use of his time? For that matter, is individual discipleship the best use of a pastor’s time for six men who desire it?¹ How much of a priority should one-on-one discipleship be for a busy pastor? The initial response from a pastor should genuinely communicate that he would love to disciple a beloved one before him. But before he commits to a certain plan, it is important for him to discuss what discipleship is and what his role in the process should be.

¹ Would you spare Sodom for two (Gen 18:23–33)? How should a pastor negotiate the ideal number of people to spend time with and mentor?

Furthermore, it is important for pastors to think about what kind of discipleship might be most beneficial for one member or another.

This article begins by demonstrating how Scripture informs our understanding of what it means to disciple. Two words of warning are given: first, that genuine growth must flow from God’s grace before human effort, and second, that one-on-one discipleship is not a magic bullet. From there, the discussion turns to the pastor’s primary calling to the pulpit and explains how faithful preaching anchors every other form of discipleship within the church. The article concludes with practical guidance for pastors, presenting four questions to help them discern when and how to engage in personal discipleship relationships wisely and effectively.

Defining Discipleship

In their survey of discipleship literature, Dixon and Rogers found that modern definitions of discipleship vary widely; however, they reflect that in the broadest Christian sense, discipleship is understood as the process of helping others follow Jesus.² This definition is consistent with the New Testament verb μαθητεύω (*mathēteuō*).³ In the New Testament, μαθητεύω is used as a verb or a verbal form four times, referring to someone who learns or follows. BDAG defines it as “to cause one to be a pupil, teach.”⁴ Twice, μαθητεύω is used to refer to an individual who had “become a disciple” (Matt 13:52; 27:57).⁵ In Acts 14:21, Luke uses it to describe the action Paul and Barnabas took after they proclaimed the gospel in the Galatian region, “and had made many disciples.”⁶

The fourth usage of μαθητεύω is found in a key passage in the New Testament for disciple making—Matthew 28:18–20. In this Great Commission passage, our Lord used this term as an imperative, commanding His disciples to make more disciples.⁷ What is significant about the use of μαθητεύω in Matthew 28 is that it is the only place in the New Testament where one finds this word as an imperative. It also has two participles after it, which help the reader understand what New Testament disciple making entailed. Those participles are “baptizing” (βαπτίζοντες, *baptizontes*) and “teaching” (διδάσκοντες, *didaskontes*). That new disciples were

² D. Scott Dixon and Trent Rogers, “‘Discipleship’: Clarifying Terms in the New Testament and Secondary Literature,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 14, no. 1 (December 2023): 45–65. See also Mark Dever, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 13.

³ The verb μαθητεύω appears four times in the New Testament. More prominent is the noun μαθητής, appearing over 260 times, meaning, “one who engages in learning through instruction from another, pupil, apprentice.” William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609, hereafter BDAG. One reason so much stress has been placed on the verb and not the noun is because of its prominent place in the Great Commission where Jesus gives the components of discipleship.

⁴ BDAG, 609.

⁵ In Matthew 13:52, μαθητεύω is used as a participle. However, like Matthew 27:52, the idea of describing an individual who becomes a learner/follower is clear. Matthew 13:52 had implications for the twelve disciples who would later become apostles.

⁶ Luke also uses it as a participle.

⁷ For an extended discussion on the Great Commission, how disciple making relates to evangelism, see Brian Biedebach, “Equipping the Saints: Training Believers to Win the Lost,” in *Evangelism: How to Share the Gospel Faithfully*, The John MacArthur Pastor’s Library (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 127.

baptized demonstrates that a conversionary transformation took place in their lives, which they proclaimed through the act of baptism.⁸ Then the new disciple was committed to the lifelong process of learning all that Christ had taught. Thus, according to this text, a disciple is someone who has repented of their sins, committed their life to Jesus Christ as His follower, and is committed to being a lifelong learner of Jesus.⁹

Discipleship occurs anytime a genuine believer is learning more about Christ. When a pastor is preaching from the pulpit, people are being discipled. When a church member joins an adult Sunday school class, he or she does so in order to be discipled. Also, when a believer agrees to read a book (that deepens one's understanding of Christ) individually, with a younger believer in the faith, that too is discipleship. When somebody is being discipled, they are learning and becoming a better follower of Christ.

Notice that there is nothing in the Great Commission about one-on-one discipleship. It may surprise the reader to know that the idea of one-on-one discipleship is not emphasized in Scripture. Other than fathers being instructed to teach their sons about Yahweh, one is hard pressed to find a pattern of individual discipleship that is similar to what comes to mind when the term is used today.¹⁰ Wilkins has observed that in the Gospels, Jesus attracted a substantial number of followers early in His ministry who were all identified as His disciples (Luke 6:17; 10:1). John's Gospel records a distinct moment when some disciples, having followed Jesus for a time, retreated after encountering teachings they found too difficult to accept (John 6:60–66).¹¹ Mark suggests the presence of disciples beyond the Twelve (Mark 3:13–15), while Matthew mentions additional individuals who identified as disciples (Matt 8:19, 21) and refers to a broader circle through various references (10:24–25, 42). Notably, Matthew describes Joseph of Arimathea as one who had become a disciple of Jesus (27:57). Luke similarly notes that Jesus selected the Twelve from among a much larger body of followers (Luke 6:13–17). While the Twelve—and at times a smaller subgroup—did receive special access to Jesus and

⁸ In the words of John MacArthur, “In the context of the Great Commission, baptism is synonymous with salvation, which is synonymous with becoming a disciple. As already emphasized, discipleship is Christian life, not an optional, second level of it.” John F. MacArthur Jr., *Matthew 1–28*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 4:344.

⁹ Craig Blomberg summarizes the passage well, “make disciples also commands a kind of evangelism that does not stop after someone makes a profession of faith. The truly subordinate participle in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: ‘baptizing’ them and ‘teaching’ them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into the Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.” Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 431.

¹⁰ Quinn suggests that the closest concept to modern church based one-on-one discipleship is the Old Testament concept of fathers instructing their sons in the words of the Lord: “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise (Deut 6:6–8).” He carries this idea into the New Testament. Christian ‘fathers’ have the responsibility to disciple ‘young men,’ as young men would ‘little children’ (1 John 2:12–14). S. Lance Quinn, “Discipling,” in *Pastoral Ministry: How to Shepherd Biblically*, The John MacArthur Pastor’s Library (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 261–63.

¹¹ Michael J. Wilkins, “Disciples and Discipleship,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 204.

unique teaching (John 13:23; Matt 17:1; Mark 9:28), this is not equivalent to the modern practice of one-on-one discipleship.¹² The focus of the discipleship between the Twelve and Jesus was the disciples’ endeavor to learn from and follow the teachings of Jesus.

Before further discussing the question “Will you disciple me?,” two words of warning about the practice of discipleship are in order.

Warning 1: Growth Comes Through Grace Before Grit

In 1978, Jerry Bridges wrote a book called *The Pursuit of Holiness*, which became very popular and sparked a movement among publishers for books on personal discipleship and spiritual disciplines.¹³ In just one year after its initial publication, it had already reached its third printing.¹⁴ *The Pursuit of Holiness* underscored that holiness cannot be approached passively or with partial effort. Drawing on scriptural imperatives such as Hebrews 12:14 (“make every effort to be holy”), Philippians 3:14 (“press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”), and Romans 6:12 (“do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies”), Bridges insists that the pursuit of sanctification is a disciplined, intentional endeavor. Holiness is not a spiritual gift bestowed without effort, but a calling that demands active, ongoing obedience. Holiness must be expressed through deliberate resistance to sin, not merely received as an abstract ideal. Bridges emphasizes that the Christian life is marked by a sustained, visible striving toward moral transformation. As he states clearly, “the experience of holiness is not a gift we receive like justification, but something which the Christian is exhorted to work at.”¹⁵

While it is true that God expects His followers to make every effort to pursue holy living, there is a real danger in overemphasizing human effort. This form of legalism is the tendency to measure spirituality or spiritual growth by outward performance rather than by the standards set in Scripture. For example, questions such as, “Did you have your devotions this morning? How much time did you spend

¹² This concept is similar to Paul’s approach to ministry. Paul’s model is fundamentally public; he grounds his discipleship in openly following the teaching of Christ (Rom 15:7; Gal 6:2; Col 3:15–16). Paul also presents himself as a model but only insofar as he reflects Christ (Acts 20:34–35; 1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17), and he encourages the church to publicly imitate others, and even entire congregations, who embody this same pattern (2 Cor 8:1–7; 1 Thess 1:7–10). For an extended discussion, see Robert J. Banks, “Church Order and Government,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 136.

¹³ Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1978). For an updated version of this book, see Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016).

¹⁴ This period witnessed a significant surge in Christian self-discipline publications. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), offered a discussion of spiritual practices like solitude, confession, and fasting. Such works included Bill Hull, *Jesus Christ Disciplemaker* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1984); Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991); Bob and Michael Benson, *Disciplines for the Inner Life* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988); Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984). Another book which had a serious impact, although predating this period, was Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, which found new life during the discipleship craze and was reprinted in 1985 (Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* [Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1985]).

¹⁵ Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, 52.

in prayer? How many people have you witnessed to lately?” can become the benchmarks for spiritual maturity in some minds.

Jerry Bridges himself recognized this potential pitfall because about a year after he wrote *The Pursuit of Holiness*, he was asked to give a series of ten lectures on holiness, and one of those lectures was entitled “The chapter I wish I had written.”¹⁶ That lecture focused on learning to live by grace and not by performance. Captivated by the subject of living by grace, Bridges wrote another book entitled *Transforming Grace*.¹⁷ This book criticizes treadmill-style performance Christianity.¹⁸ The problem was that many of his readers did not understand the relationship between grace and responsibility. They began to ask him, “How can you write a book that emphasizes the personal responsibility of spiritual disciplines and then write a book that emphasizes living by grace?”¹⁹ So in 1994, Bridges decided to write another book entitled *The Discipline of Grace*. In that book, a key concept is that discipline must be understood in light of God’s grace.

The more one is overwhelmed with the grace of God, the more one will be motivated to abstain from fleshly lusts and things that draw one away from God. Spiritual disciplines (as important as they are) can be practiced in an unbalanced way. People can be so focused on human effort that they neglect God’s grace.

The book of Ephesians reveals that the call to Christian obedience must be grounded in the prior realities of grace. While chapters 4–6 are often used in counseling to provide practical guidance—urging believers to put off sin, submit in relationships, walk in love and truth, and live obediently—these imperatives are not free-floating. Ephesians 4:1 calls believers to “live in a manner worthy of the calling” they have received, a command that only makes full sense in light of chapters 1–3. There, Paul lays the theological foundation: believers have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph 1:3), saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8), and sealed with the Spirit as heirs of God’s redemptive promises. Paul prays that the “eyes of their hearts” would be enlightened to grasp the hope, riches, and power available to them in Christ (Eph 1:18–19). These profound gospel truths shape and fuel the Christian life. Counseling or discipleship that focuses only on the commands of chapters 4–6 without rooting them in the identity-shaping realities of chapters 1–3 risks reducing Christianity to moralism. The two halves of the letter must be held together: theology motivates obedience, and grace empowers transformation. Therefore, the desire for one to focus on spiritual disciplines and to meet with a personal discipler, almost like an athlete meets with a personal trainer, needs to be balanced with a genuine appreciation for who Christ is and what He has already accomplished in one’s life.

¹⁶ Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace: God’s Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994), 7.

¹⁷ Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God’s Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

¹⁸ Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, 6–8.

¹⁹ Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, 13.

Warning 2: One-on-One Discipleship Is Not a Magic Bullet

The second warning a believer should be aware of is that one-on-one discipleship is not a magic bullet. Sometimes people wonder why they are not growing spiritually, and they mistakenly assume that, since they are not involved in a formal one-on-one discipleship program, that must be what they are missing. They think, “If only I could find somebody who is mature in the faith and who will spend time with me one-on-one, then I will grow.” The absence of Christian maturity cannot necessarily be blamed on a lack of a formal one-on-one discipleship program.

Now, to be clear, this article is not meant to discourage anyone from finding someone who will meet with them individually and help them become a better learner and follower of Christ. That can be and has been a very valuable encouragement for many believers over the centuries. But there are some basics to Christian growth that should precede individual discipleship.²⁰ Furthermore, it would be incorrect to think that one church program, like an individual discipleship program, is the primary key church members need for spiritual growth.

Some fundamental assumptions must be dispelled here. First, different people thrive spiritually in different contexts within the church. While some may flourish under structured one-on-one discipleship, others may find such intimacy as forced and a bit uncomfortable or even counterproductive, especially when deep personal questions are posed by someone they barely know. They might do better in a small group Bible study, or they might grow more spiritually, for example, by preparing to teach in a children’s Sunday school.

Second, formal programs in the church are great and should be encouraged, but discipleship will still occur even without a formal program. A formal model typically involves people signing up and following a set curriculum. For example, they may read through a book together, discuss prepared questions after each chapter, check in with each other spiritually, and pray regularly. This approach provides consistency, accountability, and direction. By contrast, informal discipleship emerges more organically: one person might invite a friend out for coffee, and the conversation turns to spiritual topics—asking how one or the other is “really” doing; sharing what they have been reading. Though not structured in a formal way, this interaction, when focused on Christ, can be discipleship.

The same can be said for biblical counseling. Formal counseling might involve scheduled office visits, intake forms, and assigned homework. The structure provides intentionality, accountability, and a defined space for pastoral care. However, counseling is not limited to office walls. Informal counseling can occur spontaneously such as in the grocery store aisle, where a passing “How are you really doing?” turns into a deeper conversation about a problem someone is facing. In that moment, a scriptural truth can be shared, repentance gently called for, prayer offered, and encouragement given. Though unplanned, it may be no less significant. The point is that believers sometimes limit the idea of discipleship merely to formal church programs, but discipleship extends to a much broader experience in life.

²⁰ Some examples of the basics referred to here can be found further down in this article under the heading “When Another Ministry Supersedes Pulpit Ministry, the Church is Weakened” and in the conclusion of this article.

Discipleship needs to arise from the shared life of the body of Christ. No one church program or method can claim a monopoly on discipleship. This should free church members from a feeling of guilt they might have because they did not sign up for a particular program. At the same time, it should encourage them to look for relationships within the church that will propel spiritual growth.

Recognizing that there is a broad spectrum of means the Lord uses for spiritual growth frees the pastor from the burden of thinking he must take on hundreds of individual disciples. In fact, if he is keeping his priorities, he is already discipling the members of his congregation without ever meeting them one-on-one. How can this be? Because he is preaching the Word of God. This is not an excuse for pastors to be uninvolved in the lives of their members, but this should help comfort church members who have a misunderstanding about discipleship and who may think that the one thing they are missing is a one-on-one formal discipleship program.

Some Ministries Are More Important for Church Leaders than Others

Christians are to minister to others in every aspect of their lives. In other words, a Christian's life is indeed a living sacrifice, and all ministry is important.²¹ And yet, there are certain ministries that leaders of churches are ordained to do that should take priority over other important ministries.

Preaching is ordained by God to have a dominant role in the church (see Acts 6). A pastor was once developing some training material and had asked a friend to review the material. The friend asked him why there was such a low emphasis on preaching in the material. He responded, "I do not buy into this 'preaching is everything' mentality." He went on to explain that some pastors act as if all one needs to do is preach and teach the Bible to grow a congregation in a healthy way. He believed there were more important priorities that pastors needed to focus on, such as fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship. One pastor even proclaimed that he built his church up more through home visitation than through the pulpit.

Is preaching everything? The answer is no. But preaching is the primary ministry that should affect everything. Pulpit ministry sets the tone for everything else and is the most important mark of a healthy church.²² Just like the early church leaders knew that it would be wrong for them to neglect prayer and the ministry of the Word to serve tables, it could be wrong for church leaders today to be distracted with auxiliary ministries.²³ It is incorrect to conclude that auxiliary ministries are unimportant in the church. And yet, pulpit ministry should be the priority for church leaders.

²¹ Rom 12:1.

²² When considering the phrase, "preaching is everything," it is difficult to identify a pastor whose work is limited solely to preaching and teaching the Bible. All Christians should engage in fellowship and evangelism and discipleship ministries. Since pastors are Christians, they should naturally be involved in activities that all Christians are called to do; additionally, there is an underemphasis today on the importance of preaching the Word. If we downplay the importance of preaching in the church, everything else is affected negatively. In Mark Dever's *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, he said it this way: "The first mark of a healthy church is expositional preaching. It is not only the first mark; it is far and away the most important of them all, because if you get this one right, all of the others should follow." Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 39.

²³ Acts 6.

If, then, one-on-one discipleship is not the primary ministry—although it still promotes a lifelong pursuit of learning about Jesus—how does a believer grow in his knowledge and love of the Lord? Christians grow spiritually as they understand and apply Scripture. Whenever a pastor helps his people understand the Word better, he is discipling them. Understanding the Word should occur first and foremost from the pulpit.

In past generations, congregants sat through sermons three times per week. In many churches, each one of those sermons was nearly an hour long. Today many Christians hear the word preached thirty minutes per week (if not less).²⁴ There are some who have suggested that the order of service could be more balanced—twenty minutes of singing, twenty minutes of prayer, twenty minutes of preaching. Naturally, then, each church should also spend twenty minutes for the offering! However, Scripture in fact instructs that preaching is to be the priority.

Why should preaching have such a dominant role in our worship services? The answer is that God has ordained preaching to have a dominant role in the church. The unique qualification for an elder of a church is that he must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2). Paul instructs Timothy to teach men doctrine who would themselves be teachers in the church. He says, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). Paul also charges Timothy to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2). Preaching the Bible was to be the method used to exhort and rebuke the congregation. Romans 10:14 adds, “How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” Here, believing in the message of the gospel is tied directly to the preaching of the Word.²⁵ Preaching and teaching from the pulpit are essential and primary shepherding activities.

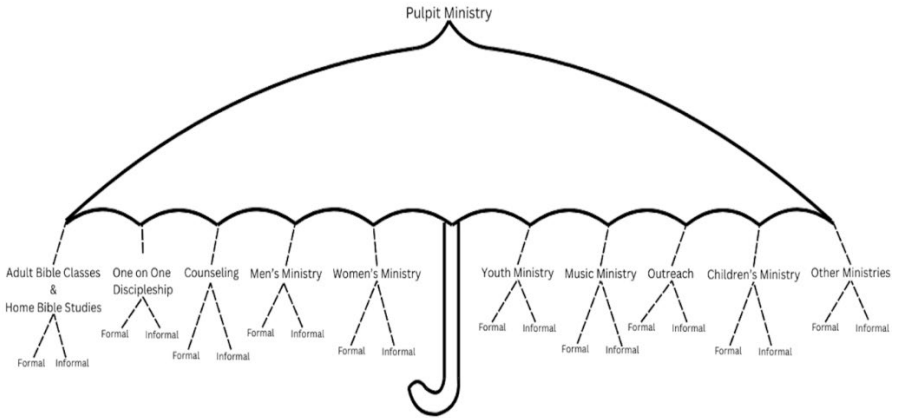
Pulpit Ministry Should Influence Other Discipleship Ministries in the Church

There are many practices that churches do to enhance ministry. These may be referred to as auxiliary ministries. While they may all be of great importance, they are all to remain under the umbrella of a church pulpit ministry because they are all to be influenced by the preaching of the church.

²⁴ Research conducted around Easter 2019 found that, “Catholic sermons are the shortest, at a median of just 14 minutes, compared with 25 minutes for sermons in mainline Protestant congregations and 39 minutes in evangelical Protestant congregations. Historically black Protestant churches have the longest sermons by far: a median of 54 minutes.” Pew Research Center, “The Digital Pulpit: A Nationwide Analysis of Online Sermons,” December 16, 2019, accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/12/16/the-digital-pulpit-a-nationwide-analysis-of-online-sermons/>.

²⁵ God has ordained the Word of God to be the primary means to sanctify the church: “Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). “So that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (Eph 5:26).

Consider the graph below that depicts the pulpit's impact on various areas of ministry that have discipleship components.²⁶



If discipleship truly occurs anytime a believer is learning more about Christ, and since the preaching of God's Word in the church is a primary responsibility given to pastors, then pulpit ministry should influence all other areas of discipleship in the church. Discipleship occurs anytime the Word is being proclaimed or taught, but one should not think that all discipleship ministries are of equal importance as a church develops programs. Pulpit ministry (prayer for the congregation and the ministry of the Word from the pulpit) should be the overarching influence for all other ministries in the church. There are at least four principles that support this claim: (1) the purpose of other ministries in the church is to complement pulpit ministry; (2) when another ministry supersedes pulpit ministry, the church is weakened; (3) pastors need to avoid distraction; and (4) pastors equip primarily through a pulpit ministry.

The Purpose of Other Ministries in the Church Is to Complement Pulpit Ministry

Since God has ordained preaching as a primary responsibility for the church, all other ministries in a local church, though important, complement the preaching. Formal church programs like children's Sunday School, adult Bible class, one-on-one discipleship, counseling, men's ministry, women's ministry, outreach ministry, music ministry, and youth ministry are all examples of ministries that are affected by the primary ministry of a church. While they assist in discipleship, they are not requirements for a church to be biblical. With the exception of music, we find no prescription in God's Word for formal ministries like these in the church. And yet, ministries like these can be so beneficial to help individuals learn and grow closer to Christ.

²⁶ Of course, many other components of church life could be listed. Sunday school is for discipleship, benefiting both the youth and those studying. Music ministry is discipleship; the music minister should be discipling people under his care. One could name just about any ministry in a church and put it underneath this umbrella, and under each of these, there could be subcategories.

An example of this would be a children’s Sunday School program. Children’s Sunday School is a beneficial staple in many churches. Though we have no examples of a formal children’s Sunday School program in Scripture, churches have the freedom to develop programs to further disciple children who are in their care. Furthermore, it is not only the children in those programs who are being disciplined; the teacher is growing as he or she prepares to teach. Many times, others who are assisting with the children in the Sunday School class are benefitting from the additional teaching from God’s Word.

But if church members are not careful, some might get the idea that the primary way for their children to be disciplined is through a Sunday School program. Scripture teaches that discipleship for children is primarily the responsibility of parents.²⁷ Practically speaking, how would parents learn that it is primarily their responsibility to disciple their children? They would not learn that from their children, but rather from their pastor who disciplines them from the Word of God in a pulpit ministry. Once that truth is understood by all the parents in a congregation, then the Sunday School program takes on a different role, one that complements what the parents are doing at home as they and their children learn from the pulpit ministry in their church.²⁸

When Another Ministry Supersedes Pulpit Ministry, the Church Is Weakened

A sad reality in many churches is that sometimes their auxiliary ministries supersede their pulpit ministry, resulting in a weakened church. Liberalism oftentimes works its way into the church first through an operational segment of the church, and then through a theological little leaven that leavens the whole loaf.²⁹ Years ago, one denomination was weakened because of its acceptance of a social gospel, but long before that heretical idea became widespread in the pews, it had been espoused on the mission field.³⁰ Today, some churches in America are losing their

²⁷ See Deut 6.

²⁸ Reference from the GCC website, “The Children’s Ministry of Grace Community Church exists to glorify God through evangelizing children, encouraging parents, and edifying servants so that the gospel may be spread among our children, families may be supported, and the church may be strengthened.” From “Grace Kids,” Grace Community Church, accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.gracechurch.org/gracekids>.

²⁹ 1 Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9.

³⁰ In the 1980s, the General Board of Global Ministries associated with the United Methodist Church obfuscated the biblical gospel with the social gospel and moved “away from ministry that had a specific objective of helping people come to faith in Jesus Christ.” In fact, the mission board decided to reduce the number of missionaries it supported since true evangelism was no longer seen as important. “In 1968, there were 1,650 missionaries serving outside the United States at the time of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) merger. Unfortunately, by the early 1980s, the GBGM slashed its missionary ranks to slightly over 500. Those numbers eventually dropped even further.” Riley B. Case, “The Integrity of Missions,” Good News Magazine, accessed October 6, 2025, <https://goodnewsmag.org/the-integrity-of-missions/#:~:text=In%20those%20dire%20times%2C%20The,Riley%20B.> This change of mission was opposed by many ministers in the United Methodist Church, and divisions ran deep. Some responded with a second mission board in the denomination that had a more evangelical focus. “Based in Atlanta, the Mission Society for United Methodists, now simply known as TMS Global, was incorporated on January 6, 1984. The emphasis would be more on evangelism and church planting than social justice ministries.” “The Missional Division in the United Methodist Church,” UMC Insight, accessed October 6, 2025, <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/the-missional-division-in-the-united-methodist-church/#:~:text=Based%20in%20Atlanta%2C%20the%20>

focus on gospel proclamation as they pick up a repackaged mantle of social justice, but that trend is not so new on the mission field for many churches.³¹ The danger is this: instead of beginning with the Word in the pulpit—and understanding how the pulpit ought to influence auxiliary ministries (such as missions)—some auxiliary ministries begin new trends and govern the operation of the church. As pulpit ministries respond to those new trends, it often divides and weakens the church.

Outreach ministry should not influence American pulpits, but rather it should be the other way around. For example, as discussed earlier in this article, in order for a church to have a right view of Great Commission ministry, the elders of the church should have a deep understanding of Matthew 28:19–20. The main verb in that passage is translated as “make disciples.” The word “go” in the original is actually a participle that carries an imperatival emphasis because it is so closely tied to the verb, “make disciples.”³² But to be sure, the greater emphasis should be on making disciples. If a mother told her son to “go” and “clean” his room, and the boy left and sat in his room without cleaning it, the mother could rightly say, “You missed the entire point of my instruction.” The two participles that follow the verb “make disciples” (i.e., “baptizing” and “teaching”) are also key descriptive terms that give understanding to what discipleship involves. If an outreach department does not focus on sending out missionaries who both proclaim salvation (with the goal of bringing about regeneration resulting in baptism) and teach the Word (teaching all things that the Lord has commanded), then that department is not really fulfilling Great Commission work. Thus, the clear, accurate, and passionate preaching of God’s Word makes a difference in how an outreach ministry keeps its focus.

The pulpit should influence how mission committees and missionaries are functioning in their roles. When outreach departments, or other ministries for that matter, begin to wield influence over pulpit ministries, everyone loses.

Pastors Need to Avoid Distraction

In Acts 6, the early church was faced with a dire ministry failure. The Hellenistic widows in the church had been overlooked. And yet, the leaders of that early church made clear that, as serious as the need was, they would not allow themselves to be distracted. In Acts 6:2, they said “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.” They made the decision to appoint other church members to administrate that important task, but for the church leaders, they said, “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”³³

Oftentimes, when people describe their pastor, they say, “He is not a really good *preacher*, but he is an excellent *pastor*.” This is a false dichotomy because if one is not a good preacher, he cannot be a good pastor. A pastor who tries to strengthen the

Mission, very different priorities and theologies! The point is, that a mission board made decisions that influenced pulpits rather than pulpit ministry influencing the actions of a mission board, and this caused great division in the church.

³¹ See Joel James and Brian Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 25, no. 1 (2014): 29–50.

³² Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 642, 645.

³³ Acts 6:4.

church more through one-on-one discipleship (or any other auxiliary ministry) more than through his pulpit ministry will be distracted and his church will be malnourished. If someone says their pastor is a good pastor but he is not a good preacher, that person does not have the correct understanding of what pastoring involves. A pastor is a shepherd of people. If a literal shepherd of sheep nurtured his sheep, hugged them, combed their wool, protected them from wolves, but never fed them—would anyone think that he was a good shepherd? How is it that one could think a pastor who does not feed his flock well from the Word is adequately doing his job?³⁴

A pastor who does not expose the Word to his entire congregation is not a good pastor because he is not feeding his flock. As Charles Jefferson noted, “No part of a pastor’s work is more strictly, genuinely pastoral than the work of preaching. When the minister goes into the pulpit, he is the shepherd in the act of feeding.... Sermons, rightly understood, are primarily forms of food. They are articles of diet. They are meals served by the minister for the sustenance of spiritual life.”³⁵

The best way a pastor can care for his flock is to spend time praying for them and to devote himself to plumb the depths of God’s Word so he can share its rich, nourishing truths with his entire congregation. A pastor, like every Christian, has many responsibilities, but let him not neglect the priorities of preaching and prayer. Oftentimes, one blatant deficiency in many pulpits today is that the minister cares more about the homiletical presentation of his sermon than he does about relying on the Spirit and committing the message to prayer. E. M. Bounds (1835–1913) was a pastor known for his prayer life. In one of his books on prayer, his comments on the neglect of prayer in sermon preparation are just as relevant today as they have ever been:

The young preacher has been taught to lay out all his strength on the form, taste, and beauty of this sermon as a mechanical and intellectual product. We have thereby cultivated a vicious taste among the people and raised the clamor for talent instead of grace, eloquence instead of piety, rhetoric instead of revelation, reputation and brilliancy instead of holiness.³⁶

One-on-one discipleship is important, and the pastor can and should make time to participate as he has time, but he must equip others primarily through the preaching of the Word. One-on-one discipleship and one-on-one counseling are nearly synonymous terms.³⁷ Counseling is discipleship and biblical discipleship offers counsel. One slight distinction between the two is that when someone comes to a church leader for counseling, they may have already recognized a significant mindset or behavior that needs biblical calibration. But in both counseling and discipleship, the Word of God is explained in order to address certain heart issues that prevent

³⁴ For more information on the importance of a pastor being an expositor, consult: Brian Biedebach, *What to Look for in a Pastor: A Guide for Pastoral Search Committees* (Leominster, UK: Day One, 2011), 12–32.

³⁵ Charles Edward Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1912), 76–77.

³⁶ E. M. Bounds, *Power through Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 54.

³⁷ William W. Goode, “Biblical Counseling and the Local Church,” in *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically*, The John MacArthur Pastor’s Library (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 222–23.

individuals from spiritual growth. In both counseling and discipleship, the relationship between the counselor/counselee or discipler/disciple is not like a doctor/patient where one is healthy and the other one is sick. In discipleship and counseling, all parties involved are sinners, and like beggars they are looking for bread that will nourish them. The difference is that the counselor/discipler knows where to find the bread. And that counselor oftentimes learns where to find the bread by means of a pulpit ministry.

The primary way a pastor can guard his flock from error and temptation is through the proclamation of the Word. When Paul instructed the Ephesian elders to “be on guard for themselves and for all the flock” (Acts 20:28), he did so right after stating, “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Guarding the flock is directly related to preaching.³⁸

Pastors Equip Primarily Through a Pulpit Ministry

Pastors have a responsibility to shepherd the church, first in the area of pulpit ministry, and then through various other ministries. Because preaching affects everything, it is reasonable to recognize that the pastor cannot be intimately involved in every facet of these various ministries; the pastor should not be expected to personally take on the full responsibility of every ministry in the church. Some ministries in the church can be underdeveloped until other individuals are equipped and ready to serve.

Ephesians 4:11–13 explains that God provides the church with pastors and teachers so that they can build up the body of Christ. The outcome is that the church moves toward unity in faith and deep knowledge of the Son of God, leading to spiritual maturity that reflects the fullness of Christ.³⁹

Ephesians 4:12 states that pastors are in the church “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” Pastors build up the body of Christ. The key words here are “equipping” (*καταρτισμὸν*) and “building up” (*οικοδομῆν*). The latter refers to the building up of a house but was

³⁸ Biedebach, *What to Look for in a Pastor*, 43.

³⁹ Ephesians 4:11 reads, “And He Himself gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.” “He” in the text refers to Christ, making these ministry roles Christ’s provision for the church. However, when considered in the light of all Scripture, the giving of spiritual gifts is a work of the entire Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—as shown throughout the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor 12:3–4). The four leadership gifts in Ephesians 4:11—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers—fall into two categories: Apostles and Prophets: These offices are no longer active because, as Ephesians 2:19–20 explains, their role was to lay the foundation of the church, reveal God’s Word, and confirm the message through signs and wonders. Their work is complete; the foundation has been laid and God’s revelation is finished, so these offices have ceased. Evangelists and Pastor-Teachers: These continue today. Evangelists are like missionaries and church planters, spreading the gospel, often establishing new churches. Pastor-teachers serve the local congregation by shepherding (guiding and caring) and teaching God’s Word. Biblical shepherds must feed the flock spiritually, with teaching being a core requirement for pastors. In summary, Christ gave these four leadership roles as gifts to the church—two foundational (now completed) and two ongoing—to equip believers. The key question, then, is not only what these provisions are, but also why Christ gave them: to build up and mature the church according to God’s purposes. Biedebach, *What to Look for in a Pastor*, 34–36.

often used to describe any kind of construction.⁴⁰ Together, one gets the concept of edification. Pastors build up the members so that they can be ministers. When the Bible refers to the body of Christ, it is not a place where a few ministers do the work of the Lord and everyone else watches; the body of Christ is a place where every member is a minister (1 Cor 12). If a church has 150 members, then it should have 150 ministers. The entire body of Christ is a ministering body.⁴¹

The next verse, Eph 4:13, clarifies what Paul expects this “building up” to look like: we are to strive in building up the body of Christ “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” One should note first that Paul expects a built-up church to be a unified church. God is glorified when His Church is strengthened and unified. One should also observe that this unity is with Christ. Paul expects the church to “know” Christ. Paul uses the same word for “knowledge” in Philippians 1:9, where he prays that believers’ love may abound in “knowledge and all discernment,” and in Philippians 3:8–10, where he counts everything as loss compared to “the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus.” Paul’s goal is to know Christ—not just intellectually but personally. Jesus Himself emphasizes this personal relationship in John 10:27: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” J. I. Packer, in his classic book *Knowing God*, put it this way:

Knowing God is a matter of personal dealing, as is all direct acquaintance with personal beings. Knowing God is more than knowing about him; it is a matter of dealing with him as he opens up to you and being dealt with by him as he takes knowledge of you. Knowing about him is a necessary precondition of trusting in him (“How could they have faith in one they had never heard of?” [Rom 10:14 NEB]), but the width of our knowledge about him is no gauge of the depth of our knowledge of him.⁴²

⁴⁰ While οἰκοδομή can refer to physical construction, BDAG notes that its spiritual sense means “strengthening, edifying, edification.” As for καταρτισμός, Gerhard Delling observes that in Ephesians 4:12 it “denotes the equipment of the saints for the work of the ministry. The establishment of the community in work for the kingdom of God in the widest sense thus constitutes for Paul a material precondition of the upbuilding and consequently the actualization of the community.” Gerhard Delling, “Ἄριστος, Ἐξαρτιζῶ, Καταρτιζῶ, Καταρτισμός, Κατάρτισις,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:476.

⁴¹ The most famous example of every member a minister comes from an article written about Grace Community Church in 1972. Lowell Saunders, “The Church with Nine Hundred Ministers,” *Moody Monthly* (1972): 32–33, 106, accessed October 6, 2025, <https://romans45.org/misc/SAUNDERS.PDF>. However, just because every member is supposed to be a minister, that does not mean everyone has the same job in the church. Paul makes it clear that to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift (Eph 4:7). A few verses later, he adds from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effectual working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Eph 4:16). The reason why a God honoring church can have a significant impact is because every believer has a unique spiritual gift, given to him by the Lord Jesus Christ, and Christ uses those gifts in harmony for His glory.

⁴² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 50th Anniversary Ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2023), 43.

Knowing God is the aim of discipleship and is accomplished when the entire Church does the work of ministry.

Therefore, in this passage of Scripture, one finds a biblical formula for building Christ's Church His way: those whom he gives as pastors and teachers disciple by explaining the Scriptures, then believers who sit under the faithful teaching of God's Word minister to one another; this results in God's people being disciplined into knowing God more, which ultimately brings glory to His name.⁴³

So when someone comes to a busy pastor and asks, "Why are we not doing this ministry or that ministry?," the pastor can say, "Would you like to help us with that?" This response encourages and shepherds the body of Christ to function as it is supposed to function.

Conclusion: Four Questions to Ask Someone Before Discipling Them

With the above discussion in mind, what practical response should a pastor have when someone asks, "Will you disciple me?" Below is a four-question test to see if discipleship will be a good fit for the pastor, disciple, and the church itself.

The first question is, "What does the churchgoer mean by and expect from a discipleship relationship?" Generally speaking, a conversation should be had to help them understand what discipleship is and what it is not, with inquiries being made to discover whether or not they think one-on-one discipleship might be the magic bullet that will solve a deeper problem in their life.

Second, "Is the individual engaged in the foundational practices of church life and Christian living to grow as a believer?" Are they attending regular weekly church services, including the evening and mid-week service? Are they reading their Bible on their own in a constructive way, praying on their own, serving the body in some capacity? It should be determined whether this person is doing some of the basics for spiritual growth before they add anything else into the mix. If the fundamentals of Christian maturity are not part of their life, they should try some of the basics before looking for a one-on-one relationship.

Third, and related to the second question, "Does the would-be disciple have time?" Sometimes, men ask to be disciplined, but they are already over-committed. There was a man who went to church on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. He was involved in two different Bible studies and attended the mid-week men's meeting, yet he still wanted more. While he was doing all this, he was neglecting time with his family! Pastors should certainly be eager to invest time in a man, but only if the man is already doing the basics, has time to meet, understands what discipleship is, and still desires more. Then, perhaps, that person is a good candidate for discipleship. When a pastor meets with someone, he should feel free to assign serious homework. Once the disciple has finished the work, then he should come

⁴³ The purpose of the church is to glorify God! Consider the following references from Ephesians: 1:6—"to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He graciously bestowed on us in the Beloved;" 1:12—"to the end that we who first have hoped in Christ would be to the praise of His glory;" we get a sense of God's greatness and glory, as seen in Ephesians 4:6, which states, "One God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

back and meet again. The pastor should be happy to spend time with the disciple, but the disciple has to be serious.

Fourth, and finally, “Does the pastor have time to take on another individual for one-on-one discipleship?” While it is flattering to be asked to disciple someone, a wise pastor will take a good hard look at his schedule and commitments before adding on an extra responsibility. Further, when a pastor does discipleship, he should look for ways for the discipleship to benefit the entire congregation. If several guys are interested in being discipled, consider meeting as a group.⁴⁴ Additionally, consider doing something that helps with sermon preparation or another aspect of Word ministry. For example, early in my ministry, I would meet with five interns on Tuesday mornings to diagram the text I would preach the following Sunday. The men loved breaking down the passage into clauses and phrases, discussing it, and even coming up with an outline. This Tuesday morning discipleship opportunity killed two birds with one stone—not only were the men being discipled, but I was also getting work done. Discipleship does not have to take away time from the pastor’s study; it can maximize ministry opportunities.⁴⁵

Discipleship is essential in the church. However, since discipleship is a much broader term than many believers perceive, certain warnings should be given. True spiritual growth can be hindered by an overemphasis on human effort, and while one-on-one discipleship can be very helpful in one’s life, different people flourish under different models of discipleship. Pastors need to focus on pulpit ministry, which is the greatest form of discipleship. At the same time, as they are able, pastors should develop personal discipleship relationships, both formally and informally, with individuals who are ripe for deeper equipping. Pastors are free to engage in those relationships but should not feel guilty if they do not have time for many one-on-one, formal discipleship relationships. As pastors are faithful to teach and preach the Word, God will still equip His people for the work of ministry.

⁴⁴ Such a scenario might be your sign to start a men’s ministry or a seminary-style elders-in-training program. Seminary training should be discipleship at the highest level. The training should not be so academic that it is not conducive to spiritual growth. At the same time, the seminary should not be so devotional that it neglects to provide the tools one needs for serious study of the Word. Two examples of well-balanced training are The Masters Seminary’s mentor model and discipleship labs. For more information see <https://tms.edu/academics/master-of-divinity/distance-education/mentor-model/>, accessed October 6, 2025. Second, The Expositors Seminary in Jupiter, Florida, offers a four-year program that combines academic rigor with practical ministry training. For a great discussion on how to walk the line between academic rigor and practical church ministry see Jerry Wragg, *Courageous Churchmen: Leaders Compelling Enough to Follow* (Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian, 2018), 210–12.

⁴⁵ For a practical book to help facilitate such a study, see Joel James, *Expository Studying* (South Africa: Word of the Cross, 2008). Or see <https://sequelsermon.com/f002/file/grace-fellowship-files/Documents/Books+%26+Booklets/Expository-Studying-PDF-2009-new.pdf>.

**“CAN A HOMOSEXUAL CHANGE?”:
A COUNSELING QUESTION IN PASTORAL MINISTRY**

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Redemptive transformation constitutes the essential dynamic of comprehensive and enduring spiritual renewal. Within the context of contemporary Christian discourse, however, a significant hermeneutical and pastoral tension has emerged concerning the nature and extent of this transformation in those who once identified as homosexual and who now profess saving faith in Jesus Christ. The theological question at stake is not whether God is both willing and able to redeem individuals who have engaged in homosexual behavior; Scripture unequivocally affirms His sovereign power and willingness to save all who repent and believe (cf. Rom 10:9–13; 1 Tim 1:15–16). Rather, the critical inquiry concerns whether the salvific act of regeneration intrinsically entails a transformation of sexual orientation—that is, whether the ontological and moral orientation of the person is reconstituted in Christ. This author contends that in authentic conversion, both the outward practice and the inward perception of self and sexuality are fundamentally and enduringly renewed by the redemptive power of Christ, whose grace redefines human personhood in conformity to His holiness.

* * * * *

Introduction

Throughout the history of redemption, unrighteousness has persistently sought to veil itself beneath the semblance of righteousness. Sin, by its very nature, possesses a deceptive propensity to masquerade as holiness in order to gain acceptance among the people of God. Scripture reveals that such deceit originates in Satan himself, who “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Cor 11:14). The Lord Jesus Christ therefore admonished His followers to “beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s

clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt 7:15). The prophet Isaiah likewise denounces those who morally invert the divine order, declaring, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isa 5:20).

In the contemporary ecclesial landscape, this ancient pattern of moral inversion has resurfaced with renewed vigor. The church’s theological and moral naïveté—often stemming from an uncritical desire to appear intellectually sophisticated and socially progressive—has rendered it increasingly susceptible to deceptive ideologies. In particular, the fear of being perceived as scientifically uninformed or socially intolerant has muted the church’s prophetic witness regarding human sexuality. Consequently, many congregations have extended unqualified acceptance to self-identified homosexuals who profess faith in Christ, equating verbal confession with genuine conversion. While such individuals may publicly affirm belief in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and undergo baptismal confession, a significant number simultaneously deny that same-sex attraction is intrinsically disordered or sinful.

This theological disjunction reveals a critical misunderstanding of biblical anthropology and sanctification. To affirm Christ as Lord while retaining an unrepentant disposition toward desires that Scripture categorically identifies as contrary to the created order (Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–11) constitutes a distortion of grace and a redefinition of holiness. The enduring presence of sinful inclination in the believer is a reality of sanctification’s progressive nature; yet the deliberate retention or moral normalization of sinful orientation stands in contradiction to the transformative power of regeneration. Thus, the church must recover discernment grounded in Scripture and resist the cultural tendency to sanctify that which God condemns, lest the very deception that masquerades as light undermine the witness of the gospel within the household of faith.

Homosexuality and Scientific Research

Those who make such a claim (that same-sex attraction is permissible for believers) are forced to appeal almost exclusively to extrabiblical research. These secular studies strive to prove that the inherent biological predisposition of homosexuality is present in some human DNA and brain structural development. They reason that this is the way God instilled gay orientation into the human body; therefore, it cannot be sinful. Peer reviewed research that represents a variety of biological perspectives, including genetics, prenatal influences, brain differences, and epigenetics comprise these studies.¹ However, these studies have never

¹ One of the most cited journal articles is “Differences in the Brain: A Neurobiological Perspective on Sexual Orientation.” The study itself was called, “PET and MRI show differences in cerebral asymmetry and functional connectivity between homo- and heterosexual subjects” by Ivanka Savic & Per Lindström (published 2008 in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America). “The sample size and key findings: They studied a total of about 90 subjects (both sexes, different sexual orientations) from the Karolinska Institute. They found that heterosexual men and homosexual women tended to have a right-hemisphere larger than the left (asymmetry), whereas homosexual men and heterosexual women had more symmetrical hemispheres. They also found sex-

demonstrated any hard evidence that same-sex attraction is the result of biological causality. One oft quoted author implies that since the biology is fixed, same-sex desires are not sinful: "It is not un-Christian to experience same-sex attraction any more than it is un-Christian to get sick. What marks us out as a Christian is not that we never experience such things, but how we respond to them when we do."² For him, internal same-sex impulses are simply normal biological processes which, by their very nature, are amoral. They are not to be viewed in the category of sin of which a Christian must repent. They only *become* sin when you practice them.

Many Christians accept this view because of the vast amount of research pointing to some type of physiological predisposition innate within the bodies of gay inclined people. Allen Branch articulates this reasoning.

Several scientific studies were initiated in recent decades to substantiate the born-this-way argument that homosexuals are not just different in their sexual behavior, but are constitutionally different from heterosexuals. Pro-homosexual advocates hope these studies will remove the moral stigma associated with homosexuality by proving it is not really a "choice," but an essential part of one's inborn nature. Their goal is to convince others that if homosexuals are "born this way," then they should not receive moral censure for their sexual lifestyle: Homosexuality should be viewed as an innate characteristic as immutable as one's race. The claim is then made that if it is wrong to discriminate against someone because of race, it is equally wrong to discriminate against someone because he or she is homosexual.³

A brief review of the most cited and revered studies attempting to demonstrate such biological causality follows:

1. Genetic Research

- a. "A Genome-Wide Association Study of Male Sexual Orientation," J. Michael Bailey, et al. (2015). Published in *Science*, the authors analyzed the genetic makeup of gay men and heterosexual men, identifying specific regions of the genome that may be associated with male sexual orientation. Note the word, "may."
- b. "Genetic and Environmental Contributions to Same-Sex Sexual Behavior: A Population Study of Twins in Sweden," Niklas Långström, et al. (2010). Published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, this study found

atypical patterns of amygdala connectivity in homosexual individuals. The significance of this study is widely cited in reviews of neurobiological correlates of sexual orientation, as evidence supporting the notion that brain structure and connectivity differ in relation to sexual orientation." It is important to note however, none of these studies provide a single, conclusive biological "cause" of sexual orientation. The differences in brain hemispheric structure and mass could be due to unique individual subjects' brain variations and not same-sex attraction. The word "tended" is significant, not everyone who possesses a larger right brain hemisphere than the left is homosexual. Biological causality of homosexuality remains scientifically unproven.

² Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction*, (Charlotte, NC: The Good Book Company, 2013), 34.

³ J. Alan Branch, *Born This Way?: Homosexuality, Science, and the Scriptures* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 138–39.

that genetic factors that seem to contribute to same-sex sexual behavior in both men and women, with heritability estimates around 35–40%. This means that 60–65% who had the genetic factors were not same-sex attracted. There is no causality identified in this study.

2. Prenatal and Hormonal Research

- a. “Sexual Orientation and Early Hormonal Influences,” C. M. Morris, et al. (2019). Published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, this study examined how prenatal hormones might influence sexual orientation, with some evidence suggesting that exposure to certain levels of sex hormones in the womb could be related to sexual preferences later in life. This study was influenced by earlier animal research, but no causation was determined.
- b. “Sexual Orientation, Hormonal Mechanisms, and the Role of Maternal Immune Response,” Sergey Gavrilets, et al. (2019). Published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, this paper discussed maternal immune responses to male offspring and how this could be a factor in determining sexual orientation. Changes that occur during pregnancy may influence the sexual orientation of the child later in life, but the argument of the paper was inconclusive and not shown to be causative.

3. Brain Structure and Neurological Differences Research

- a. “Differences in the Brain: A Neurobiological Perspective on Sexual Orientation,” Ivanka Savic and Per Lindström (2008). See footnote 1.
- b. “The Human Brain and Sexual Orientation: A Review of Structural and Functional Findings,” R. A. Lippa (2008). This review, published in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, summarized the state of research into brain structure and function as they relate to sexual orientation. These combined findings only suggested a relationship between sizes of hemisphere regions of the brain influencing, not causing, sexual orientation.

4. Epigenetics Research

- a. “Epigenetic Modifications in the Regulation of Sexual Orientation,” D. A. Drake and S. Benhamou (2021). Published in *Trends in Neurosciences*, this study focused on epigenetic mechanisms that might influence sexual orientation, such as how gene expression is regulated without altering the underlying DNA sequence. It discusses how epigenetic factors could play a role in sexual preferences and behavior. The operative word is “could.”
- b. “Sexual Orientation and Epigenetic Mechanisms: New Insights into the Developmental Origins of Sexual Preference,” Sergey Gavrilets and Aaron Vose (2019). This study, published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (Cambridge University Press), offers an epigenetic perspective on sexual orientation, explaining how environmental factors during development could influence genetic expression and contribute to sexual orientation. No proven link between the environment was demonstrated to cause same-sex attraction.

5. Evolutionary Theory

- a. "The Evolution of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior: A Review," P. L. Vasey and D. P. VanderLaan (2017). This paper abounds with theory and not scientific research. Published in *Annual Review of Psychology*, it provides a review of theories on the evolutionary origins of same-sex sexual behavior, including biological explanations like kin selection and reciprocal altruism, which claims may account for the persistence of same-sex sexual behavior in evolutionary history. The assumption of evolutionary theory is false, making the collective assertions of its theories false.

6. Meta-Analyses Research

- a. "The Science of Sexual Orientation: A Meta-Analysis of Twin, Family, and Adoption Studies," Niklas Långström, et al. (2010). Published in *PubMed*, this meta-analysis included several studies on twins, families, and adoption, concluding that both genetic and environmental factors may be involved in same-sex sexual behavior. It is important to note that identical twin studies show an estimated less than 30% are both same-sex attracted. If biology was the causality, then one would expect 100% of identical twins would be same-sex attracted; meaning there are many other factors influencing same-sex orientation.

Hard science and research have failed to link same-sex attraction to human genetics, pre-natal and hormonal influences, brain structure, neurological differences, epigenetics, evolutionary theory, and meta-analysis. It does not come from the body, birthing hormones, brain function or structure, neurological development, genetic regulation, evolutionary influences, or bio-family connections. Although the studies cited here do not represent the entire scope of research presently available, they represent the most frequently referenced research in attempting to demonstrate biological causality of homosexuality. The most elementary question of psychology remains unproved by contemporary scientific research: "Is homosexuality a result of nature or nurture, biology or environment?" The hard science of homosexuality as a bio-physical causation is missing and uniformly negative.

The lack of hard scientific evidence suggests that it is primarily a learned social construct. Allen Branch, after carefully reviewing the research, comments, "Some genetic and biological factors correlate with a higher incidence of homosexuality among select populations. However, there are no genetic or biological factors that have been shown to cause homosexuality."⁴ This does not discount the possibility that certain bio-chemical somatic tendencies can contribute to homosexuality, just as testosterone and estrogen are the primary hormones responsible for effecting the libido in both men and women. Yet neither of these hormones *cause* them to be sexually deviant; nor can it be deduced that sexual deviancy is therefore normal and sinless. Biological processes do not determine essence or identity. God created mankind to be whole creatures consisting of body and soul. Jay E. Adams has clarified the relationship between the two:

⁴ Branch, *Born This Way?*, 139.

I prefer the word duplexity [over dichotomy]. Duplexity refers to two things folded together, whereas dichotomy means two things cut apart from one another.... Duplex teaching considers that man has a physical and a non-physical side. The former is the body (q.v.) while the latter is referred to variously as the heart, the spirit, the soul, or the mind (cf. Matt 22:37).⁵

By understanding how the soul and body are “folded together,” their functions can be interrelated. Bodily mechanisms can influence the thinking of the soul, just as the thinking of the soul can affect the mechanisms of the body. Although it is possible that there may be some genetic or physiological factors that can *correlate* with being gay, resulting in same-sex temptation to be greater in some than in others, just like some people love coffee and others do not, it is not *determinative*. The non-physical soul of man still possesses the capacity to turn away and be retained along the lines of righteous heterosexuality.

Evolutionary psychology teaches that human beings are soulless animals. Man as an animal is simply the sum of bio-chemical mechanics; therefore, thinking and behavior are amoral. Likewise, same-sex attraction is an ethically neutral issue. Unbeknownst to many who claim to be Christians, they are reasoning with reductionistic evolutionary assumptions when they promote same-sex attraction as simply a biological reality. “A purely material, physical view of man is frightfully deficient. At the same time, an overemphasis on the spirit and a de-emphasis on the physical is neither realistic nor balanced.”⁶ To deny the role the spirit of man has upon the thinking and behaving of the believer is frightening and misleading. If same-sex attraction is fixed in the DNA of the body, a person has no possibility for change. Consequently, biological determinism removes any prospect to change or grow, which inevitably culminates in hopelessness.

The medical model of homosexuality provides a shelter for many in the secular and Christian communities, and this explains its popularity. Same-sex attraction is not viewed as a disease, but it is considered as so much a part of who a person is biologically as their own ethnic origin. Blaming a person for their racial ethnicity is discrimination. Likewise, blaming a person for their sexual identity is discrimination.

If the biological distinctiveness of homosexuality is, as has been implied, so cloudy, why is the biological explanation so popular with the gay and lesbian community and so much more acceptable to the general public? Undoubtedly the answer lies in the fact that a biological explanation of homosexuality identifies with the medical (organic disease) model of behavior. Such a model has the full backing of the medical profession and provides protection from blame, since no one would certainly be blamed for having a disease.⁷

⁵ Jay E. Adams, “Duplexity,” in *The Practical Encyclopedia of Christian Counseling* (Cordova, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 58.

⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Man, Doctrine Of,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 1386.

⁷ Sherwood O. Cole, “Biology, Homosexuality, and Moral Culpability,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 365.

In Christian circles today, many believe it is only the practice of homosexuality or lesbianism that is sinful, not the condition of it. They suppose that to attribute sinfulness to a professing believer who continues to not only possess same-sex attraction but also to see no wrong in it, is as ridiculous as blaming a person for having hazel-colored eyes or being left-handed. The medical model implies it is not their fault.

Homosexuality and the Early Church

Ecclesiastical history demonstrates that the church of Jesus Christ has consistently seen this issue as predominantly spiritual, i.e. a struggle within the non-material side of man. The *Didache*, an early Christian manual of reported Apostolic teaching (late 1st–early 2nd century AD), provides biblical guidelines that are relevant to the topic, although it does not specifically mention homosexuality.⁸ However, its broader teachings on biblical sexual ethics suggest a condemnation of same-sex orientation in line with traditional Jewish and Greco-Roman moral standards. No distinction is made between the practice of sex and its orientation.

One of the foremost early Christian apologists, Tertullian (c. AD 155–240), wrote extensively against various forms of immorality, including homosexuality. In his work *Apology*, he discusses Christian biblical teachings and criticizes the sexual practices of the Roman Empire, including same-sex relations.⁹ Even though his emphasis was upon the practice of homosexuality, there is no indication that he makes any distinction between the practice and the desire of same-sex attraction. Furthermore, he envisions a strong distinction between genuine Christianity and homosexuality.

Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 150–215), in his work *Paedagogus (The Tutor)*, stresses sexual purity and condemns a range of immoral behaviors, including homosexuality.¹⁰ His thinking was influenced by early Christian theology and even some Greek philosophy as he emphasized sexual uprightness. For him, sexual purity was the natural result of understanding and practicing good theology, both within and outside of marriage. Therefore, it was inconceivable that a person could consider themselves a Christian and view same-sex attraction as being a legitimate ongoing assumption.

Then, of course, the prolific pastoral-theologian Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), in his renowned work *The City of God*, strongly condemns same-sex relations as contrary to God's natural order.¹¹ He repeatedly emphasizes that sexual conduct should occur within the context of marriage for procreation, insisting homosexual acts are both sinful and aberrant. He writes, "Therefore those offences which are contrary to nature are everywhere and at all times to be held in detestation and punished; such were those of the Sodomites, which should all nations commit, all alike would be held guilty of the same crime by the divine law, for our Maker did not

⁸ *The Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Volume 1*, Loeb Classical Library, trans. Bart D. Ehrman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 115.

⁹ Tertullian, *Apology*, trans. S. Thelwall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916), 62.

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor (Paedagogus)*, trans. John Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 233–34.

¹¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 546.

so make men that they should in that way abuse one another.”¹² It is worth noting that Augustine’s stand would be consistent with the understanding that both same-sex attraction and practices are an assault upon the Christian institution of marriage and to be understood as sinfully unnatural.

Homosexuality and Romans 1:24–27

The early Christian church, as evidenced by centuries of documentation, maintained a strong stance against homosexuality, viewing same-sex desires and practices as sinful and contrary to both natural law and Apostolic teaching. This view was grounded in both biblical passages (e.g., Rom 1:26–27) and the teachings of the early Church Fathers, who often referenced Jewish moral traditions and the prevailing Greco-Roman views on sexuality. Scripture was their final authority and source of clarity in confronting these issues among Christians. Throughout early centuries AD there is frequent reference to the Apostle Paul’s instruction on homosexuality and lesbianism in Romans.

For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions; for their females exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the males abandoned the natural function of the female and burned in their desire toward one another, males with males committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error (Rom 1:26–27).¹³

Paul’s words, “dishonorable passions” (πάθη ἀτιμίας), directly refers to deeply ingrained lustful sexual desires that are disgraceful. The source of human behavior is the heart, and this is especially true of deviant sexual behavior (Mark 7:21–23).¹⁴ Gayness in terms of its practice (e.g., committing gay sexual acts) and its passion (e.g., being same-sex attracted) is “unnatural” and contrary to the creation mandate (Gen 1:27–28).

Sexuality that is “the unnatural” (τὴν παρὰ φύσιν), in contrast with “the natural” (τὴν φυσικὴν), consists of thoughts and behaviors that are not aligned with the attributes or purposes for which gender distinctiveness was created. According to

¹² Augustine, *The City of God*, 116–17.

¹³ All quotations are from the *Legacy Standard Bible*, (The Lockman Foundation, 2021) unless otherwise specified.

¹⁴ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 744–45. The “mind or reasoning” in OT and NT etymology, Heb. מַחְשָׁבָה or מַחְשָׁבָה, Gk. καρδία. “In the Bible it usually designates the whole personality, though, in contrast to modern usage, the emphasis is on the activities of reason and will rather than the emotions. Both in the OT and NT it is the seat of wisdom (1 Kgs 3:12), and of thought and reflection (e.g. Jer 24:7, Luke 2:19), the instrument of belief (Rom 10:10) and of will, the principle of action (Exod 35:21) which may be hardened so that it resists God (Deut 10:7; Mark 16:14). It is the principle both of virtues and vices, of humility (Matt 11:29) and pride (Deut 17:20), of good thoughts (Luke 6:45) and of evil thoughts (Matt 15:19).” Also see Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropologie des Alten Testaments* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1974) 40–58. Robert Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms, Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und das Urchristentums 10* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 305–33. Friedrich Baumgärtel and Johannes Behm, “καρδία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 3:605–14.

Paul, both wrong sinful thinking and wrong sinful behavior characterizes anyone who considers themselves to be a homosexual or lesbian. Douglas J. Moo explains,

Paul generally uses the word “nature” to describe the way things are by reason of their intrinsic state or birth, and in these cases, there is no clear reference to divine intention. Some scholars in recent years especially, noting this, have argued that Paul does not here brand homosexuality as a violation of God’s will. He is only, they argue, following his own cultural prejudices by characterizing homosexual relations as being against what is “usually” the case. But Paul’s use of the word “nature” in this verse probably owes much to Jewish authors, particularly Philo, who included sexual morality as part of “natural law” and therefore as a divine mandate applicable to all people. Violations of this law, as in the case of Sodom, are therefore considered transgressions of God’s will. In keeping with the biblical and Jewish worldview, the heterosexual desires observed normally in nature are traced to God’s creative intent. Sexual sins that are “against nature” are also, then, against God, and it is this close association that makes it probable that Paul’s appeal to “nature” in this verse includes appeal to God’s created order.¹⁵

For a professing Christian who says, “I do not practice gay sex and yet I still have the internal same-sex desires, and they are not sinful,” the apostle makes it clear that those desires are unnatural and against God. Any same-sex longings coming from an “intrinsic state,” or inner man compulsion, is counterintuitive to the redeemed soul of the Christian.

Almost four decades ago, this author had a lengthy exchange with a popular local pastor who was nationally recognized as a converted gay Christian. He had a wife and three children and helped to lead an international gay-recovery ministry. It was a psychology-based, integrational ministry focused on men and women confessing Christ as Savior, renouncing same-sex behavior through behavioral therapy, and being assured of going to heaven. It was one of the first ministries to homosexuals and lesbians to practice what came to be called “Conversion Therapy.”¹⁶ This pastor was a staunch defender of the proposition that a person could come to Christ, stop same-sex practices, function as a heterosexual, raise a family, and yet still retain internal same-sex desires. It is the conviction of this author that such a position denies the comprehensiveness of real regeneration in the inner man. This turns homosexuals into white-washed-tomb Pharisees (1 Sam 16:7; Matt 23:25–28; Luke 15:7–9). How could the awakened love for God in a new believer be content with desires that are

¹⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 114–15.

¹⁶ Sometimes referred to as “Reparative Therapy” or “Reorientation Therapy” that seeks to change an individual’s sexual behaviors, orientation, or gender identity through some type of psychological methodology, along with occasionally integrating elements of Christianity with the false gospel of “accepting Jesus as Savior and not as Lord.” Both secular therapists and biblical counselors reject “Conversion Therapy” for different reasons. Secular therapists reject the notion that any change is needed and to do so is potentially harmful. Biblical counselors reject it because it is built upon an unbiblical secular psychological model of behaviorism while presenting a false view of biblical anthropology and an empty assurance of salvation.

opposed to righteousness? Within two years after our private debate, he left his wife and children to return to his gay lifestyle. It turned out he was never a Christian to begin with, and yet churches had permitted him to advocate his false gospel all over the world. This gospel teaches that you can stop sinful practices, confess Christ as your Savior, and still maintain unnatural same-sex desires while denying their sinfulness and still be a Christian. In Romans 1:27, Paul refers to it purposefully as an “error.” Moo writes, “In calling the homosexual activity that brings about this penalty an ‘error,’ Paul does not diminish the seriousness of the offense, for this word often denotes sins of unbelievers in the NT.”¹⁷ This “activity,” as described by Moo, is the fruit of the heart which is the source of the error. Maintaining and even nurturing same-sex attraction in a redeemed heart is inconceivable and misleading. It is an error that is made by an unbeliever who is seeking to be accepted as a believer.

As reviewed earlier, the term Paul uses in Romans 1:26 for “nature” (φυσικός) contextually means the fundamental essence or qualities of mankind. It is the created character and nature of humanity to be heterogeneous in its sexuality. This means God does not create people with unchangeable and irresistible biological homogeneous sexual urges. The nature of all humanity is to be heterosexual. To pervert God’s original design was such an abomination in ancient Israel that Yahweh demanded capital punishment. “If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them” (Lev 20:13; cf. 18:22). Those who have acquiesced to the routine customs of the culture have more in common with unbelievers than believers. John Calvin comments on Leviticus 20:13 recognizing the same problem: “And it is astonishing that almost all the Gentiles have so sunk into stupid and brutal folly, that they have tolerated with little less than impunity unnatural crimes, detestable in their very name.”¹⁸ This is the way Gentiles reason and act, not God’s people. The very created nature of man defies homosexuality until lustful desires begin to dominate. Then it is easy to believe a lie.

The Old Testament narrative of Lot’s wife serves as an example of how God is concerned more with the inner condition of a person than their outer behavior. It is the inner thoughts, desires, plans, intentions and purposes that eventually bear fruit in behavior. Sodom and Gomorrah were twin cities on the southern coast of the Dead Sea. Sodom was considered a Canaanite stronghold consisting of a league of five cities, including Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar (Gen 14:2, 8).¹⁹ These cities were known for their wickedness, Sodom was especially notorious for its exceeding wickedness (13:13) and homosexuality was the worst type of its degradation (18:20; 19:1–7). The prophet Ezekiel, 1,480 years later, compares the debauchery of Jerusalem to its “sister city” Sodom, and the main point of the comparison was their “lofty pride, abundant food, and quiet ease” while ignoring and abusing the afflicted and needy for their own pleasure (Ezek 16:49). This appearance of ease-of-living was

¹⁷ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 116.

¹⁸ John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 3:74–75.

¹⁹ Thoralf Gilbrant, “סֹדֹם,” in *The Old Testament Hebrew-English Dictionary*, The Complete Biblical Library (WORDsearch, 1998).

certainly the original reason Lot separated from Abraham and settled in Sodom, but it also became the fertile soil for sexual deviance (Gen 13:10).

When the two angels from Yahweh came to Lot and his family warning them of God's imminent judgment and demanding they leave Sodom immediately and not look back, Lot took his family and fled toward the city of Zoar (19:17, 22). However, while following Lot away from the city, his wife looked back at her burning city being pummeled with brimstone and fire, presumably in nostalgia hoping to return. Yahweh turned her to a pillar of salt. It almost seems like a cruel act of God until you understand His desire for internal holiness. Her body had obeyed Yahweh, but her heart was still in Sodom (19:26). This is the very definition of false repentance. Lot's wife enjoyed her pleasures in Sodom; she rationalized the men's aggressive homosexual pursuit with the two angels. Therefore, she was heartsick and homesick. Her internal desires were horribly contorted, and it cost her her life. External obedience is insufficient when the heart is unrepentant. Like the husband who stops his adulterous affair and remains with his wife and family but secretly longs to be with the other woman, his outer behavior appears good, but his inner lustful heart is still wicked and far from God. Later in the Apostle John's Apocalypse, the nefarious city of Sodom metaphorically epitomizes the boneyard of the dead (Rev 11:8).

For this reason, the Apostle Paul describes what is the actual cause of same-sex behavior, "Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (Rom 1:24–25). It is the lust of men's hearts for corrupt self-gratification that is the breeding ground for same-sex indulgence, as with all other sexual sins. Deviant sexual lust, not just behavior, is a lie that realigns the worshipful allegiance of the human heart away from its Creator.

When the apostle says in Romans 1:26 that "God gave them over" (παρέδωκεν αὐτοὺς ὁ θεὸς), it means He surrendered them over to their lustful desires to suffer the natural consequences of their corruption—the dishonoring of their bodies. "He shuts people up to the consequences of their sin so that they will see their error and look to him for mercy and for a better way ... their immersion in their sin is itself their punishment."²⁰ It is not just the acts of gay sex but the heart's craving that is an abomination, disgraceful, dishonoring, and destructive. When the mind is filled with same-sex imaginations, it will enflame undeniable desire for expression, and God's judgment is to see that it will take its toll on the sinner's body.

Those who claim the name of Christ and profess to be true believers and yet continue in a besetting sexual sin are in a special biblical category. Former homosexuals that profess Christ and yet rationalize and self-justify continuing same-sex attraction are in this category. Their own lustful hearts betray them. These are the very people Paul admonishes the Christians to avoid and cease association with (1 Cor 5:10–11). Christians should not avoid the sinful people of the world ("sexually immoral people of this world," 5:10). Believers should continually engage and evangelize the world. But the one to avoid is the "so-called brother if he is a sexually immoral person" (5:11). God will judge the people outside the church, but believers are called upon to judge

²⁰ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 88.

those professing believers within the church who are abiding in and rationalizing their unnatural lustful desires (5:12–13). The immediate context is a professing brother who continues to have sexual relations with his stepmother (5:1). But Paul chooses not to limit his admonition to incestual or familial sexual sins. Instead, he uses the immediate occasion of the church’s mishandling of unrepentant incestual sex among its members to broaden this command to all types of “sexual immorality,” or the “greedy, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler” (5:11). All kinds of sexual immorality would unquestionably include those who claim that same-sex attraction is not sinful (unrighteous orthodoxy) as well as those who practice it (unrighteous orthopraxy), since one’s behavior always grows out of one’s theology.

Homosexuality and Soteriology

The doctrine of soteriology is salient to the issue of what happens to a homosexual or lesbian, both when and after the Holy Spirit regenerates the heart. A theological case can be made to show that the prevailing misunderstanding of the gay and lesbian *heart* is due to an errant or deficient view of personal redemption and sanctification. The biblical etymology of the heart involves what a person thinks and believes about themselves, God, their circumstances, and others. It includes whether they understand the fullest theology of irresistible redemptive grace and have existentially experienced its radical transformation (Eph 2:4–9). Another way to describe the *irresistible grace* of God is to call it His *effective calling* (John 6:44; 21:11; Acts 16:19; Jas 2:6). The Westminster Confession of Faith states,

- I. ALL those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, he is pleased, in his appointed and accepted time, effectually to call [Rom 8:30], by his word and Spirit [2 Thess 2:13–14], out of that state of sin and death in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ [Rom 8:2]; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God [Acts 26:18; 1 Cor 2:10, 12; Eph 1:17]; taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh [Ezek 36:26]; renewing their wills, and by his almighty power determining them to that which is good [Ezek 11:19; Phil 2:13]; and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ [Eph 1:19; John 6:44–45]; yet so as they come most freely, being made willing by his grace [Ps 110:3; John 6:37; Rom 6:16–17].²¹

Because it is divinely effectual, salvific grace always brings comprehensive transformation. The comprehensiveness of the *effectual call* has both an *already* and a *not yet* actualization. The redeemed sinner is declared holy and righteous in Christ but awaits the full putting away of sin’s remnants in this life until he stands in the presence of his Savior.

Simultaneously, the supernatural gift of regeneration guarantees sanctification. A Christian is saved (positional sanctification) to be sanctified (progressive sanctification). The Holy Spirit both regenerates the heart of the sinner and takes up

²¹ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 61–63.

residence to assure perfected sanctification. As a result, the transformed heart is instilled with an insatiable desire to be like Christ. It longs to be holy and be cleansed from every desire and lust that is impure. The Westminster Confession of Faith adds,

- II. This sanctification is throughout in the whole man, yet imperfect in this life [1 Thess 5:23]; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part [1 John 1:10; Rom 7:18, 23; Phil 3:12]; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh [Gal 5:17; 1 Pet 2:11].

- III. In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail [Rom 7:11], yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome [Rom 6:14; 1 John 5:4; Eph 4:15–16]: and so the saints grow in grace [2 Pet 3:18; 2 Cor 3:18], perfecting holiness in the fear of God [2 Cor 7:1].²²

The God of the *effectual call* desires purity of heart and has provided for His people's perfected sanctification through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, and for their progressive sanctification through His Spirit. Both the positional and progressive aspects of sanctification are seen in Hebrews 10:14: "For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." The phrase "He has perfected for all time" is the *already* aspect, while the phrase "those who are being sanctified" is the *not yet* aspect.

There is a considerable amount of misunderstanding in regard to positional and progressive sanctification among Christians who promote the concept that gays can be genuine Christians and still be comfortable with same-sex lusts and attempt to exercise self-restraint merely by refusing to externally indulge those desires. Among those who advocate this view are two groups: those who confess they follow Christ and still embrace a gay identity or orientation, and those who reject the moniker of such an identity or orientation. For example, those who reject the identity and orientation of being gay will say, "The kind of sexual attractions I experience are not fundamental to my identity. They are part of what I feel, but are not who I am in a fundamental sense. I am far more than my sexuality."²³ Amazingly, a statement like this is made while still maintaining the belief that same-sex attraction is not sinful. If this is true, then there cannot be any desire to change those desires or grow in sexual sanctification. Such belief has no desire to retrain thinking toward heterosexual feelings. It is unnecessary to change because they are self-convinced that their desires are innocent and godly. This view fails to acknowledge the danger of harboring same-sex feelings and God's eventual judgment, not only on those who practice homosexuality, but also on those who cherish those deviant feelings in their heart.

Those professing Christians who retain their gay identity and orientation are under an even greater delusion. They are either ignorant of the effectual change of regeneration or are willfully rejecting God's clear will. The God of Scripture requires absolute holiness. Historically, He has gone on record bringing about horrific

²² Westminster Confession of Faith, 74–75.

²³ Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?*, 8–9.

judgment upon those who identify with homosexuality (Gen 19:1–26; 1 Tim 1:9–10). When a person says they identify as a homosexual, they are expressing that they are emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to another of the same gender. It reflects how they understand their sexual attraction toward another of their gender. It says they define themselves within the spectrum of a homosexual orientation. In contrast, the Christian who embraces the effectual change of redemption will endeavor to completely deny their former identity because they die to themselves and now live only for Christ. “I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). This means all their desires, aspirations, and feelings are being conformed to His image. It is inconceivable that a so-called Christian would be identified or oriented in any fashion that is contrary to the image of Jesus Christ.

These two positions, resting on the relationship between same-sex attraction and being a Christian, are challenged by the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. A hermeneutical understanding of this text provides much needed soteriological clarity as to the change of a gay person’s core essence upon regeneration.

Contextual Overview of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11

In this epistle, the Apostle Paul addresses a series of moral issues within the Corinthian church. In 1 Corinthians 6, his primary focus is on lawsuits among believers (1 Cor 6:1–8) and sexual immorality (6:12–20). These themes fit into the larger argument about the church’s responsibility to live out the transformative power of the gospel with one another within a corrupt and idolatrous society. Paul emphasizes the need for believers to be distinct in their behavior, guided by their newly regenerated position in Christ, and to avoid behavior that reflects the fallen state and wickedness of the world.

In verses 9–11, Paul provides a strong warning against a professing Christian’s self-determined nature and behavior that is incompatible with the kingdom of God. Such natures and their subsequent behaviors are illustrated in a list of vices, which Paul describes as characteristic of the unrighteous—those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Adams writes, “In these verses, he lists many sinful life-styles, life-styles that have become so life-dominating that the person involved can be labeled by the sin that dominates him.”²⁴ When Scripture labels a life-style as a sin, it describes a self-determined habituated manner of life for which they are culpable and which will produce sinful behavior. It is an individual’s fully conceived self-awareness that trains the feelings (e.g., same-sex desires) in unrighteousness.

Relevance of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11

The unrighteous and the Kingdom of God are incompatible (1 Cor 6:9). The concept of “unrighteousness” (ἀδικία) refers to injustice or immoral hearts that cause

²⁴ Jay E. Adams, *1 Corinthians; 11 Corinthians*, The Christian Counselor’s Commentary (Arlington, TN: Institute for Nouthetic Studies, 2020), 41.

ungodly behavior. The inheritance of the kingdom of God is a prominent theme in Paul's letters, referring not just to eternal salvation but also to the present reign of Christ over the lives of believers. The evidence of genuine salvation is seen in the righteous desires, feelings, attitudes, likeness, and conduct of Christ-like saints.

Continuing in verse 9, Paul cautions that it is easy to be deceived on this issue. He warns against any misbeliefs that presume that the self-authentication and practice of certain sins will not affect one's standing before God. This implies that some in the Corinthian church may have been justifying their immoral behaviors. Then he provides in the original language eight nouns and two adjectives as sinful life-style examples of individuals who presumably want to be known among Christians but who are not genuine saints.

The first three sinful labels Paul mentions were common lifestyles in the city of Corinth. First, the sexually immoral (πόρνοι): The term refers to individuals who engage in any form of illicit sexual activity, including prostitution and fornication, a prevalent issue in the Corinthian society. Second, idolaters (ειδωλόατραι): Idolatry was rampant in Corinth due to the city's connection with pagan religious practices.²⁵ Paul connects idolatry with sexual immorality, since idol worship often involved temple prostitution. Third, adulterers (μοιχοι): Adultery is specifically sexual unfaithfulness in marriage, and its inclusion reflects the sanctity of marriage as foundational to Christian integrity.

The fourth term is more central to this article, effeminate (μαλακοι): It is the first of two adjectives in the list, a word often used to speak of the feminine side of a homosexual relationship: soft; fine; catamite. Its actual meaning is, "effeminate homosexual." Anthony C. Thiselton explains that this Greek term, when used "outside sexual contexts means soft, as in a soft tongue (γλωσσα δε μαλακη συντριβει οστα, Prov 25:15 LXX); or soft clothing (Matt 11:8). In Hellenistic literature of the Roman period it may mean effeminate when applied to men (Dio Chrysostom, 49 [66]; Diogenes Laertius, 7:173, and papyri)."²⁶ It is quite possible it is in reference to men who assume the passive-submissive-feminine role in a homosexual relationship. Every homosexual and lesbian encounter impersonates a heterosexual relation with one party assuming the more dominant masculine role and the other the more feminine passive role. It is critical to note this term reflects a state of being and not mere action, even though it could produce effeminate behavior. Such a male may self-authenticate as being unmanly or womanly in their same-sex encounters. Their sexual self-awareness defines them, and this is the reason Paul gives them a label among those who will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

The fifth noun is closely related to the previous term and is also germane to this article, homosexual (αρσενικοιται): The Greek word is debated in its exact meaning, but it likely refers to men who have same-sex desires and relations, particularly those who take the active, dominant role. It appears in the context of Paul's consistent opposition to homosexuality both in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. This term includes,

²⁵ Greco-Roman Polytheism: Aphrodite, Apollo, Poseidon, Athena; Imperial Cult: Roma, Augustus, later emperors; Mystery Religions: Isis, Serapis, Cybele, Dionysus. Some in the church at Corinth claimed to be Christian yet had simply added Jesus Christ to their pre-existing pantheon of pagan gods.

²⁶ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 448.

but is not restricted to, simply practicing homosexuality but also can involve the individual who exercises extreme self-restraint by not externally practicing same-sex behavior while still being content with internal ongoing same-sex attraction. In Romans 12:1–2, Paul clearly states that true transformation is both of the body and of the mind: “Therefore I exhort you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—living, holy, *and* pleasing to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may approve what the will of God is, that which is good and pleasing and perfect” (cf. Luke 6:45; Jer 31:33; Ezek 11:19). Where the effeminate (μαλακοί) is the passive/feminine side of the same-sex relationship, homosexual (ἄρσενικοῖται) is the active/masculine side.²⁷ Whether that same-sex experience is real or imagined, the person who is content to possess those desires and who remains unrepentant can be labeled among the “unrighteous” and “will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Unwavering same-sex attraction and behavior are listed among many other common sins not often believed to exclude a person from “the Kingdom of God,” such as the sixth noun, thieves (κλέπται): Thieves are those who steal, undermining trust within the community. This sin disrupts the communal harmony that is essential to the life of the church. The seventh term is a noun, the greedy (πλεονέκται): The greedy person is driven by insatiable desire for material gain, often to the detriment of others (cf. Luke 12:15). Still an eighth is a plural noun, drunkards (μέθυστοι): Drunkenness is condemned throughout Scripture (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:21) because it reflects a lack of self-control, an essential virtue for Christians. The ninth is also a plural noun, revilers (λοιδοροί): These are people who engage in abusive speech, slander, or verbal abuse. Paul addresses this to remind the Corinthians that their speech should reflect their transformed nature. The tenth and final is an adjective, swindlers (ἄρπαγῶντες): Swindlers are excessively greedy. They exploit and deceive others for personal gain. Paul condemns such behavior, as it is antithetical to the justice and integrity expected of believers. Each of these concrete labels characterizes unbelievers. Nevertheless, there were those in the Corinthian church who wanted to be accepted as fellow Christians while maintaining these same desires and practices.

Paul emphatically states, “such were some of you” (6:11). He reminds the Corinthians of their past desires, deeds, and identity—no one is excluded from the possibility of transformation. He highlights that the Corinthians’ former state was marked by many of the same vices he just enumerated. They used to possess the same qualities of being; they “were” (ἦτε, second person, plural, imperfect) this way, but no longer. For our purposes, their core essence of being was no longer effeminate or homosexual. How did they change? “You were washed” (ἀπελούσασθε, aorist, middle, indicative), he says. It refers to a full and complete cleansing from sin through the atoning death of Christ. This was their secured positional sanctification in Christ. Then he says, “You were sanctified” (ἡγιασθητε, aorist, passive,

²⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 771. “A male partner in homosexual intercourse—‘homosexual.’ οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ... οὔτε μοιχοὶ οὔτε μαλακοὶ οὔτε ἄρσενικοῖται ... βασιλείαν θεοῦ κληρονομήσουσιν ‘don’t you know that ... no adulterers or homosexuals ... will receive the kingdom of God’ 1 Cor 6:9–10. It is possible that ἄρσενικοῖτης in certain contexts refers to the active male partner in homosexual intercourse in contrast with μαλακός, the passive male partner.”

indicative). This is God's work of sanctification in the believer guaranteeing the process of being made holy, set apart for God's purposes. It is both a present reality of progressive sanctification and a future promise of perfected sanctification. Then he adds a strong conjunction of emphatic contrast (*ἀλλὰ*), which contextually could be translated "surely" or "certainly," "you were justified" (*ἐδικαιώθητε*, aorist, passive, indicative). Justification speaks to the legal declaration of righteousness before God, accomplished through the gift of repentance and corresponding faith in Christ. This is foundational to Paul's theology of salvation. He finally concludes with a trinitarian statement of the action and authority of the Godhead in this fundamental change of the human, depraved nature: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." This detailed description of the radical nature of soteriological transformation excludes any possibility of treasuring the notion that a Christian remain same-sex attracted. If there are same-sex feelings in a Christian, that Christian will acknowledge them as sinful, practice repentance, and resolve to retrain the thoughts and desires in accordance with what will bring God the greatest glory.

Conclusion

Paul's argument in this passage centers upon the ontological and ethical transformation that accompanies authentic faith in Christ. The apostle insists that the Corinthian believers must no longer persist in the patterns of sin that once defined their pre-conversion existence. His deliberate use of the aorist verbs—"were washed," "were sanctified," and "were justified" (1 Cor 6:11)—underscores the definitive and irreversible nature of the redemptive event effected by the gospel. These verbs signify not a gradual moral improvement but a decisive act of divine grace through which the believer's status and identity are permanently reconstituted.

Within this framework, Paul establishes a sharp demarcation between those whose lives remain characterized by the vices enumerated in the preceding verses (1 Cor 6:9–10) and those who have inherited the kingdom of God through union with Christ. The ethical distinction is not merely behavioral but ontological: participation in Christ necessarily entails participation in His holiness (cf. Rom 6:1–4; Gal 2:20). Thus, the apostle's exhortation functions as both assurance and admonition—affirming the believer's new identity while warning against any presumption that divine grace legitimizes continued sin.

In Pauline theology, salvation (*sōtēria*) encompasses more than forensic justification; it entails the transformative empowerment of the believer through the indwelling Spirit. Grace not only pardons sin but reorients the moral and spiritual disposition of the regenerate person toward conformity with Christ's righteousness. Consequently, Paul's ethical imperatives are rooted in his soteriology: those who have been justified are also called and equipped to manifest the sanctified life that flows inevitably from their new creation in Christ Jesus.

Despite the grave listing of sins, the focus of verse 11 is on the hope of transformation. Paul does not dwell on condemnation but emphasizes the positive reality of the Corinthians' redemption. Adams writes,

Often, homosexuals, drunkards and others will ask counselors if there is any hope of changing. Reading this passage is a powerful response. Paul makes it

clear that such things as drunkenness and homosexuality are not genetic problems, as some aver, but rather, are sinful life-styles. Lifestyles due to genetics do not require forgiveness; but it is also true that they cannot be changed by it either! All the life-styles mentioned here are sin-engendered. The hope lies in this: Jesus Christ died for sins, not for genetic problems. Call what the Bible labels “sin,” “sin,” and you will restore hope to many who have been led astray by modern propaganda (often disseminated by avant-garde elements in the church itself).²⁸

This provides pastoral encouragement: no matter how grievous one’s past sins within the gay, LGBTQIA lifestyle, there is always the hope of full cleansing and renewal in Christ. Soteriology changes the entire person down to the core of their essential nature.

A “gay Christian” is a contradiction in terms. To entertain the idea that a person can claim to be a believer in Christ and willfully or wishfully sustain a same-sex attraction in their life betrays ignorance of the depth of salvific transformation. When the Spirit of God redeems the heart and changes the nature, He will instill a lifelong disdain for not just the practice of sin, but especially its contemplation. The heart now hates all the evil it previously cherished (Gen 6:5; Mark 7:21–23; Rom 12:9). As Charles Spurgeon has preached, “But regeneration, such as we read of it in the Bible, changes the nature of man, makes him hate the things he loved, and love the things he hated.”²⁹ Those who claim to be “gay Christians” do not hate their gayness.

²⁸ Adams, *I Corinthians; II Corinthians*, 41–42.

²⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Fruitless Faith,” Sermon No. 3434, Delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington, on the Lord’s-day evening, February 21, 1861. Published in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1914), 18.

PASTORAL MINISTRY AND CREATION DOCTRINE

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Foundational truths from biblical creation doctrine contribute to a variety of pastoral ministry applications. Creation doctrine (or, Bible-based creationism) comprises an element of biblical theology resulting from exegesis of the biblical text. Creation doctrine relates even to the title of “pastor/shepherd” since Scripture identifies the Chief Shepherd as Creator in a context dealing with life, death, and Scripture. Creation doctrine introduces and influences the content of written revelation dealing with the person and work of Christ. Creation doctrine is also related to the biblical concept of community. Creation doctrine aids biblical counseling with truths for guiding counselees toward commitment, providing comfort, and navigating one’s creatureliness (especially in issues of gender, sexuality, and marriage). Finally, creation doctrine bears directly on the biblical doctrines of future consummation and celestial residency.

* * * * *

Introduction

Biblical theology as a methodology commences with exegesis of the biblical text in its historical context. “Biblical theology seeks to determine what the biblical writers said concerning a theological issue...”¹ Pastoral ministry finds its source in biblical theology by way of systematic theology which examines doctrinal discussions in the light of contemporary issues and views. Pastors then take the elements of systematic theology to formulate their practical theology—the application of biblical truth to congregants and counselees facing a variety of issues and situations as they seek to live out God’s will in their lives.²

¹ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 23.

² See Enns’ chart of biblical theology’s relationships to other disciplines; Enns, *Handbook of Theology*, 22.

Scripture’s opening words confront readers with the doctrines of God and creation: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1).³ God reveals what human beings cannot know by any other means. When creation took place there were no human witnesses. No matter how anyone might think God accomplished creation, every individual’s concept of origins begins with faith rather than direct observation. The object of faith determines one’s view on origins. If the object of faith is God Himself, then what He has revealed in the Scriptures provides the information required to develop creation doctrine. If the object of faith is human experience and investigative or philosophical knowledge, creation doctrine is subject to human nature and its limitations.

Following Adam’s disobedience, the complexity of divine truth became difficult for fallen humans to comprehend.⁴ Human beings forget, neglect, disobey, or skew what God does reveal to them. In fact, fallen humanity constantly seeks to eliminate God from their knowledge. In Romans 1:21–25 the Apostle Paul puts it this way:

For even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the likeness of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

The human condition necessitates divine revelation. Scripture points fallen mankind to the path for restoration to fellowship with God. Natural revelation (the testimony of conscience and creation) lacks any redemptive message. Without special revelation mankind possesses no authoritative or dependable direction from their Creator. The Bible is that God-given special revelation.

A summary of biblical theology in Genesis 1–3 provides a simple description of creation doctrine (or, Bible-based creationism):

(1) God revealed Himself as omnipotent and sovereign in the creation of the universe and world. (2) God is holy, demanding obedience for fellowship with Himself. (3) God is a God of grace, as manifest through the promise of a Savior. (4) Man is the apex of God’s creation, created in the image and likeness of God for fellowship with God and for rule over God’s creation. (5) Man is a responsible creature, answerable to a holy God. Man is constituted a sinner through the sin of Adam. (6) God initiates His redemptive program by promising a Savior to Adam and Eve. The promise anticipates Messiah’s triumph over Satan, providing the basis for the restored kingdom.⁵

³ Scripture quotes are from the *Legacy Standard Bible* (Irvine, CA: Three Sixteen, 2022).

⁴ For a masterful exegetical study of this biblical matter, see George J. Zemek, *Tethered to the Text: An Exegetical Approach to Apologetics* (Jupiter, FL: Expositors, 2024), 39–118.

⁵ Enns, *Handbook of Theology*, 42, thus summarizes the “theology of the Edenic Era.”

Theocentricity stands out in this summary. God is the center and source of all creation doctrine. We can expect that the rest of Scripture will bear this out. Indeed, again and again the writers of Scripture refer back to creation doctrine to support their view of God, the world, the human situation, and the future. Passages like Psalm 33:6–9, Isaiah 45:6–18, John 1:1–5, Colossians 1:15–17, and Hebrews 11:1–3 demonstrate that “the doctrine of creation is fundamental to Christian theology.”⁶

The belief that God has created and is sustaining the order of the world in all its complexities, is not a peripheral theme of biblical theology but is plainly the fundamental theme. What Israel experienced in her history and what the early Christian community experienced in relation to Jesus is understood and interpreted in terms of this one basic theme.⁷

Therefore, creation doctrine is fundamental to pastoral ministry. However, it too often falls between the cracks in many evangelical churches. Van Dam identifies the cause: “Fueling much of the downplaying or denial of the literal historicity of the events reported in Genesis 1 and 2 is the enormous prestige enjoyed by science and its championing the theory of evolution as the most attractive explanation of how this present world and its inhabitants came to be.”⁸

Sound biblical theology commences with commitment to biblical inerrancy. Unfortunately, many pastors hold to a very weak view of the integrity and historical accuracy of the Bible. According to MacArthur, “a discernable trend exists in contemporary evangelicalism *away* from biblical preaching and *toward* a pragmatic, topical, and experience-centered approach in the pulpit.”⁹ Biblical inerrancy empowers expository preaching. When we accept the apostle Paul’s declaration that “all Scripture is God-breathed,” we must also commit ourselves to every part of Scripture (including Gen 1–11) as “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped, having been thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).¹⁰

Secular science and its evolutionary theory oppose Bible-based creationism. Contemporary culture deifies the evolutionary process. In other words, many people believe that evolution controls and determines what happens rather than an omniscient, omnipotent, sovereign, free, and transcendent God. If evolution presents the true history of the universe and everything in it, every major biblical doctrine proves false—even the gospel message itself. If evolution is true,

⁶ Andrew S. Kulikovskiy, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2009), 15.

⁷ H. H. Schmid, “Creation, Righteousness and Salvation: ‘Creation Theology’ as the Broad Horizon of Biblical Theology,” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B. W. Anderson (London: SPCK, 1979), 111.

⁸ Cornelis Van Dam, *In the Beginning: Listening to Genesis 1 and 2* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 2.

⁹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., “The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching,” in *The Master’s Perspective on Pastoral Ministry*, eds. Richard L. Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas, The Master’s Perspective Series 3 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 143 (emphasis original).

¹⁰ John MacArthur makes this point in “The Mandate and the Motivations: Inerrancy and Expository Preaching,” in *The Inerrant Word: Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 335.

(1) Death cannot be the result of sin or penalty for sin if millions of years of death occurred *before* Adam existed or sinned. (2) In the standard evolutionary view, there is no Adam—people today are allegedly descended from a group of individuals that branched off from the apes. (3) Apart from a literal Genesis, there is no guarantee that Jesus is descended from Adam and thus eligible to pay our debt.¹¹

The theory of evolution impacts pastoral ministry by insisting that many of the sins identified in Scripture arise out of one’s environment, natural history, or guilt imposed by practitioners of Christianity (e.g., homosexuality, disobedience, theft, murder).

The very title “pastor” (ποιμήν, *poimēn*, Eph 4:11; cp. Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:2) means “shepherd.”¹² Interestingly, Solomon attributes the title of “Shepherd” to God in Ecclesiastes 12:11 within a context saturated with creation doctrine. First, Solomon tells his readers to “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth” (v. 1). Second, the mention of “the sun and the light, the moon and the stars” (v. 2) brings the Genesis creation account to mind.

The scenario of all heavenly luminaries and light itself being extinguished is a poetic description of the undoing of creation: *when not yet will have darkened the sun and the light and the moon and the stars* describes an unstoppable future period of complete darkness in which acts of God’s creative work will have been undone, the products of God’s creative activity on days one and four of creation (Gen 1:3–5, 14–19). Every important word in Ecclesiastes 12:2a appears in the narrative about these two days of creation.¹³

Third, Solomon alludes to God’s creation of Adam from dust and Adam’s return to dust when he dies as a consequence of his disobedience: “then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it” (v. 7; cf. Gen 2:7 and 3:19). Fourth, “whether it is good or evil” (אִם־טוֹב וְאִם־רָע, *im-tôb wə’im-rā’*, v. 14) echoes the “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2:9, עֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע, *wə’ēš hadda’at tôb wā rā’*) and reminds readers of the fact that God judged Adam because he had eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil contrary to His explicit command (Gen 2:16–17; 3:11, 17–19). Thus, in a context dealing with life, death, and even Scripture itself, God’s titles as Creator and Shepherd are juxtaposed. Pastors (shepherds of the flocks over which God has placed them) must reflect their “Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:1–4), Christ Himself (cf. John 10:11–16), who is also the Creator and ultimate author of Scripture.

Without giving full consideration to the doctrine of creation and its role in Christian life and faith, pastors severely limit their toolkit for proclaiming the gospel

¹¹ Jason Lisle, *Understanding Genesis: How to Analyze, Interpret, and Defend Scripture* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2015), 314.

¹² W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 843.

¹³ Knut Martin Heim, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 18, ed. David G. Firth (London: InterVarsity, 2019), 193.

and ministering to needy and hurting believers. Creation doctrine relates directly to most topics addressed in pastoral ministry. The remainder of this study will address the topics of Christ, community, counseling (with special attention to commitment, comfort, and creatureliness), consummation, and celestial residence—all occurring in Scripture together with references to creation doctrine.

Creation Doctrine and Christ

Through the prophet Isaiah God reveals the relationship He bore to the Messiah, His Servant (Isa 42:1–9).

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;
My chosen one *in whom* My soul is well-pleased.
I have put My Spirit upon Him;
He will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry out or raise *His voice*,
Nor make His voice heard in the street.
A crushed reed He will not break
And a faintly burning wick He will not extinguish;
He will bring forth justice in truth.
He will not be faint or crushed
Until He has established justice in the earth;
And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.
Thus says the God, Yahweh,
Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
Who spread out the earth and its offspring,
Who gives breath to the people on it
And spirit to those who walk in it,
“I am Yahweh, I have called You in righteousness;
I will also take hold of You by the hand and guard You,
And I will give You as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the nations,
To open blind eyes,
To bring out prisoners from the dungeon
And those who inhabit darkness from the prison.
I am Yahweh, that is My name;
I will not give My glory to another,
Nor My praise to graven images.
Behold, the former things have come to pass;
Now I declare new things;
Before they spring forth I cause you to hear *them.*”

Yahweh “created the heavens and stretched them out, . . . spread out the earth and its offspring, . . . gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk in it” (v. 5). The tie to creation doctrine cannot be ignored. The very same God who created the heavens, the earth, and human beings chose and upholds His Servant. The Creator is pleased with His Servant and put His Spirit upon Him (v. 1). He commissioned His

Servant, guarded Him, gave Him as a covenant to His people, and as a light to the nations (v. 6) “to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who inhabit darkness from the prison” (v. 7). This textual unit demonstrates that

God’s creative power in salvation is tied to His power in creation. The worship of God is tied to Him as the Creator. According to the book of Revelation, the God to be worshiped is the one who made the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them. The pattern for worship is God as Creator, and God as the new Creator of those who put their trust in Him.¹⁴

In the New Testament four witnesses appeal to Isaiah’s declaration of Messiah’s mission to bring salvation to the Jews and Gentiles alike: Simeon (Luke 2:32), Jesus (Luke 4:16–21 citing the equivalent prophecy from Isa 61:1–2), and Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:47). Jesus Christ Himself announced that He fulfills Isaiah’s prophecies. He provides salvation because He is fully God and participated in creation at the very beginning of all things (Col 1:16–20):

For in Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together...

Therefore,

... For in Him all the fullness of *God* was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross—through Him—whether things on earth or things in heaven.

The Son of God Himself entered the world in human flesh—true humanity united with true deity. God created Jesus’ humanity. Jesus, therefore, represents unfallen creation as the second Adam (cf. Rom 5:14–21; 1 Cor 15:45). Just as the original creation was perfect and sinless, the humanity of Jesus is also perfect and sinless. In His perfection Jesus Christ became the author of salvation. This is the message of Hebrews 2:9–15,

But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels—Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of One; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brothers, ... Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that

¹⁴ John MacArthur, “Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Must Be a Six-Day Creationist,” in *The Shepherd as Theologian*, ed. John MacArthur (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2017), 68.

is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Creation doctrine cannot be separated from biblical Christology or soteriology. All that Christ is and accomplishes relates back to creation doctrine. Pastors seeking to teach the Word of God and to apply it to the lives of their congregants cannot do so biblically without giving careful attention to creation doctrine. Pastoral ministry thrives on creation doctrine because it is enmeshed with the doctrine of Christ. Individual salvation and sanctification depend upon the truths derived from the early chapters of Genesis which form the foundation for the rest of Scripture.¹⁵ The pastor's ministerial tool kit without creation doctrine may be justifiably compared to a surgeon's tool kit without medicine, scalpel, and syringe.

To fully understand the deity of Christ, a person must believe God (indeed, the Son of God Himself) created all things exactly as recorded in Genesis 1–2. Apart from the deity of Christ there can be no incarnation at the miraculous conception of Jesus. If Jesus Christ is not the almighty, sovereign Creator of all things, He cannot be the Savior of anyone. More than this, if Genesis 1–2 cannot be taken as a fully accurate record of the six days of creation, it would be inconsistent and illogical to take the Gospels as a fully accurate record of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Turning Genesis 1–11 into myth turns the Gospels into myth. The textual connection stands out quite clearly in the opening words of the New Testament: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). The only other place in the Bible the phraseology “the book of the genealogy of” occurs is Genesis 5:1, “This is the book of the generations [or, genealogy] of Adam.” The very first verse of the New Testament presents Jesus as the second Adam. Pastoral ministry has no foundation in the person and work of Jesus Christ if either of these Scripture units falls into the realm of myth rather than historical narrative (cf. Rom 5:14–21).

Jesus compared His teachings to what Moses had written (like the creation account in Gen 1–2). He said, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” (John 5:46–47). Jesus issues this challenge to everyone. Believers cannot claim to believe what Jesus says if they reject what Moses wrote. In addition to Genesis 1–2, Moses wrote of creation in Psalm 90:1–3,

Lord, You have been our dwelling place from generation to generation.
Before the mountains were born
Or You brought forth the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.
You turn man back into dust
And say, “Return, O sons of men.”

¹⁵ Later discussion of the topics under “Creation and Counseling” will provide evidence of the relationship of creation doctrine to sanctification. See, also, Enns' points (2) and (5) in his summary of creation doctrine in the “Introduction” above.

The initial verses of this psalm allude to Genesis 1–3. Creation doctrine permeates its words. It is noteworthy that such references to the creation event focus heavily upon the doctrine concerning God Himself. Grogan makes this very point: “the psalmists often refer to Yahweh as creator, either explicitly or by implication. They certainly believed him to be creator of all. How could he be any less than this if he was the only God who existed? If sole deity does not imply creation of the whole cosmos, what can it mean?”¹⁶

In Acts 17:24–31 the apostle Paul presents the gospel concerning Christ by opening his discourse with creation doctrine. He begins by proclaiming “‘the one God’ (ὁ θεός) who created the universe and who is thus the ‘Lord’ (κύριος) of the universe.”¹⁷

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things; and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to inhabit all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,¹⁸ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His offspring.’ Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to suppose that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the craft and thought of man. Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now commanding men that everyone everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He determined, having furnished proof to all by raising Him from the dead.

Paul confronts and contradicts the viewpoint of his pagan hearers. The Creator is exclusively God. There is no other. Additionally, “he is not served by human effort; he knows no special people (like the Jews or the Greeks) since all were made by God; God purposes to draw humanity to himself.”¹⁹ Ultimately the divine purpose of the original creation is the worship of the Creator, the one true God.²⁰ Then the apostle

¹⁶ Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 246.

¹⁷ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 731.

¹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, 735, says, “the ‘boundaries of their lands’ are the political boundaries between the places where people live—whether cities, regions, provinces, or continents.” Schnabel not only relates Paul’s teaching to Gen 10, but also to Deut 32:8: “‘When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set up boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel.’ . . . the Greek term (κατοικία) denotes the place(s) where people live; . . . ὁρθοεσία is used in terms of political boundaries . . .” (735n1135). Paul’s sources go back to Moses (cf. discussion of John 5:46–47 above).

¹⁹ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, Holman New Testament Commentary 5, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 289.

²⁰ Gangel, *Acts*, 290. See also Schnabel, *Acts*, 731, “Since the one God created everything without exception, he ‘is’ (ὁπάρχων) the ‘Lord’ (κύριος) of the entire cosmos, of heaven and earth, of the world and everything in it.”

calls for his hearers to repent (v. 30) and to acknowledge that the only righteous judge of all humankind is the “Man whom He determined, having furnished proof to all by raising Him from the dead” (v. 31). Thus, creation doctrine leads to Christ and His resurrection, and the gospel of salvation.²¹

Creation Doctrine and Community

When Jonah disobeyed God and attempted to flee to Tarshish to avoid going to Nineveh, God got his attention by means of a great storm on the sea (Jonah 1:1–4). The ship’s sailors confronted Jonah and asked him five questions to obtain some explanation for their peril. Jonah responded, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear Yahweh, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (v. 9). Jonah “asserts that Yahweh is the true God of heaven who has control over all creation.”²² His declaration of faith in the Creator marked him as a member of the believing Hebrew community. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews indicates that all members of the community of faith hold to the same creation doctrine (Heb 11:1–3):

Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Israelite elders declared their corporate commitment to Yahweh by referring first to His act of creation (Neh 9:6), then His choice of Abram (vv. 7–8), and then the miraculous deliverance of His people out of Egypt (vv. 9–10). As Breneman observes, “The doctrine of creation is important because it emphasizes God’s sovereignty over all.”²³ The sovereign Creator is eminently trustworthy and worthy of all praise. Context reveals that this prayerful hymn of praise originated from the reading of the law in Nehemiah 8.

The prayer ... shows the influence on the people of the Scripture reading of the previous three weeks, since the Old Testament begins with a creation account. In fact, the entire prayer follows an outline based on the content of the early books of the Old Testament.²⁴

²¹ David E. Garland, *Acts*, Teach the Text Commentary Series, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 177, identifies the “Big Idea” of Paul’s address to the Areopagus council as follows: “As creator, God places a claim on all people. God’s purpose for humankind is for all to be in a worshipful relation with their creator, and he will hold all accountable for their willful ignorance and rejection.”

²² JoAnna M. Hoyt, *Amos, Jonah, & Micah*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary, ed. H. Wayne House and William D. Barrick (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 438. Hoyt adds, “Given the satirical tone that is used throughout the book, including the numerous elements of irony, it is likely that Jonah proclaims this message with gusto because, as wrong as he is in his actions, his theology is solid. All his actions are lessons in contradictions” (439).

²³ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New American Commentary 10, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 236.

²⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Nehemiah: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 101.

Here, then, is an example for pastoral ministry today. Believers respond to the reading and exposition of Scripture. As in the time of Nehemiah, public reading of the creation account in Genesis 1–2 can be the catalyst for corporate prayer and praise.

Creation Doctrine and Counseling

Biblical counseling must be Christ-centered and Bible-based. Wayne Mack explains the latter in the following way:

Christian counseling will be *conscientiously and comprehensively Bible-based*, deriving from the Bible its understanding of who man is, the nature of his main problems, why he has these problems, and how to resolve them. For counseling to be worthy of the name of Christ, the counselor must be conscientiously and comprehensively committed to the *sufficiency of Scripture* for understanding and resolving all of the nonphysical personal and interpersonal, sin-related difficulties of man.²⁵

When it comes to making counseling Bible-based, pastors and counselors must recognize “there is in the Bible no redemption, no social and personal life, apart from the creation.”²⁶ In other words, all biblical doctrine begins with the Bible’s teaching about creation and the Creator.

Romans 1:25 declares, “For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” As White explains, “To deny the Creator-creation relationship, which is exactly what Paul presents here, requires that one know what the relationship is before denying it.”²⁷ The apostle goes on to give examples of behavior (vv. 26–31) resulting from minds rejecting God’s truth. The antidote for such twisted behavior in rebellion against one’s Creator and His creation consists of a return to that truth as revealed in biblical creation doctrine.

Commitment

The first “by faith” the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews specified presents fellow believers as the opening example in the roll call of the faith: “By faith we” (Heb 11:3). What is the act of faith? “We understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.” The first example involves adherence to the doctrine of creation. No one but God and His angels were present at the creation of the universe and it “can’t be verified or reproduced in laboratories.”²⁸ Believing what no human saw or experienced provides the ultimate model of faith. We only learn about and understand

²⁵ Wayne A. Mack, “The Sufficiency of Scripture in Counseling,” in *The Master’s Perspective on Pastoral Ministry*, eds. Richard L. Mayhue and Robert L. Thomas, The Master’s Perspective Series 3 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 186 (emphasis original).

²⁶ Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1992), 33.

²⁷ James R. White, *The God Who Justifies* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2001), 162.

²⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Andreas J. Köstenberger (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021), 343.

the miracle of original creation from what God has revealed to us in His written Word. Scripture teaches that God simply spoke and what He intended came immediately into existence (cp. Pss 33:6 and 148:5).

Faith requires believers to commit themselves to their Creator. The apostle Peter writes, “Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God must entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing good” (1 Pet 4:19). As the only use of κτίστης (*ktistēs*, “Creator”) in the New Testament, “this is an affirmation of the unmatched power and gracious initiative of God, expressed in his creative work.”²⁹ Again, creation doctrine forms the foundation for faithful living for an even more faithful Creator—even in times of extreme suffering. Lack of commitment to creation doctrine as presented in the Scriptures will lead to a lack of commitment to the rest of Scripture. God has chosen to sanctify the believer by the washing of the Word of God (Eph 5:26–27). Eliminating creation doctrine as a major theme of Scripture weakens the sanctifying power of the Word. The writer of Hebrews associates personal commitment to God and to the household of God (the assembly of believers) to the sanctifying work of this spiritual washing (Heb 10:22–25):

Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Comfort

Now that we have mentioned suffering as something believers might experience (1 Pet 4:19 above), we find that creation doctrine provides the soothing salve of comfort. King David penned Psalm 139 as a praise-filled lament. Consider what David says in verses 13–18,

For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And intricately woven in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unshaped substance;
And in Your book all of them were written
The days that were formed *for me*,
When as yet there was not one of them.
How precious are Your thoughts to me, O God!

²⁹ Joel B. Green, *1 Peter*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 161.

How vast is the sum of them!
 If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
 When I awake, I am still with You.

David testifies to God's knowledge of both his outer life (v. 2a) and his inner life (v. 2b). He marvels at his Creator's wisdom in how He made him (v. 14). Through the roughest times of life with all the trials and troubles one might face, God never ceases to think about the one who worships Him (vv. 17–18).

The psalm takes the literary form of a lament. That does not thereby eliminate positive elements. Laments often end with the psalmist expressing trust and praise. Vroegop defines lament as "a prayer in pain that leads to trust."³⁰ He describes lament as a "step of faith to reach out to God. Lament invites us to turn our gaze from the rubble of life to the Redeemer of every hurt. It calls us to turn toward promise while still in pain."³¹ The resulting praise in Psalm 139 arises out of the character and actions of the Creator Himself, as Bullock explains:

Moreover, when we find ourselves in a place that seems to be devoid of God's presence, we discover, perhaps to our surprise, that God is *there* (139:7–12), and not only *there* but even guiding us by his right hand. When we find ourselves in the darkest places of our lives, when human logic would insist that we can't see God's way and God can't see us, we discover that darkness is no obstacle for God's providential care—darkness is like light to him. God's pursuit is more one of love than of judgment.³²

Some years ago we read Psalm 139:13–17 before our daughter entered surgery for breast cancer. The psalm enabled us to face the fear of cancer, surgery, and the potential outcomes. The Creator-God of all comfort gave comfort as He promises (2 Cor 1:3–5):

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ abound to us, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Our Creator never ignores His creation either corporately or individually. He truly cares.³³ Isaiah affirms this truth in connection with his assertion that Yahweh, the

³⁰ Mark Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 28. Pastors and counselors might find this insightful volume quite beneficial for initiating a Bible study of lament with counselees experiencing pain, grief, and suffering.

³¹ Vroegop, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*, 29.

³² C. Hassell Bullock, *Psalms 73–150, Teach the Text Commentary Series 2*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 509 (emphasis original).

³³ Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 16, ed. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 451–52, disagrees with taking this psalm so positively: "It is often read as a calm reflection on

Creator, never tires of providing new power and strength to the tired and weary (Isa 40:28–31):

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, Yahweh, the Creator of the ends of the earth,
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the weary,
And to *him who* lacks vigor He increases might.
Though youths grow weary and tired,
And choice young men stumble badly,
Yet those who hope in Yahweh
Will gain new power;
They will mount up *with* wings like eagles;
They will run and not get tired;
They will walk and not become weary.

Isaiah begins with creation doctrine (v. 28) in order to highlight the Creator's power and wisdom. Because God is Creator with these specific divine attributes, He can offer hope to the afflicted and weary.

The writers of Scripture consistently turn to creation doctrine for comfort arising out of faith in our Creator. As Peter concludes his first epistle, he offers believers this Spirit-led instruction: "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, CASTING ALL YOUR ANXIETY ON HIM, because He cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7). Who more fitting to give our cares and sufferings to than the sovereign Creator of the universe?

Creatureliness

As the creation of God, human beings are His creatures. Our creatureliness includes being created in our Creator's image (Gen 1:26–27). No one can come to terms with the reality of his or her existence, nature, or condition without understanding this creation truth. Today one of the key issues in human society involves human gender and sexuality. Only in the Scriptures can we find the objective truth regarding this particular issue. Burk, Closson, and Smothers provide an excellent manual dealing with gender, sexuality, and marriage that does just that—returning to God's truth beginning with creation itself.³⁴

God's omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence and how these awesome divine qualities elicit wonder and comfort from the composer. Such a reading simplifies the psalm and ignores the final stanza (vv. 19–24), which is an intense statement of hatred towards the psalmist's dangerous enemies and includes an appeal to God to realize that the psalmist is innocent. Moreover, the first three stanzas (vv. 1–6, 7–12, 13–18) themselves express ambivalence about God's pervasive knowledge, presence and power. In the light of its final stanza, the psalm is best considered a lament."

³⁴Denny Burk, David Closson, and Colin Smothers, *Male & Female He Created Them: A Study on Gender, Sexuality & Marriage* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2023). This book might be a valuable study guide for marital counseling and instructing singles in how to live a life of purity. On the topic of homosexuality see also the articles by Grisanti, Murphy, Klassen, and Riccardi in *The Master's Seminary Journal* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2017).

Jesus directs the Pharisees' attention to the biblical record of creation in Genesis 1–2 when answering their question about divorce (Matt 19:4–9):³⁵

And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, 'FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

By quoting from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 Jesus verifies that creation doctrine applies immediately and efficaciously to human sexuality and marriage. Since Jesus appeals to Genesis 1–2 for His teaching, pastors and counselors ought to do so as well. That requires those involved in such ministry to delve deeply into the early chapters of Genesis and to establish very firm convictions based upon a sound and detailed exegesis of those chapters. Pastors and counselors without such a foundation are not adequately prepared to minister to their congregations. Burk, Closson, and Smothers offer further clarification:

God's process in creating the world also seems to progress in glory from day one to day six, culminating in the creation of humanity as male and female in God's image, informing humanity's dignity, purpose, and worth. God's creation of the world in six days and rest on the seventh inform our week—this point is explicitly mentioned in Exodus 20:11. God's creation work in Genesis 1 and 2 not only gives us a kind of blueprint that God followed when creating the world but also a blueprint for our lives that we can follow.³⁶

The demands of biblical ministry do not allow pastors and counselors to take an agnostic approach to the literal six-day creation of the world and the historicity of the biblical account of the origins of the universe, the earth, and all its creatures, including the historicity of Adam and Eve as the originating head of the human race.

How can finite humans ever comprehend the perfections and immensity of their eternal God? The inability to fully understand who God is arises out of the immense difference existing between human beings and their Creator in nature and attributes

³⁵ The Gospels cite or allude to the early chapters of Genesis at least eighteen times: Matt 1:1 ("The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ," Gen 5:1); 13:35 ("SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD," Gen 1:1); 19:4–6 ("from the beginning," Gen 1:1, 27; 2:24); 23:35 ("the blood of righteous Abel," Gen 4:8); 24:21 ("since the beginning of the world," Gen 1:1), 37–39 ("just as the days of Noah were . . . in those days before the flood . . . until the day that Noah entered the ark," Gen 6:5–7:23); 25:34 ("from the foundation of the world," Gen 1:1); Mark 10:6–8 ("from the beginning of creation," see Matt 19:4–6); 13:19 ("since the beginning of the creation," see Matt 24:21); 16:15 ("all creation"); Luke 3:38 ("the son of Shem, the son of Noah, . . . the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God," Gen 1:26; 2:7; 4:25–26; 5:1–32); 11:50–51 ("since the foundation of the world," Gen 1:1; "the blood of Abel," see Matt 23:35); 17:26–27 (see Matt 24:37–39); John 1:1–5 ("In the beginning," see Matt 19:4–6); 1:1; "in the beginning"; "All things came into being through Him," Gen 1:1–31; "the Light shines in the darkness," Gen 1:3); 10 ("the world was made through Him," Gen 1:1); 8:44 ("from the beginning"); 17:5 ("before the world was," Gen 1:1); 24 ("before the foundation of the world," Gen 1:1). Jesus is the speaker in thirteen of these passages. He accepted the Genesis record as historically accurate and its events as real.

³⁶ Burk, Closson, and Smothers, *Male & Female He Created Them*, 18.

(cf. Isa 55:9). That cognitive distance existed even between the unfallen Adam and his Creator—it predated the fall. “Because man is finite and God is infinite, if man is to know God it must come about by God’s revelation of himself to man.”³⁷ God did reveal Himself—in biblical creation doctrine.

Creation Doctrine and Consummation

The prophet Isaiah emphatically proclaimed that Yahweh was Creator of the heavens and the earth (Isa 40:21–28, see discussion above under “Creation and Comfort”). He also prophesied of the future new heavens and new earth (65:17–25):

“For behold, I am creating a new heavens and a new earth;
And the former things will not be remembered or come upon the heart.
But be joyful and rejoice forever in what I create;
For behold, I create Jerusalem *for* rejoicing
And her people *for* joy.
I will also rejoice in Jerusalem and be joyful in My people;
And there will no longer be heard in her
The voice of weeping and the voice of crying.
No longer will there be in it an infant *who lives but a few* days,
Or an old man who does not fulfill his days;
For the youth will die at the age of one hundred,
And the one who does not reach the age of one hundred
Will be *thought* accursed.
They will build houses and inhabit *them*;
They will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They will not build and another inhabit;
They will not plant and another eat;
For as the lifetime of a tree, *so will be* the days of My people,
And My chosen ones will wear out the work of their hands.
They will not labor in vain,
Or bear *children* for terror;
For they are the seed of those blessed by Yahweh,
And their offspring with them.
And it will be that before they call, I will answer, and while they are still
speaking, I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the
ox; and dust will be the serpent’s food.³⁸
They will do no evil nor act corruptly in all My holy mountain,” says Yahweh.

³⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 153.

³⁸ John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series, eds. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 369, stresses the inclusion of this reference: “here, more clearly than in Genesis 3:14–15, the description concludes with a promise that the serpent’s action will not spoil things (v. 25b). When we set the passage in a broader biblical context, that reference to the serpent also draws our attention to the fact that long, full, ordinary earthly life is designed to be continued as, or succeeded by, or transformed into, eternal life.” Creation doctrine in Isaiah 65 includes the totality of Genesis 1–3.

Throughout Isaiah 40–55 the prophet integrates the theme of creation doctrine with God’s subsequent works in the prophet’s time and on into the distant prophetic future. God will make the old creation totally new at the end, “not only its sorrows but everything in the old order, dimmed and diminished as it was by the infection of human sin, will undergo this great renewal.”³⁹ Nearly every Christian believes that God will instantaneously create the new heavens and new earth, rather than cause it to slowly evolve over millions of years. That raises an interesting question: If God will create instantaneously the new heavens and new earth, why could He not have created the original heavens and earth in six literal days the way Genesis 1 describes?

It is therefore reasonable, especially in the light of the Old Testament witness to the creation, to hold that the Bible as a whole is concerned with the future of creation, particularly in view of the evidence ... from the Synoptic Gospels of Christ as Lord of creation.⁴⁰

Indeed,

Creation was not simply the making of the world out of nothing, not even that world continually upheld by the providence of God, but the making of a world destined for perfection, completedness. To be a creature means to be a being called and directed to a future perfection.⁴¹

Just as God had created the second Adam righteous like the unfallen first Adam, so God will create the second heavens and earth with the perfection of the first heavens and earth. The kingdom of God at that time will be that which had already been determined “from the foundation of the world” (Matt 25:34). Gary Smith provides insight regarding the significance of the new creation:

The efforts of mankind will never fully transform this world into a better place; it will require the miraculous work of God to bring about the real change that people long for. God’s work of salvation is a marvelous creative effort in which he recreates the world and his chosen people into a new, totally unimaginable, and glorious kingdom where God dwells among mankind. Although the sinfulness of mankind has not defiled the heavens (though sinful angels have), this sounds like a complete redoing of Gen 1:1 after the destruction of this present sinful world (cf. 34:4). This new world with its transformed people will be so completely different that God’s servants will not remember the “former world” (48:13) of sin, suffering, hunger, death, and destruction. In fact, this new world will be so different that even the more positive aspects of the former things will probably fade from memory.⁴²

³⁹ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 20, ed. Donald J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 450.

⁴⁰ Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 33–34.

⁴¹ Gunton, 45–46.

⁴² Gary Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, New American Commentary 15B, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 718.

Both Isaiah and John recorded the revelation God gave them concerning the characteristics of the future new heavens and new earth as the residence of resurrected and glorified believers. Isaiah mentions the joy experienced by the inhabitants of the new heavens and earth along with the absence of weeping (Isa 65:18–19). John is even more explicit: “He will WIPE AWAY EVERY TEAR FROM THEIR EYES; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain” (Rev 21:4).

The old creation will be transformed into the new creation. The Bible’s flow from Genesis to Revelation reveals significant events occurring and then repeating in inverse order (a chiasmic arrangement) book-ended by the two creation events:

Original Creation (Gen 1:1)
Satan’s Freedom (Gen 3:1)
Worldwide Judgment (Gen 6–8)
Babel/Babylon (Gen 10–11)
...⁴³
Babylon (Rev 17–18)
Worldwide Judgment (Rev 19)
Satan’s Confinement (Rev 20)
New Creation (Rev 21)

As a result, eschatology (the doctrine of last things) recapitulates protology (the doctrine of beginnings) in inverse order. If the beginnings in Genesis are but mere myth, then the prophetic announcements of future events must also consist of myth. Both must be true and trustworthy, or neither. That must apply equally to the hope of heaven as the believer’s future residence no matter what the relationship might be between our heavenly residence and the new heavens and new earth.

Creation Doctrine and Celestial Residence

More than just a parallel to Isaiah 65:17–25, Psalm 102:23–28 reveals the hope of an anonymous afflicted believer—a hope involving continued existence in the presence of God.

He has afflicted my strength in the way;
He has shortened my days.
I say, “O my God, do not take me away in the midst of my days,
Your years are from generation to *all* generations.
Of old You founded the earth,
And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
Even they will perish, but You will remain;
And all of them will wear out like a garment;
Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed.
But You are the same,

⁴³ Other parallel events might be cited to fill the chiasmic structure out more completely. The center of the chiasmic structure is Jesus Himself.

And Your years will not come to an end.
The children of Your slaves will dwell *securely*,
And their seed will be established before You.

The psalmist trusts the eternal Creator God to establish His people in His presence. Grogan observes the psalmist’s comparison of human transience with the way God will establish the godly “in his presence—eternally (v. 28).”⁴⁴ Starting with God as Creator allows the psalmist to conclude that He must be eternal, existing before creation. Since the Adamic sin-damaged creation will wear out and is subject to potential future non-existence, the Creator alone possesses the power and knowledge to change it all. Accepting the reality of both the original creation and the fall leads to faith in an unchanging Creator who will establish His new creation. The Creator will also populate the new creation with His servants whom He saves and preserves out of the old fallen creation.⁴⁵

Other psalms suggest believers enter into the presence of God after this life:

You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever. (Ps 16:11)

As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness;
I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake. (Ps 17:15)

The New Testament, however, removes all doubt. Jesus Himself explained that He has gone to prepare a place for His followers:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, *there* you may be also. (John 14:1–3)

What kind of place is Jesus preparing? Perhaps we have a hint in 2 Corinthians 5:1, “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Note the implication that the “building” is God’s work and that it will be “eternal in the heavens.”

⁴⁴ Grogan, *Psalms*, 172. In the theological section of this volume Grogan adds, “It is clear, however, in a small but significant number of psalms, that the ultimate destiny of the believing psalmist was in continued fellowship with God. He is convinced that the fellowship with God that he experienced during his lifetime would not be terminated by death but would go on and, indeed, in some way would be consummated (e.g., 17:15; 49:15; 73:24–26)” (423).

⁴⁵ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Psalms*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary 2, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2021), 221: “when this heaven and earth have been worn out and changed (102:26 [MT 102:27]), the seed of God’s servants will be established before him to praise him forever (102:18, 21–22 [MT 102:19, 22–23]).”

The context makes it clear that Paul refers to dying and leaving our mortal body (vv. 6–8):

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

The thought is quite consistent with what Paul penned in Philippians 1:21–24,

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know what I will choose. But I am hard-pressed between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better, yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

When we consider what the Scripture says about where Christ currently dwells, Revelation 4 with its description of the throne room of God in heaven comes to mind:

After these things I looked, and behold, a door *standing* open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like *the sound* of a trumpet speaking with me, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things.” Immediately I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting *was* like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and *there was* a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. Around the throne *were* twenty-four thrones, and upon those thrones *I saw* twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads. And out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And *there were* seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. And before the throne *there was something* like a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. And the first creature *was* like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature *was* like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within, and day and night they do not cease to say, “HOLY, HOLY, HOLY *is* THE LORD GOD, THE ALMIGHTY, WHO WAS AND WHO IS AND WHO IS TO COME.” And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.”

Creation doctrine once again anchors the text with the proclamation of the twenty-four elders (v. 11). As in Genesis 1:1 God is the focal point, the center of attention. Why? Because He created all things. That is heaven's theme. Believers who presently deny

creation doctrine or claim to be agnostic about it will hear it proclaimed emphatically and repeatedly in heaven. Pastoral ministry must give the theme equal emphasis when teaching about the believers' everlasting home in the presence of God.

Conclusion

Pastoral ministry without the integration of creation doctrine tends to reflect the worldview of secular humanists rather than the revelation provided by the almighty Creator in His inerrant Word. Creation doctrine as a biblical theme saturates biblical theology. Creation doctrine is the gate to many of the great doctrines and truths of Scripture. The doctrine of Christ stands firmly on the foundation of His Creatorship as one of the keys to understanding His deity. Creation doctrine identifies one's relationship to the community of believers. Biblical counseling encounters creation doctrine when guiding people through difficult situations characterizing this fallen world. Creation doctrine offers biblical counselors a tool for dealing with the believer's commitment to God, His Word, and His church. It also enters into the provision of comfort for believers afflicted with suffering and weariness. Counselors must delve deeply in creation doctrine to deal with those facing the conflicting views of worldly culture with regard to gender, sexuality, and marriage. Creation doctrine also impacts the world's and the believer's futures. Pastors and biblical counselors cannot ignore the early chapters of Genesis because the rest of Scripture and their Savior do not ignore those chapters. Truth, biblical inerrancy, and biblical integrity begin with Genesis 1–11.

PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT: THE BOOK OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

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Expository techniques of Old Testament narrative have been a matter of much discussion among expositors. Using Ezra-Nehemiah as a case study, this article implements the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic to interpret this narrational portion of Scripture, with the end goal of preparing a sermon. In the midst of its analysis, this study contends that Ezra-Nehemiah is a unified book and that it should be preached as such. The article ends with a sample sermon on Ezra-Nehemiah to demonstrate the fruit of careful exposition.

* * * * *

Introduction¹

The discussion concerning whether preaching Christ-centered sermons from OT narrative texts is viable and the preferred expository practice has intensified in evangelical circles in the past three decades.² A test case for this homiletic proposal is the OT book of Ezra-Nehemiah. There is no explicit direct Messianic reference in

¹ This article incorporates material first presented in the unpublished Keith Essex, “Preaching Christ from Ezra/Nehemiah?” ETS Far West Regional Meeting, Sun Valley, CA, April 20, 2012.

² Major representative works on “Christ-Centered” Preaching are Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007); Julius J. Kim, *Preaching the Whole Counsel of God: Design and Deliver Gospel-Centered Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); Tony Merida, *The Christ-Centered Expositor* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016); and Randal E. Pelton, *Preaching with Accuracy: Finding Christ-Centered Big Ideas for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014).

the book.³ Therefore, many expositions on Ezra-Nehemiah as a whole or the individual sections (Ezra or Nehemiah separately) treat the main characters in the book(s) as models of godly faith and practice and make applications from the actions of God, the people of Israel, and the nations described in the book(s) to the contemporary Christian audience. The principles of godliness seen in the main characters and the positive and negative actions of the peoples, the expositor then applied to his hearers as practices that Christians should emulate or avoid. NT imperatives and/or examples usually reinforced these principles. An example of this approach is found in Raymond Brown's exposition of Nehemiah.⁴ There are other examples of this homiletic model.⁵ A newer model of expositing Ezra-Nehemiah is to link the themes of the book(s) with the theological flow of the OT, looking forward to the Messiah and the fulfillment of God's promises to His people. This is the approach of Robert Fyall in his exposition of Ezra.⁶ This is an example of "Christ-centered" preaching.

This article seeks to evaluate these two homiletic practices currently employed by evangelical expositors of Ezra-Nehemiah. First, the text will be introduced hermeneutically because exposition must be based on a valid interpretation of the text. Second, we will then turn our attention to how to exposit the text for a contemporary audience. Third, an evaluation of works that will benefit the preacher will be presented. Finally, in an addendum, a sample exposition incorporating both homiletical models will be given as an example.

³ Gerard Van Groningen, *The Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 922, states concerning the book of Ezra, "It is noteworthy to realize that scholars have not located many, if any, direct references to the promises concerning the Messiah and the conscious expression of messianic promises or hopes." The same holds true in his comment on the book of Nehemiah (Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation*, 924–25).

⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998). Brown speaks of Nehemiah's example of leadership, "The fact that such a wide variety of gifts, expertise and achievement are crowded into the compass of one life is ample evidence of Nehemiah's qualities as one of Israel's most outstanding leaders. His leadership qualities are as necessary and relevant today as in the fifth century BC." (22)

⁵ Other examples of this homiletic are James Montgomery Boice, *Nehemiah: Learning to Lead* (Old Tappan, NJ: F. H. Revell, 1990); Wallace P. Benn, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther: Restoring the Church*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021); Dale Ralph Davis, *Ezra & Nehemiah: The Quest for Restoration* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2025); Derek W. H. Thomas, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2016); and Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976). Barber writes, "As I studied the book [Nehemiah] I learned, to my amazement, that God had anticipated the problems of those in middle-management." (12)

⁶ Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra & Haggai: Building for God*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010). He states, "The overarching genre of Ezra is narrative. As such it fits into the grand narrative of the Bible from creation to the new creation, and, along with Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles, more particularly into that recounting of Israel's history which especially from the post-exile perspective show us that God has not given up on his people or altered his purpose. As we will see at various points in the exposition, the story of these dark days is linked with the story of the exodus and looks forward to the Messiah." (20) Also see James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Christ-Centered Expositional Commentary: Exalting Jesus in Ezra and Nehemiah* (Nashville: B & H, 2014).

A Hermeneutical Foundation

An expositor must base his biblical exposition on a firm interpretive foundation. The following discussion will discuss and apply the literary-grammatical-historical hermeneutical base to the study of Ezra-Nehemiah.

The Text of Ezra-Nehemiah

It is generally acknowledged that “the Hebrew and Aramaic text of Ezra-Nehemiah has, by and large, been well transmitted with relatively few obscurities.”⁷ The Masoretic Text (MT) readings (the consonantal text with the Masoretic vowel pointings) are generally reflected in the fragments of Ezra from Qumran and in the Greek Septuagint translation (LXX) of Ezra-Nehemiah called “Esdras Beta,” showing the MT’s basic reliability. Another Greek text called “Esdras Alpha” (also known as “1 Esdras”), which was also used by Josephus, is now viewed as a later conflation of 2 Chronicles 35–36, parts of Ezra 1–10, Nehemiah 8:1–13a, and a non-canonical account of Zerubbabel in the court of Darius written in the late second or first century BC.⁸ Because the MT is as a rule understandable, the current approach avoids emendations but seeks to explain the text as written and even follows its verse and chapter divisions in exposition.⁹

The Composition of Ezra-Nehemiah

During the past generation, commentators have had a lively discussion as to whether Ezra-Nehemiah was originally written as one book or two separate books (Ezra and Nehemiah) that were later combined into one book.¹⁰ This exposition will

⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 70. I base the exposition of Ezra-Nehemiah on the consonantal Hebrew and Aramaic text represented in MT. The following textual facts are gleaned from Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 70–72.

⁸ First Esdras, in my view, is not a better reflection of the original text.

⁹ My approach is the same as that articulated by David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 10: “When there is not enough evidence to draw the solid conclusion that the text is corrupt, the best thing to do is to leave the MT, an ancient artifact, unaltered, and to explain it with minimal speculation.”

¹⁰ The one-book position is supported by W. Brian Aucker, “Ezra” & “Nehemiah,” in Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton, Jr., Jay Sklar, eds., *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 4:17–114, 115–237; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*; Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC 10 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993); Gregory Goswell, *EP Study Commentary: Ezra-Nehemiah* (Darlington, UK: EP Books, 2013); Geert W. Lorein, *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 12 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2024); Gary V. Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022); Mark A. Trontveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1992); and especially H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1992). Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, CC (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2010) and Edwin Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, EBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 4:563–771 argued for the two-book approach. F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) and Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979) were ambivalent.

be based upon the MT's recognition that Ezra-Nehemiah is a unified, independent composition.¹¹

First, the view that Ezra-Nehemiah is one unified book can be considered from two perspectives—the external and internal evidence. The external evidence delineates the following observations:

- The Masoretes (the transcribers of the Hebrew OT text [c. AD 500 on]) clearly regarded the work as one because they count Nehemiah 3:22 as the middle of the book and add their annotations for the whole at the end of Nehemiah.
- The earliest Hebrew manuscripts [c. AD 1010 on] did not divide the books.
- The LXX (the Greek translation of the OT [c. 125 BC¹²]) treated the book as one.
- To make sense of Josephus' enumeration of the OT books [c. AD 90], it must be assumed he counted Ezra-Nehemiah as one book.
- Melito, Bishop of Sardis [c. AD 175], quoted Jewish sources as referring to the whole book as "Ezra."
- The Talmud [c. AD 500] included the activities of Nehemiah in the book of Ezra.
- The medieval Jewish commentators considered Ezra-Nehemiah as one book.
- The first attestation of the division of Ezra and Nehemiah into two books was by Origen [c. AD 220–250], although he affirmed that the Jews considered it to be one book.
- Jerome (c. AD 400) divided the book in his Latin translation, the Vulgate, although he also affirmed that the Jews recognized it as one book and he entitled the books 1 and 2 Esdras.

Additionally, the internal evidence for the view that Ezra-Nehemiah is one book delineates the following observations, underscoring the thematic continuity between Ezra and Nehemiah:

- The "twentieth year" (Neh 1:1; Ezra 7:7)
- The destroyed walls of Jerusalem (Neh 1:3; Ezra 4:12, 23)
- The Book of the Law (Neh 8:1; Ezra 7:6, 10)
- "Ezra, the scribe," "Ezra, the priest" (Neh 8:1, 2; Ezra 7:1–10)
- Separation from foreigners (Neh 9:2; 10:29; 13:1–3; Ezra 9:1–10:44)
- Temple issues (Neh 10:33–40; 12:44–4; Ezra 1:1–3:13; 6:13–22; 7:15–20; 8:24–36)
- Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Neh 7:7; 12:1; Ezra 2:1–6:15)

¹¹ There is also discussion among scholars as to whether the biblical books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles were written by the same author. Although certainty on the authorship of the two books is difficult to reach, I assume the Masoretic tradition that testifies that they are two separate compositions. For evidence Ezra-Nehemiah were not by the same author, see Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, xxii–xxiii. For the opposing viewpoint, see Blenkinsopp, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 41–54.

¹² See Gregory R. Lanier and William A. Ross, *The Septuagint: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 56–57.

Analysis of the external evidence suggests that Ezra-Nehemiah was considered as one book from 200 BC to AD 200. The separation into two books began in the Christian tradition, being cemented into that tradition by Jerome's division in the Vulgate, the Latin translation used throughout the Middle Ages. The separation was adopted into Jewish texts toward the end of the Middle Ages. The question arises, then, as to whether two different books were merged into one from 400 to 200 BC, or whether the early tradition reflected the reality of one original book.

This, then, necessitates the need to consider the second view—that Ezra and Nehemiah might have originally been two different books. The arguments for this view have centered on internal evidence since there is no external evidence before about 200 BC. Thus, the internal evidence for the view that Ezra and Nehemiah are two books delineates the following observations:

- The Introduction to Nehemiah (Neh 1:1; cf. Amos 1:1; Eccl 1:1)
- The First-Person Material in Nehemiah
- The Repeated List of the First Returnees (Neh 7:6–73; cf. Ezra 2:1–70)
- Distinct Language (ex. “King of Persia” [11x], “the God of Israel” [13x] in Ezra, but not in Nehemiah)
- Distinct Ideology (religious concerns in Ezra; secular concerns in Nehemiah)

However, there are legitimate responses to these arguments that counter the two-book view. First, the introduction to Nehemiah is necessary to divide the first-person narrative of Nehemiah (Neh 1:1b–7:5 [73]) from the previous first-person material of Ezra (Ezra 7:27–8:34; 9:1–15). Second, the first-person material of both Nehemiah and Ezra is authentic autobiographical material incorporated by the author into his one book. Third, the repeating of historical material in an Old Testament book can be interpreted as “inclusion” in one book, not necessarily as the same list in two separate documents.¹³ Fourth, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah incorporated documents retaining their original style; thus, differences in language in the Nehemiah autobiographical material from other documentary material is to be expected. Fifth, Nehemiah 8:1–13:31 shares the same religious concerns begun in Ezra.

At the end of the day, every expositor must decide whether to approach Ezra and Nehemiah as one book or two. The external and internal evidence for the view that Ezra-Nehemiah is one book, along with the testimony of the Masoretic text, compels me to conclude that the unified composition of the book is the best view.

The Authorship and Date of Ezra-Nehemiah

Although the book comes to us anonymously, Jewish tradition accepts Ezra as the author of the original text. Of great significance is the fact that Ezra's and Nehemiah's written words are heard in the text, something unique in Old Testament historical narrative. The book was probably written during or just after the reign of

¹³ Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1998), xxvii, defines ‘inclusion(n)’ as “a special form of repetition marking structure in literary units by duplicating word, phrases, or whole clauses from the beginning of a poem or narrative at the end of a section to mark it as a completed whole.”

“Darius the Persian” (Neh 12:22), the last Persian king mentioned in the book. Darius II reigned from 423 to 404 BC. Thus, the book was written around 400 BC.

The Purpose of Ezra-Nehemiah

In addition to the “what” (a unified independent composition), “who” (Ezra according to Jewish tradition), and “when” (about 400 BC) of Ezra-Nehemiah, it is important for the expositor also to wrestle with the “why” of the book. Why was this text written? Or asked in another way, what was the purpose for which the book was originally composed? The determination of the purpose should emerge from an inductive study of the text, informed by the previous attempts of others. The purpose of the whole book will then guide the expositor as he expounds each literary unit of the text.

It is evident that the original audience of Ezra-Nehemiah was post-exilic Israel in Judah. The book was written for the instruction, not merely for the informing, of the Jews in Judah who lived after the events recorded in the text. Ezra-Nehemiah is clearly a historical narrative of what Yahweh (the LORD) had done in Israel’s recent past (c. 538–424 BC). Within the book itself, Nehemiah 9:6–37 gives an example of how the historical narrative, recorded in the Torah and the Former Prophets, was understood by the Ezra-taught Levites (Neh 8:13). Israel’s history was interpreted as a revelation of Yahweh’s faithfulness to the covenant He made with Abraham and a demonstration of Israel’s failure to reap the blessings of that Abrahamic Covenant because of their unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant.¹⁴ Ezra himself interpreted Israel’s post-exilic return to Judah as further evidence of Yahweh’s grace and loyalty to Abraham’s physical seed (Ezra 9:8–9) despite Israel’s past and present disobedience of their God. Post-exilic Israel, therefore, pledged their faithful obedience to the Mosaic Covenant (Neh 9:38–10:39); however, they proved to be as rebellious as their ancestors (13:4–31). Thus, only the godly like Nehemiah could anticipate future blessing when Yahweh finally “remembered” and fully fulfilled His covenant promises He had made to Abraham (13:14, 22, 31).

Therefore, Ezra-Nehemiah should be expounded assuming the following purpose statement: “The purpose of Ezra/Nehemiah was to demonstrate through historical narrative to the godly post-exilic Israelites that Yahweh had been as loyal to the Abrahamic Covenant in the restoration of Israel as He had previously been in Israel’s history, yet post-exilic Israel had been as disobedient to the Mosaic Covenant as the previous generations of Israel, thus the full blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant had not come in Israel’s immediate past but were still anticipated in the future.”

The Literary Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah

There are five distinct major literary units in Ezra-Nehemiah:

1. The Initial Return and Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)
2. The Return of Ezra and the Problem of Intermarriage (Ezra 7:1–10:44)

¹⁴ See William D. Barrick, “The Mosaic Covenant,” *TMSJ* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 223–24, for a brief discussion of the relationship between the blessings of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.

3. The Return of Nehemiah and the Building of the Wall (Neh 1:1–7:73)
4. The Renewal of the People, the City of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Dedication of the Wall (Neh 8:1–13:3)
5. The Failure of the People to Obey Their Renewed Commitment to the Law (Neh 13:4–31)¹⁵

Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 are arguably an “inclusion,” therefore the first three units are bound together as one division of the book, with the final two units being the last two divisions of the book respectively.¹⁶

The Historical Reliability of Ezra-Nehemiah

The Events Narrated

Because Ezra-Nehemiah is “God-breathed,” inerrant Scripture, all the historical facts it narrates are believed to be historically accurate.¹⁷ All the events recorded in the book are believed to have taken place exactly as the author has described them. Further, all the names listed are believed to correspond to actual individuals who lived and performed the actions attributed to them.¹⁸ The responsibility of the interpreter/expositor of the book is to apply the historical-grammatical hermeneutic to the biblical text so that he can ascertain its meaning; this will result in a historically accurate understanding.

The Chronology Stated

Many chronological statements referring historical events to the time of their occurrence are found in Ezra-Nehemiah.¹⁹ These are also believed to be accurate when properly interpreted. Two fixed dates are 538 BC for “the first year of Cyrus king of Persia” (Ezra 1:1) and 515 BC for “the third day of the month Adar; it was the sixth year of the reign of King Darius” (Ezra 6:15). This firmly anchors the beginning and closing events of Ezra 1:1–6:20. Also, “the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezra 4:24) can be confidently dated to 520 BC. However, no clear date is given for the return of the first Israelites (Ezra 1:5–2:70). Many commentators

¹⁵ See the discussion of “The Narrative Structure” in Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 54–58, 62–64. Smith identifies twenty-three literary units which result in five larger sections (Ezra 1–6, 7–10, Neh 1–7:72a, 7:72b–10, 11–13) for the complete book. These twenty-three units can guide the expositor in determining the textual units he will develop in his series of expositions on the book. Once these basic literary units are determined, a preacher can apply to exegesis the exposition guidance present in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 1981); Robert B. Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); and Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2017).

¹⁶ See also Aucker, “Ezra,” 19–20, who acknowledged his indebtedness to Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah*, SBLMS (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

¹⁷ See the excellent discussion, “Ezra-Nehemiah as History,” in Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 164–74.

¹⁸ Thus, I accept Ezra and Nehemiah as contemporaries in Jerusalem (Neh 8:9; 12:31–43).

¹⁹ For the major chronological issue concerning when Ezra’s return to Jerusalem is to be dated, see “A Question of Chronology: Ezra-Nehemiah or Nehemiah-Ezra?” in Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 146–58.

who accept the veracity of the biblical text argue, plausibly, that it would have taken 50,000 returnees at least one year after the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–4) to prepare for the journey of about nine hundred miles. But John Whitcomb has assumed that an undertaking of this magnitude would take two years of preparation.²⁰ Thus I have noted the timing of events from Ezra 1:5–4:5 with a “/” (i.e., 537/6 BC) in the accompanying chart and exposition to take note of this possible later date.

There are also differing opinions concerning “the seventh year of Artaxerxes” (Ezra 7:7–8), “the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes” (Neh 2:1), and “the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes” (Neh 13:6). Edwin Yamauchi explains, “The Israelite civil year began with the seventh month, Tishri, in the fall. Some scholars conclude from Nehemiah 1 and 2 that the Israelites in the postexilic period reverted to a fall-to-fall calendar.”²¹ This would change the dates for the computation of reign of Artaxerxes from the more usual spring-to-spring dates. Yamauchi’s solution, which I will follow, lists the more common dating first with the alternate date in the (), such as 458 (457) BC.²² Finally, “after some time” (Neh 13:6) cannot be dated with certainty, occurring in the later years of Artaxerxes, between 432 (431) to 424 BC. For the chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah, see Table 1.

Table 1 – The Chronology of Ezra-Nehemiah

| Year | Event(s) | Reference |
|--------------|---|------------------|
| 538 BC | The Decree of Cyrus | Ezra 1:1–4 |
| 537/6 BC | The Return under Sheshbazzar The Altar Built The Celebration of Tabernacles | Ezra 1:5–3:6 |
| 536/5 BC | The Laying of the Temple Foundation | Ezra 3:7–13 |
| 536/5–520 BC | The Work on the Temple Stopped | Ezra 4:1–5, 24 |
| 520 BC | The Work on the Temple Resumed | Ezra 5:1–6:13 |
| 515 BC | The Temple Completed The Celebration of Passover | Ezra 6:14–22 |
| 486 BC | An Accusation Concerning the Inhabitants of Judah | Ezra 4:6 |
| 464 BC (?) | A Letter of Accusation | Ezra 4:7 |

²⁰ John Whitcomb, “Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 426.

²¹ Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 4:572.

²² Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 4:572.

| | | |
|--|--|-------------------|
| 464 BC (?) or ca. *446(5) BC (?) | A Letter Concerning the Rebuilding of the Walls of Jerusalem | Ezra 4:8–23 |
| 458(7) BC | The Decree of Artaxerxes The Return of Ezra The Problem of Mixed Marriages | Ezra 7:1–10:16 |
| 457(6) BC | The Report Concerning Those with Foreign Wives | Ezra 10:17–44 |
| 446(5) BC | The Report to Nehemiah Concerning Jerusalem | Nehemiah 1:1–11 |
| 445(4) BC | The Decree of Artaxerxes The Return of Nehemiah The Rebuilding of the Wall The Repopulating of Jerusalem The Teaching of Ezra The Celebration of Tabernacles The Confession and Covenant of the People The Dedication of the Walls | Nehemiah 2:1–13:3 |
| 445(4)–433(2) BC | The First Governorship of Nehemiah | Nehemiah 5:14–15 |
| 430–423 BC (?) | The Second Governorship of Nehemiah | Nehemiah 13:4–31 |

A Hermeneutical Conclusion

Therefore, on the basis of this hermeneutical discussion, I propose that Ezra-Nehemiah should be interpreted and explicated as one book on the basis of its proposed purpose, “Yahweh had restored a remnant of Israel to Jerusalem and Judah from Babylon in faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant; however, post-exilic Israel had proved to be disloyal to Yahweh by her continued disobedience to the Mosaic Covenant.” Like the rest of the OT narrative, Ezra-Nehemiah emphasizes the great faithfulness of Yahweh and the great unfaithfulness of Israel.

Toward Homiletic Practice

The Preaching of Old Testament Narrative

There is much current discussion in both how to interpret and how to exposit OT narrative.²³ While there is an emerging consensus on the basic interpretive principles to be followed,²⁴ the exegetical conclusions are debated.²⁵ But even more highly debated is how to preach OT narrative. The basic issue is how an expositor moves from a text which is descriptive to a proclamation which is prescriptive in nature. Though there are some who aver that OT narrative should be preached in an inductive way, Brown, Fyall, Davis, and Hamilton agree in preaching the OT narrative deductively.²⁶ Since this is not a debated point in our representative expositors on Ezra-Nehemiah, we will not dwell on this issue. My approach as a preacher and teacher is to use induction in the interpretative process, but I exposit deductively.

The Homiletic of Biblical Principles

As we have also seen, many expositors of Ezra-Nehemiah see the present application of the book in either the principles of godly behavior and leadership modeled by the key human characters in the book or narrated events that give timeless principles of godly living. The NT also mines the OT for personal examples that instruct Christian hearers (Rom 4:1–25; Heb 11:1–40; Jas 5:11; 2 Pet 2:15–16; Rev 2:14), both positive and negative. Further, NT saints are exhorted to learn spiritual lessons from events recorded in OT narratives (1 Cor 10:1–13; Heb 3:12–4:11). Thus, if the character of God is the foremost emphasis, principles undergirding the salvation and sanctification of a NT believer can be found and proclaimed from OT narrative texts, including Ezra-Nehemiah.²⁷

The preacher of Ezra-Nehemiah needs to be aware that not all interpreters view Ezra and Nehemiah in a positive way, certainly not as “types” of Christ.²⁸ While Eskenazi asserts that the biblical author’s portrayal of Ezra is as the “self-effacing teacher of Torah” who “influences others by example, delegates responsibilities, works with committees, trains future leadership and then steps aside, leaving Torah and community to each other,” this is a contrast to the portrayal of Nehemiah.²⁹ She

²³ For a more detailed discussion, see Keith Essex, “Interpreting and Applying Old Testament Historical Narrative: A Survey of the Evangelical Landscape,” *TMSJ* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 3–17.

²⁴ For the basic interpretive principles for OT narrative, see D. Brent Sanday and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 69–112. For the principles and practice, see Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 29–90.

²⁵ As an example, while contemporary interpreters of OT narrative recognize the use of inclusion and chiasm in biblical texts, not all would agree with the interpretive conclusions reached by David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis to Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 158–61, concerning his chiasmic understanding of the literary form of Ezra-Nehemiah.

²⁶ Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching*, 112–21.

²⁷ See Bryan Murphy, “From Old Testament Text to Sermon,” *TMSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 141–50.

²⁸ Hamilton, *Exalting Jesus*, 238–40, draws typological correspondence between both Ezra and Nehemiah with Jesus.

²⁹ Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 144.

continues, “The narrator ... undermines Nehemiah’s self-glorification and undermines our trust. While Nehemiah repeatedly declares how uniquely beneficial he has been, the narrator casts doubt on these assertions by placing other information in strategic points, deflating Nehemiah’s claims to uniqueness and grandeur.”³⁰ Lubek, by comparing Ezra-Nehemiah with other OT texts, concludes that while these two men were successful in some things that were good, “they also failed in other, very important things, viz. in leading the people into lasting, constructive change. Further, they were “successful” in doing things that were not good, such as adding to God’s word, their legalism, their exclusionary policies, and in forcing people to break their marriage covenants.”³¹

“Christ-Centered” Preaching

The proponents of “Christ-centered” preaching assert that *every* sermon preached in a Christian church from any biblical text should reference Christ and His salvific work.³² Chapell presents the following description:

Christ-centered preaching (whether it is referred to as preaching the cross, the message of grace, the gospel, God’s redemption, or a host of similar terms) reflects Paul’s intention to preach nothing “except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Just as Paul’s preaching involved more than the message of the incarnation and atonement—and yet kept all subjects in proper relation to God’s redemption through Christ—so also *Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ.* The grace of God culminating in the person and work of Jesus unfolds in many dimensions throughout the pages of Scripture. The goal of the preacher is not to find novel ways of identifying Christ in every text (or naming Christ in every sermon) but to show how each text manifests God’s grace in order to prepare and enable his people to embrace the hope provided by Christ.³³

Chapell affirms that “texts that specifically mention Jesus or reveal him typologically are few relative to the thousands of passages that contain no direct reference to Christ.”³⁴ This is the case in Ezra-Nehemiah; there is no specific mention of Christ in the book, nor does the NT ever cite any character in this OT book as a “type” of Christ. However, Chapell continues, “When neither text nor type discloses the Savior’s work, a preacher must rely on *context* to develop the redemptive focus of a message.... In its context, every passage possesses one or more of four redemptive foci. The text may be:

³⁰ Eskenazi, *In an Age of Prose*, 151.

³¹ Ray Lubek, “Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ezra-Nehemiah: When Characters and Characterization Collide,” in Robert L. Cole & Paul J. Kissling, eds., *Text and Canon: Essays in Honor of John H. Sailhamer* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 167–88. Citation from 185–86.

³² See the excellent overview and critique of CCP in Richard L. Mayhue, “Christ-Centered Preaching: An Overview,” *TMSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 151–60.

³³ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 279.

³⁴ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 282.

- predictive of the work of Christ
- preparatory for the work of Christ
- reflective of the work of Christ and/or
- resultant of the work of Christ.”³⁵

According to Chapell, any message that highlights God’s nature that provides redemption and/or reflects human nature that requires redemption is to be considered “Christ-centered.”³⁶

Although Chapell labels his homiletic Christ-centered, Wu’s analysis of the distinction between “Christocentric” and “Christotelic” would lead me to view Chapell as the latter. According to Wu, “A Christocentric hermeneutic is built on the conviction that all God’s plans and purposes expressed in his word are *centered* on Jesus Christ His Son. As such, the Old Testament is ultimately *about Jesus* or more accurately is about revealing Jesus as the center and focal point of Christian faith.”³⁷ In contrast, “a Christotelic hermeneutic is built on the conviction that all the plans and purposes of God expressed in the Old Testament *find their goal, or end*, in Christ. As such the Old Testament ultimately *points to Jesus*, or more accurately, is about how the various strands of God’s plans are brought to fulfillment in Jesus.”³⁸ Hermeneutically, the expositor must ground his interpretation in a grammatical/historical exegesis of the text while homiletically applying a Christotelic implication in his sermon.³⁹

The NT is clear that the OT speaks of Christ. This is evident from such passages as Luke 24:27, John 5:39, Acts 8:35, 17:2–3, Hebrews 1:5–13. The “Christotelic” homiletic is a great reminder that the expositor can seek to discover where Christ is revealed in the OT or how the OT points to Christ, and then incorporate this truth into his exposition. However, as already noted, Ezra-Nehemiah has no direct revelation of the Messiah. It is possible to view Ezra in his priestly role and Nehemiah in his governing role as “types” of Christ based upon the post-exilic context of the book (cf. Hag 2:23; Zech 3:8; 6:11–15).⁴⁰ Also, such themes as exodus, law, and covenant point to the New Covenant, whose mediator is Christ.⁴¹ These three themes are found in Ezra-Nehemiah. The theme of God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant especially anticipates the Messiah who is the seed of Abraham (Gen 22:17b–18; 49:8–12; Luke 1:54–55, 68–75; Gal 3:6–18). Above all, as affirmed by Chapell, any message from Ezra-Nehemiah can point to the faithful God and many passages will speak of the failure of man.

³⁵ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 282.

³⁶ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 284.

³⁷ Daniel Y. Wu, “Old Testament Challenges: Christocentric or Christotelic Sermons?” in *Theology Is for Preaching: Biblical Foundations, Method, & Practice*, eds., Chase R. Kuhn & Paul Gimmond (Bellington, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 112.

³⁸ Wu, “Old Testament Challenges,” 112.

³⁹ See Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutic Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic” *TMSJ* 27, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 113–39.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation*, 920–25.

⁴¹ Note the insightful discussion in Andreas J. Kostenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 151–201.

Resources

An expositor must make use of the best resources available to accurately interpret the biblical text and communicate that meaning and the application of that meaning to his contemporary audience. Among these resources are three types of commentaries: those that interact with the text in its original language(s)—Hebrew and Aramaic for Ezra-Nehemiah; vernacular commentaries that seek to communicate accurately the meaning of the biblical text to a reader whose language is different from one(s) in the original—English for the majority of readers of this journal; expositional commentaries that are either based on sermons preached or are collections of delivered sermons.

The preacher is well served by many excellent volumes that interact with the text of Ezra-Nehemiah. Three outstanding exegetical commentaries are those by Williamson (moderately critical), Steinmann (Lutheran), and, best for the text-driven preacher, Smith (Baptist). Six commentaries give expositors insight mainly in explaining the meaning of the text with some hints as to contemporary implications. These are Blenkinsopp (moderately critical), Aucker (Covenantal), Breneman (Baptist), Kidner (Scottish Evangelical who was an excellent wordsmith), Lorein (Belgian Evangelical conversant with European scholarship), and, best in this category, Goswell (Australian Presbyterian).

Five expositional commentaries include Fyall and Brown (British Evangelicals), Thomas (Presbyterian), Davis (Presbyterian), the best biblical-principle representative, and Hamilton (Baptist), the best Christ-centered representative.⁴²

Conclusion

The expositions of Brown, Thomas, Davis and Fyall, and Hamilton all prioritize the character of God disclosed in the books. They emphasize the surpassing greatness of God and the weakness of his people. The same principles of godly living permeate the expositions. Though all could be considered “Christ-centered” by Chapell’s definition, the hearer does wish that Brown had pointed his audience to Christ explicitly like Fyall did in a few of his messages and Hamilton in all his. Therefore, homiletically, applying the text of Ezra-Nehemiah as principles of godliness to those who have responded to God’s grace in Jesus Christ and occasionally reminding the Christian of how the OT, including Ezra-Nehemiah, pointed to the Messiah are both legitimate ways to preach to text.

Addendum:

A New Beginning, but an Old Ending
(A Sample Sermon from Ezra-Nehemiah)

Introduction

In life we all have what I would call “ah-ha” moments. One such important moment in my life occurred when I learned to hit a baseball. For the first ten years of

⁴² See bibliographic details for each volume in footnote 10.

my life, I lived in England. I grew up playing cricket. In cricket, the ball is bowled and must bounce before it is hit with a fairly long, flat bat. When I came to the United States, desiring to be accepted by my peers, I decided that I would learn to play baseball and signed up for Little League. In baseball, the ball is not hit after it bounces; it is hit as it is thrown directly over home plate. Instead of a nice, broad bat, I was given a little “toothpick” with which to hit the ball. As much as I tried, I could not hit the baseball for the first few weeks that my team practiced. By my first game in Little League, I still had not really made contact with the ball. And sure enough, the first time at bat in my first Little League game, I struck out. By the second time I went up to bat, it was the top of the sixth (the last inning in Little League). The game was tied 2-2, runners were on second and third, and there were two outs. And I was facing the fastest pitcher in the league! Very quickly, he got two strikes on me. I stepped out of the batter’s box and went through all the batting procedures again; getting my hands in the right place, making sure that my head would be still and that my eyes would stay on the ball, and taking a practice swing. I then stepped back into the batter’s box. As the pitcher threw, I shut my eyes and tried to do everything the way I had been taught. And, much to my surprise, the bat hit the ball, and a line drive went over the third baseman’s head and down the left field line. Before I knew it, I was standing on second base with two runs batted in. That was an “ah-ha” moment for me. Everything came together on how I could hit a ball with a baseball bat. From then on in Little League, I did well with my hitting, as well as learning to slide, another “ah-ha” experience.

Several years ago, I had the same kind of an “ah-ha” moment when it came to the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. As we study the Bible, it is important to look at how a book begins and how it ends. It helps us to appreciate the purpose, structure, and movement of the book. For many years, like many of you, I studied Ezra and Nehemiah as two individual books. And yet, I had one of those “ah-ha” moments when I realized that Ezra-Nehemiah was one book. This means that God the Holy Spirit directed one man, at one time, to take the multitude of material that we now have in Ezra-Nehemiah (the “memoirs” of Ezra [Ezra 7:27–9:15] and of Nehemiah [Neh 1:1–73; 12:31–43; 13:1–31] in the first person, the decrees of Persian kings, the recorded letters, the different lists found throughout the book, and the “editorial links”) and bring them all together in a narrative that begins in Ezra 1 and proceeds all the way through Nehemiah 13.⁴³ The book was written as, and should be read and studied as, one literary whole, using what Dale Ralph Davis calls the *macroscope*!⁴⁴

It is interesting how Ezra 1 begins. “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he sent a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,” with verses 2–4 recording the oral

⁴³ See “The Sources of the Book” of Ezra-Nehemiah in Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, & Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2011), 350–51.

⁴⁴ Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2006), 77. He writes, “We can—and rightly—deal with individual passages within the [Old Testament narrative] books; nothing is wrong with microscopic Bible study. Details matter. But it helps to see the individual passage in light of the whole book. It helps to view the particular through the lens of the general. So we need ‘maps’ of whole books. We need to use our *macroscope* as well.”

proclamation of the decree of Cyrus that allowed the Israelite remnant in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. The book begins with the Lord as the first subject of the first major verb. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia with the result that Cyrus issued a proclamation based upon a written decree that had an impact throughout all his empire. Cyrus was the greatest, most powerful individual alive in 538 BC, yet the Lord directed his spirit to issue a decree which would set in motion the events that are narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah. The power of the Lord to execute His sovereign plan is emphasized here. Throughout the book we will see that God's sovereign power is directed for the well-being and good of His people.

But this book, which begins with such great promise, ends very differently when we arrive at the end of the book in Nehemiah 13:30–31. The final words of the writer record Nehemiah's statement, "Thus I purified them [the priests] from everything foreign and appointed duties for the priests and the Levites, each in his task, and I arranged for the supply of wood at appointed times for the first fruits. Remember me, O my God, for good." Ezra-Nehemiah ends on the note of God being invoked by Nehemiah to remember him. "Remember" has the idea here of a covenant remembrance (cf. Neh 1:8), that God would act toward Nehemiah according to the promises that He had made to His people, Israel. But notice it is not Israel as a whole, but the singular, "Remember me, O my God, for good." As the good hand of God through His sovereign power had been seen in Ezra-Nehemiah leading to a fulfillment of the prophetic word, Nehemiah anticipated the further fulfillment of prophecy in accordance with God's promises in the future. He asked God in covenant faithfulness to remember him and fulfill His promises to him in the future. The book ends on a note of Israel's failure and the fact that God's work of completing the fulfillment of the prophetic word would come in the future.

Therefore, we must look at the twenty-three chapters of Ezra-Nehemiah and ask, "What happened?" What happened in between the bright beginning with which the book started and the very somber words with which it concludes? The beginning and the end remind us that though this book emphasizes the sovereign faithfulness of God, it ends by showing the failure of God's people. The restoration of Israel showed the sovereign goodness of God in restoring His people through the godly leaders He gave to them. However, even though they responded initially to that godly leadership and Israel ultimately repented of their sin in response to God's Word, by the end of the book, they regressed to their old sinful ways. We see the movement in Ezra-Nehemiah from the evidence of the goodness of God to the failure of Israel to respond to their God, a picture that is very familiar as we go through the narratives of the Old Testament (see the summary of this Old Testament narrative pattern recorded in Neh 9:5b–37).⁴⁵

In Ezra-Nehemiah, there are three major divisions in the narrative:

⁴⁵ These insights are consistent with those articulated in Davis, *The Word became Fresh*, 87–90. He writes, "The last segment is something of a climax and one becomes mildly optimistic about life in Jerusalem after the covenant renewal of Nehemiah 10 and the celebrations of chapter 12. It is then that we meet our surprise: 13:4–31 is a bit of a 'downer' after all the careful, dogged, hard-work effort that has been poured into the Judah Restoration Project to date.... We would hope for something better after all the hardship, prayer, and sheer grinding toil Ezra and Nehemiah had poured into this community. This somewhat anti-climatic ending does not discount the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, but it does expose the flakiness of the professing people of God."

1. The Restoration of God's People to the Land of Judah (Ezra 1:1–Neh 7:73)
 - a. The First Return and the Rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)
 - b. The Second Return and the God-Appointed Teacher (Ezra 7:1–10:44)
 - c. The Third Return and the Rebuilding of the Wall of Jerusalem (Neh 1:1–7:73)
2. The Repentance of God's People and the Renewal of God's Work (Neh 8:1–13:3)
3. The Regression of God's People to their Old Ways (Neh 13:4–31)

The Restoration of God's People (Ezra 1:1–Nehemiah 7:73)

This first division, the first two-thirds of Ezra-Nehemiah, describes the restoration of God's people to the land of Judah (called "Yehud," a province of Persia that was part of a larger province "Beyond the River"). There were three very distinct movements at three different times under the leadership of three different individuals that led to the restoration of God's people. Each movement is narrated following the same pattern. Significantly, the last step in the pattern is missing in the second movement and only partially completed in the third movement. The five-fold pattern is as follows. In the first step, each movement begins with a decree that was issued outside of the land of Judah by a Persian king. In each case, this decree allowed people to return from the East to Judah with specific instructions as to what was to be accomplished. Second, there is a narrative of the journey of the people from the East to the land of Judah. In each case they specifically came to the city of Jerusalem. Third, there is a statement of initial success. At least a portion of what the people had returned to accomplish in Jerusalem began and the initial success is described. The fourth step is opposition. In each case, opposition arose to the people, and particularly the leadership of the people, calling into question the right to accomplish the task. The opposition usually stopped, at least for a time, the completion of the program determined by the decree of the Persian king. Finally, in the fifth step, there is a statement of the ultimate success whereby the stipulations of the decree are declared to have taken place. At the end of the narrative of the first and third movements, and at other points along this five-fold pattern, the writer specifically speaks of God's sovereignty that allowed these events to take place.

The Restoration of the Worship of God: Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 1:1–6:22)

The first movement is recorded in the first six chapters of Ezra. The events recorded took place in the years from 538 to 515 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel, aided by Jeshua. These chapters narrate the rebuilding of the temple, the building where Israel was to meet and worship God. With the rebuilding of the temple there was the restoration of the worship of God.

The first step of this first restoration began with the decree of Cyrus that is recorded in Ezra 1:1–4. This decree specified that the Israelites under the authority of the Persian king Cyrus could return from Babylon to go to the land of Judah, specifically to the city of Jerusalem, and rebuild the temple.

The second step in response to Cyrus' decree was the journey from Babylon to Judah and Jerusalem that was described in 1:5–2:70. Here is narrated the response to Cyrus' decree on the part of a remnant of Israelites and how they came up to Jerusalem to begin the process of rebuilding the temple. In Ezra 2:2, Zerubbabel is mentioned. In chapters 3–6 he, in concert with Jeshua the High Priest, led the returned Jews in the rebuilding of the temple.

The third step in this movement of restoration is recorded in Ezra 3:1–13. The returned exiles first build the altar so that the people could offer sacrifices to the Lord God of Israel again. Several months later, the actual restoration of the temple began with the laying of the foundation.

However, fourth, after this initial success, chapter 4 presents a narration of the opposition that arose from “the peoples of the land” against the returned Jews and their building projects in Jerusalem. The opponents were able to stop the building of the temple for a few years. Further, Ezra 4 shows that this opposition that began with this first wave of returnees to Jerusalem continued into the next generations, particularly during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

However, fifth, in Ezra 5 and 6 the events that led to the final success are recounted. The decree of Cyrus was found and repeated in chapter 6:2b–5. A further decree of Darius allowed the work to continue so that finally in 515 BC the temple was completed.

Along with this five-step pattern that led to the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the worship of God in Jerusalem, we have some very clear statements of God's sovereignty. First, in Ezra 1:1 it is clear that it was the Lord God who stirred the spirit of Cyrus to issue the decree. God's sovereignty is seen in this action of the Persian king to not only allow, but to command that the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem. Second, it was the Lord Himself who stirred up the Jews who responded to the decree to rebuild the temple (1:5). The Lord directed those He stirred to return to Judah and to Jerusalem so that the work on the temple might be completed. Third, in 5:5 the eye of Israel's God was on the elders of the Jews so that they did not have to stop rebuilding the temple as they previously had to according to 4:4–5, 24. Fourth, the conclusion of this first narrative movement states that the Lord Himself not only caused His people to rejoice, but He had also turned the heart of the king of Assyria, probably referring here to Darius, toward the Jews to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel (6:22). The text is very clear that God sovereignly had worked so that the temple had been completed. Finally, Ezra 6:14 implies that just as God had sovereignly moved in the rebuilding of the temple, He was also going to bring about all that He had commanded in the Old Testament which would take place in that temple.

The Restoration of the Teacher of God's Word: Renewing the People (Ezra 7:1–10:44)

The second movement of restoration is recorded in Ezra 7:1–10:44. The events narrated took place in 458–57 (457–56) BC, and the key leader was Ezra. Here is recorded the restoration of the teacher of God's Word. By means of Ezra and the company who returned with him, there was the determination to renew the people so

that the full worship of God as commanded in the Law would take place. Here are four of the steps concerning this restoration.

The first step that is recorded after the introduction to Ezra in 7:1–10 was the decree from King Artaxerxes to Ezra that is written verbatim in 7:12–26. Two points in particular Artaxerxes decreed as he encouraged Ezra and the other Jews who went with him. First, Ezra was to make sure that proper offerings (animal, grain, and wine) were presented at the temple (7:17). The reason for this is given in verse 23, so that there will be no wrath against the kingdom of the king, that is the Persian Empire, and the king's sons. Second, Ezra was also to teach the people the Law of Moses, along with the law of the king. He was to make sure that both were being followed precisely in Jerusalem and in Judah (7:25–26).

After the declaration given in the decree, the second step is narrated in 7:27–8:32. Here it is described how Ezra and the priests, Levites, and laity who returned with him came from Babylon to the land of Judah and to the city of Jerusalem.

Third, there was initial success as everything that the king had given for use in temple worship and the offerings that had been brought by the captives were all presented in Jerusalem (8:33–35). Further, the edicts themselves that would allow the decree to be put into effect were delivered to the governors of the province “Beyond the River” (8:36).

But in chapter 9:1–10:44, the fourth step was the opposition, now not from an outside force, but from the people themselves. Ezra could not teach and was not able to bring the temple practice in accordance with the Law because the people themselves were breaking the Law. He had to confront this opposition, this disobedience to the Law of Moses. Significantly, after Ezra's prayer and his example of contriteness and humility because of the sin that was taking place, the leaders in Jerusalem responded to Ezra's example and sought to deal with this problem. However, as Ezra 10:44 concludes, the final success of what Artaxerxes had decreed Ezra to accomplish, teaching the Law of Moses and providing for the total offering of all the sacrifices stipulated in that Law, is not noted. In fact, the narrative of Nehemiah 1:1–7:73 begins not with a note of success as far as the temple and the teaching of the Law were concerned, but rather with discouragement on the part of the people because the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates burned with fire.

The text does note once again in Ezra 7–10 God's sovereignty, particularly as far as the issuing of the decree and the journey of Ezra and his compatriots were concerned. In Ezra 7:6 and 27–28, there are statements that Ezra got the decree from King Artaxerxes because of the sovereign action of the Lord. Ezra 7:6 states, “The king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God was upon him.” In 7:27, Ezra himself stated, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.” Thus, Ezra continued, at the end of verse 28, “I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.” This theme of God sovereignly ruling and allowing Ezra to make a safe journey from Babylon back to Jerusalem is also declared in 7:9; Ezra was able to come and make good time in his return to Jerusalem because the “good hand of his God was upon him.” God's sovereign hand in the journey is also repeated in 8:18, 22–23, 31. But note that there is no statement of God's sovereignty

as far as any final success of Ezra in fulfilling the king's decree at the end of Ezra 10. This will be narrated in Nehemiah 8:1–13:3.

The Restoration of Security for God's Temple and People: Rebuilding the City Wall (Nehemiah 1:1–7:73)

The third movement of restoration is narrated in Nehemiah 1:1–7:73. The events in these seven chapters take place in a short time from 446–45 (445–44) BC. The leader was Nehemiah. The key activity was the rebuilding of the city wall. This provided the restoration of the security for God's people in Jerusalem and Judah, as well as protection for the temple.

In the first step, Nehemiah received a report that the work of Ezra had not met with final success so that the people were discouraged and the city was in great distress. The fear of Ezra that the Lord would punish the rebellious returned remnant (Ezra 9:14) came to pass in the opponents of Israel's response to Artaxerxes' decree that the building of the walls and the city cease (Ezra 4:21). The antagonists had not only stopped the work but also destroyed what had been accomplished through military action (Ezra 4:23). In response to this report, after praying to the Lord, Nehemiah, a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, brought a request that the king might allow him to remedy the situation. According to Nehemiah 2:8, Nehemiah asked Artaxerxes to grant him permission to go to Jerusalem that he might rebuild the gates of the fortress that guarded the temple, rebuild the wall of the city, and rebuild the governor's house. The verse states that the king granted this request; it is implied that Artaxerxes issued a further decree (cf. Ezra 4:21) that allowed Nehemiah to go back, rebuild the wall, and strengthen the defenses of the city.

Second, the journey of Nehemiah is related in 2:9–11. He returned from Susa in the east where he was with Artaxerxes and came to Jerusalem, a trip of over a thousand miles.

Third, Nehemiah had initial success in that he was able to challenge the Jews to join with him in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem (2:12–20). Yet even though the people were willing to follow Nehemiah's lead, already in verses 10 and 19–20, opposition arose against Nehemiah. This outside opposition continued as the wall was being built according to chapters 4 and 6.

Fourth, like Ezra, Nehemiah had to deal with internal opposition because once again the people were not obeying the spirit and the specifics of the Law (Neh 5). Therefore, Nehemiah had to call an assembly of all the workers, implying that work on the wall was stopped for a time.

Fifth, after a final round of outside opposition was successfully averted, there is the clear statement in 6:15 that the wall was completed on the 25th of the month Elul in fifty-two days. Thus, the decree to allow the rebuilding of the wall was successful.

Finally, in 7:1 not only was the wall rebuilt but the doors of the gates were also established so that the security of the city had been completed.

As with the statement of God's sovereignty in the previous two movements of restoration, there are statements of his sovereign power in this third movement of restoration as well. In 2:8, Nehemiah affirmed that Artaxerxes gave the orders that Nehemiah's request might be accomplished, and the decree was granted because the good hand of Nehemiah's God was upon him. Nehemiah also spoke to the people in

2:18 and he encouraged them to build as he gave testimony of how “the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king’s words which he had spoken to me.” Finally, when the final success of the building of the wall had taken place in 6:16, Nehemiah affirmed that the opponents recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of Israel’s God.

Thus, God’s sovereignty had allowed these three movements of restoration: including three separate decrees on the part of the Persian kings; three returns of the Israelites, first with Zerubbabel, second with Ezra, and third with Nehemiah. Three times God had allowed initial success to take place. Even though there was opposition, at least in the building of the temple and the rebuilding of the wall, final success came. With the establishment of the security of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 7, Nehemiah prepared for the repopulation of the city of Jerusalem and for the restoration of the full operation of the temple to take place in city.

The Repentance by God’s People (Nehemiah 8:1–13:3)

With the narration of the restoration of God’s people complete, the author now turns in the second major division of the book and describes the repentance by God’s people (Neh 8:1–13:3). This portion of the narrative is divided into two major sections.

First, in Nehemiah 8:1–10:39, the author describes the renewed commitment of God’s people. He recounts three different assemblies in these chapters and the consequences of what took place in a period of twenty-four days of Israel’s history. In Nehemiah 8:1–12, the foundation of the renewed commitment of God’s people to God occurred in response to the exposition of God’s Word as all the people heard Scripture taught. The people asked that Ezra read the Law to them. Ezra fulfilled the responsibilities that Artaxerxes had decreed to him (Ezra 7:25–26). He read and taught the people the meaning of the Scripture. Recognizing the meaning of God’s Word, the people then obediently applied it to their lives. Second, in 8:13–18, there was a further response of the people being specifically obedient to God’s Word concerning the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. Therefore, in Nehemiah 8, the Israelites understood the Law and were obedient to the Law. Third, in chapters 9 and 10 of Nehemiah, the people confessed their sins and promised to obey the Law in the future. The text states that the seed of Israel separated themselves from foreigners and stood and confessed not only their sins but the iniquities of their fathers as well (9:2). This confession was led by the Levites that recounted Israel’s history that they had heard from the Scripture with the recognition that God had been faithful, loyal to the Abrahamic Covenant. And yet Israel had dealt unfaithfully toward Yahweh and had acted very wickedly. They had not followed the Law that had been given at Sinai. Thus, there truly was a confession of the past sinfulness on the part of these restored Israelites. In chapter 10:1–28, the governor, priests, Levites, and leaders of the people all signed a document that pledged their faithfulness to respond to the Law of Moses. It is significant that this was a further written document just like the ones that had been previously recorded from the Persian kings (Ezra 4:17b–22; 6:2b–5, 6–12; 7:12–26), decrees that had been and were in process of being obeyed. In like manner, this was a written document brought forth by the leaders of Israel affirmed orally by all the people pledging their obedience to God.

Second, with the renewed commitment of God's people as the foundation, in Nehemiah 11:1–13:3 the completed restoration of God's people is described. The relocation of one out of ten Israelites to come and make their home in the now secured Jerusalem is recounted. There were other Jews who continued to live outside of the city. Thus, there were priests and Levites that were now present among the people both in the land and particularly in Jerusalem. And so, the temple became fully functional and the fulfillment of another portion of the decree that came from Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:17, 23 took place. The last part of Nehemiah 12 narrates in verse 27–30 the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem. In verses 35–47 two choirs came into the temple and, finally, the worship of God took place in the temple in accordance with the commands of David and Solomon. The second great division of the book therefore shows that the people of God who had been restored from exile were now the repentant people of God willing to respond in obedience to Scripture. They pledge to fulfill the Mosaic commandments, specifically committing themselves to the full worship of Yahweh by complete obedience to the Law in reference to the central sanctuary.

The Regression of God's People (Nehemiah 13:4–31)

However, the third movement of the book narrates the regression of God's people. According to Nehemiah 5:14, Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem for a period of twelve years, which constituted his first governorship. According to 13:6, after those twelve years, Nehemiah returned to the throne of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, and was gone for a while until he returned to the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. When he returned, he had to deal with the sins of God's people, specifically disobedience against what they had pledged in Nehemiah 10 to obey completely.

Five sins are listed in Nehemiah 13:4–31. First, the Jews allowed the desecration of the house of God (13:4–9). Even during Nehemiah's first governorship, the opponent, Tobiah was allowed to have a room in the temple. When Nehemiah returned and found this out, he threw Tobiah's household goods out of the temple and returned the utensils of the house of God with the offerings as should take place. What the Jews had allowed was in direct opposition to what they had said in 10:32–33 and 39.

But not only was there the desecration of the house of God; second, in 13:10–13 Israel's desertion for providing for the servants of God is noted. What they had pledged to do in chapter 10:37 and 38 to provide for the Levites, they did not follow through on. So, the Levites had to leave their service at the temple and go back to their fields and work for their provision. Again, Nehemiah confronted this and sought obedience once again to what the Israelites had pledged they would do.

Third, the defilement of the Sabbath by the Jews is narrated (13:15–22). In 10:31, they had pledged that they would keep the Sabbath; there would be no buying or selling either by them or by others. Yet when Nehemiah returned, the peoples of the land were being allowed to bring their goods to Jerusalem and sell them on the Sabbath. This is the third sin that Nehemiah had to confront.

Fourth, in verses 23–29, their departure from godly marriage is described. The Israelites had pledged in 10:30 that they would not intermarry with those who did not

worship the Lord. However, in the meantime, they had done so again. The priestly families had also participated in this sin of inter-marriage.

Fifth, even though in 10:31 they had pledged to provide wood and to bring fresh fruits to the temple, they had discontinued these practices, and Nehemiah had to take it upon himself to make sure there was the proper supply of wood and first fruits at the appointed times.

Thus, the book ends on a discouraging note with a narration of the sins of God's people. And yet in chapter 13, three times Nehemiah prayed to the Lord that God would remember him (13:14, 22, 31). Just as God had been faithful to the Abrahamic Covenant in the past, Nehemiah was convinced that God would be loyal and faithful by remembering that covenant in the future. And just as the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant came to those Israelites who would obey the Mosaic Covenant from the heart, something that Nehemiah's generation did not do, Nehemiah reminded God that he had been faithful, that he was, by God's grace, obeying the Covenant. Therefore, he asked that God bless him when the Covenant with Abraham was finally fulfilled in the future.

Conclusion

What does all this have to do with people today? What do these events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah from 538 to approximately 425 BC have to do with this contemporary generation?

First, we need to remember that God does not change. The same sovereign, faithful, merciful, compassionate, and just God revealed in Ezra-Nehemiah is the same God revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the New Testament. We too live in the same world created by this Triune God whose sovereign hand directs the affairs of our lives just as He did the events recorded in Ezra-Nehemiah.

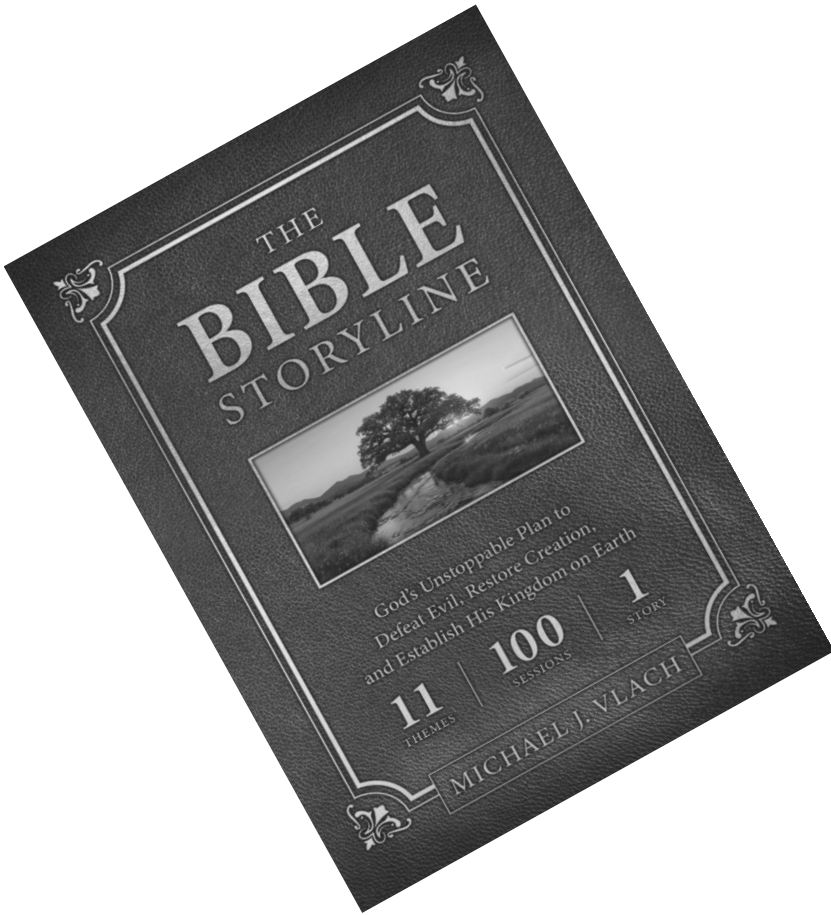
Second, if you are not Christian, if you have never submitted your will to this Triune God through faith in Jesus Christ, then Ezra-Nehemiah reminds you that your good intentions will only lead to failure. As with the rest of the Old Testament, this book chronicles Israel's ultimate failure to obey God. Israel shows us that human effort is not enough to overcome the sin that so easily besets us. Galatians 3:6-7 declares, "Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness. Therefore, know that it is those who are of faith who are the sons of Abraham." A relationship with the living God, like Nehemiah's, comes only through faith in Abraham's God. Today, that faith is to be directed to the Seed of Abraham, Christ (Gal 3:15-18), who through death redeemed us from the curse of Law (Gal 3:10-14). God's blessing comes through resting in what Christ has accomplished on the cross, not through our own efforts.

Third, Christians are reminded that the events that took place in Israel's history are an example to believers. Although Ezra-Nehemiah was not first and foremost written to the Church (it was written to post-exilic Israel), yet though written to Israel, it was also written for our benefit. Listen to the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Although Paul does not specifically mention the narrative found in Ezra-Nehemiah, rather the incidents that he records in the beginning of 1 Corinthians 10 come from the Pentateuch,

nevertheless, the principle that Christians are to learn from the history of Israel in the Old Testament is clearly articulated in 1 Corinthians 10:12, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." We need to be reminded from Israel's history that God, too, chose them; they, too, knew the goodness of God in salvation and restoration; they, too, heard the Word of God and were brought to repentance. Yet repeatedly they failed, even in this final historical narrative of the Old Testament revelation.

Our experience of God's goodness, like Israel, and our momentary repentance, also like Israel, do not guarantee our continuing obedience any more than it did for Israel in the Old Testament. In fact, the Old Testament narrative, including Ezra-Nehemiah, is a great warning to us that we, too, need endurance and perseverance in our Christian walk (cf. Heb 10:36). Our experience of God's goodness in salvation and momentary repentance based upon the Word of God does not guarantee our continuing obedience. We, as God's children, need to trust and obey God every day of our lives.

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**WE DECLARE ALL THEY INTENDED:
A PREAMBLE TO THE MASTER’S SEMINARY
STATEMENT ON HERMENEUTICS**

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Since its founding, The Master’s Seminary has focused on training pastors to exposit the Scriptures accurately. If the primary focus of The Master’s Seminary is biblical exposition, then the heart of the seminary must be hermeneutics. A proper hermeneutic is the foundation of biblical exposition; therefore, the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic has been at the center of the institution’s history. Hermeneutics drives the entire process of exposition as it establishes the principles of biblical interpretation. This article provides an introduction to The Master’s Seminary Statement on Hermeneutics included in this issue of The Master’s Seminary Journal, and explains the fundamental importance of practicing a proper hermeneutic to interpret Scripture accurately.

* * * * *

Introduction

This year has been a weighty one in divine providence. It marks the fortieth anniversary of The Master’s Seminary, a major milestone of the Lord’s faithfulness. What began as a humble school of ninety-five men is now a school of nearly nine hundred students with seven distance locations, training in local churches through alumni mentors, programs in Spanish, and theological content that reaches the entire world. Thousands of our alumni have gone out to serve in churches, seminaries, and training centers across the globe. No one could have ever imagined the way the Lord would use this institution to proclaim the truth and shepherd God’s flock. Nevertheless, in all this expansion, the seminary’s focus has been singular. We have no other purpose than to raise up men to expound the Word of God and lead His people, training men as if lives depend on it.

In addition to the fortieth year of the seminary, this year is also the year before the centennial of The Master's University, of which the seminary is a part. In the first year of the university, its president rallied against those who "deny the authority of God's Word, exalt reason and science above Revelation, deify the intellectual and dethrone the spiritual, making shipwreck of the faith and career of students and Pastors alike."¹ Nearly one hundred years later, the university remains steadfast to the cause of championing the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. From a forty-year anniversary to the eve of a centennial, this year is a major landmark of God's faithfulness in many ways.

And in this very year, the Lord also saw fit to call our founder, president, and chancellor, Dr. John MacArthur, home. Pastor John most certainly fought the good fight and finished the race (2 Tim 4:7), and the world cannot suppress the impact the Lord had through this man. Tributes have flowed from close friends and family to major news outlets like Fox News and even *The New York Times*. Christian leaders representing seminaries, humanitarian aid organizations, denominations, and universities have expressed their condolences. Government officials have written, business owners have communicated their respect, and those influential in the media have gone online to convey their recognition. Social media itself was dominated by hundreds of thousands of individuals expressing their appreciation and by millions of people watching and reminiscing about Pastor John's teaching. All of this occurred within the greater context of millions of people voicing their gratefulness for this faithful servant of Christ. The outpouring of such appreciation literally extends around the world. Even the government of Israel sent a letter in honor and gratitude to Dr. John MacArthur, a reflection of the undeniable and staggering impact of what the Lord has done through one expositor.

Indeed, what drove Dr. MacArthur's global ministry was not clever marketing, polished PR, or shrewd business tactics. It was not some kind of pragmatic leadership, demanding personality, or personal promotion. It was not chasing trends or fads. Rather, Pastor John had one mission: unleash God's truth one verse at a time. He was consumed with the careful study of God's Word, precision in theological belief and conviction, clarity in teaching and the pulpit, and conscientiousness to subject all things to the authority of Scripture. All of that has ensued due to what Dr. MacArthur maintained: the preacher is to take care of the depth of ministry and let God take care of its breadth. The Word of God is not bound (cf. 2 Tim 2:9), and the outcome of Pastor John's life demonstrates that.

Dr. MacArthur once said, "When the most faithful man dies, he leaves behind not just an institution but a movement." While Pastor John spoke of men like Calvin and Spurgeon, these words are equally applicable to himself. Upon reflection, one could say that Dr. MacArthur left behind a movement of exposition. From the millions of people who listen to Grace to You every month to thousands of expository preachers from The Master's Seminary, tens of thousands of graduates from The Master's University, and numerous global training centers through The Master's Academy International, there are saints around the world who are united by a love for faithful preaching. And to help drive this movement, Dr. MacArthur established an institution, The Master's Seminary, to train men to expound God's Word at the highest level. While

¹ https://www.masters.edu/master_tmu_news/from-one-president-to-another/.

Dr. MacArthur had said that exceptionally faithful men leave behind a movement and not just an institution, in God's providence, he left behind both.

On this fortieth anniversary of the seminary, the ninety-ninth year of the university, and the homegoing of its president and chancellor, this institution enters into a new season. The major question for this time is whether we will remain unwavering to what has been entrusted to us to hold it fast for the next generation. It is a crucial question. History has not been kind to Christian educational institutions, bearing the tales of their drift and downfall rather than recounting their stalwart faithfulness.² Such a reality becomes especially acute when an institution exists beyond one hundred years.

For any seminary that cares about biblical exposition, the answer to the question of drift is the matter of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics drives the entire process of exposition as it establishes the principles of biblical interpretation. If the primary focus of The Master's Seminary is biblical exposition, then the heart of the seminary must be hermeneutics.

The centrality of hermeneutics has been demonstrated through the institution's history. Whether it be its expression in the doctrinal statement of the school³ or tackling eschatology,⁴ exegetical issues,⁵ bible translation,⁶ biblical covenants,⁷ higher criticism,⁸ ethics,⁹ cessationism,¹⁰ open theism,¹¹ new Pauline perspective,¹²

² See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Harold Lindell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

³ "We teach the literal, grammatical, historical interpretation of Scripture, which affirms that, whereas there may be several applications of any given passage of Scripture, there is but one true interpretation. The meaning of Scripture is to be found as one diligently and consistently applies this interpretive method with the aid of the illumination of the Holy Spirit (John 7:17; 16:12–15; 1 Corinthians 2:7–15; 1 John 2:20)." See <https://tms.edu/doctrinal-statement/>.

⁴ Brad Klassen, "Premillennialism and Hermeneutics," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 29, no. 2 (2018): 127–55.

⁵ Irvin Busenitz, "The Sin unto Death," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 1, no. 1 (1990): 17–31; Robert L. Thomas, "Literary Genre and Hermeneutics of the Apocalypse," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 2, no. 1 (1991): 79–97; William Barrick, "Exegetical Fallacies: Common Interpretive Mistakes Every Student Must Avoid," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 19, no. 1 (2008): 15–27; Irvin Busenitz, "Lifting the Veil: Original Languages and the Pastor-Theologian," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 34, no. 1 (2023): 79–90.

⁶ Abner Chou, "'Unless Someone Guides Me?': Some Theological Underpinnings of Translation and the Need for an Expositor," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 35, no. 1 (2024): 5–26; Robert L. Thomas, "Dynamic Equivalence: A Method of Translation or a System of Hermeneutics?," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 1, no. 2 (1990): 149–75.

⁷ Irvin Busenitz, "Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; the Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (1999): 173–89.

⁸ Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutical Landscape," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 13–40.

⁹ Paul Felix, "The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 5, no. 2 (1994): 159–84; Larry Dean Pettegrew, "Theological Basis of Ethics," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 11, no. 2 (2000): 139–53.

¹⁰ Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of Noncessationism," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 29, no. 1 (2018): 45–67.

¹¹ Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of 'Open Theism,'" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 12, no. 2 (2001): 179–202.

¹² Robert L. Thomas, "Hermeneutics of the New Perspective on Paul," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 29, no. 1 (2018): 21–43.

new covenant theology,¹³ progressive covenantalism,¹⁴ and the Christocentric hermeneutic,¹⁵ scholarship at the seminary has constantly brought topics back to the matter of hermeneutics. From a curricular standpoint, hermeneutics is one of the first classes a TMS student takes, and advanced hermeneutics concludes the curriculum, a capstone of integrating all that one has learned for scriptural exposition. Hermeneutics has allowed the seminary to discern through “every wind of doctrine” (cf. Eph 4:14) even as it has anchored the seminary to its doctrine and purpose.

In light of the current season and the centrality of hermeneutics, the faculty of The Master’s Seminary came together to codify the institution’s hermeneutical convictions. Such a codification expresses the sum of our curriculum and the focus of our institution. For if hermeneutics is at the heart of this institution, then its articulation expresses the whole of our seminary. The conclusion of this article contains the faculty’s unified statement on hermeneutics, articulating department by department the very methodology that frames our entire approach to exposition. The statement declares who we are, where we have stood, and where we are resolved to still stand. Following the statement on hermeneutics is a signature page with the names and signatures of the TMS faculty members affirming the articles declared in the statement.

Those Who Read and Wrote: The Long Line of Expositors

Though the following affirmations and denials are certainly held by our founder and faculty throughout these years, we contend that these hermeneutical principles are not our own but that they are dictated to us by Scripture. From the very moment Scripture was written down, Moses himself commissioned the nature of exposition. Deuteronomy 31:12 records this exhortation:

הַקְהֵל אֶת־הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂיִם וְהַטָּף וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ וְיִרְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ לְעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

Assemble the people, the men and the women and little ones and the sojourner who is within your gates, so that they may hear and so that they may learn and fear Yahweh your God and be careful to do all the words of this law.

In giving this command, Moses first established the centrality of Scripture among the nation of Israel. Moses required that everyone, regardless of biological sex, age, or social status (הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂיִם וְהַטָּף וְגֵרְךָ), assemble and listen to God’s Word (הַקְהֵל אֶת־הָעָם). God’s Word should grab the attention of all of God’s people.

Having established the priority of God’s Word, Moses also established the nature of its exposition. As opposed to using the text to pontificate one’s opinions, logic, or preferences, Moses declared that true exposition is about having God’s people “hear”

¹³ William Barrick, “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 18, no. 2 (2007): 165–80.

¹⁴ Michael J. Vlach, “Have They Found a Better Way?: An Analysis of Gentry and Wellum’s Kingdom through Covenant,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 24, no. 1 (2013): 5–24.

¹⁵ Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 27, no. 2 (2016): 113–39.

the law (לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ). The goal of exposition is not to talk over the text but for people to encounter what God said through the words of the text. That the verb “hear” is used often with God’s Word (cf. Deut 6:4–5; Prov 1:8; Isa 1:10; Jer 2:4; Ezek 13:2; Gal 3:2; Heb 2:1) demonstrates that this is the fundamental task of biblical interpretation.

Deuteronomy 31 reveals that such interpretation leads to certain key applications of Scripture. First, God’s people are to “learn” the truths of divine revelation (לְמַדּוֹתֵי). Exposition is not about entertainment or scintillation (cf. 2 Tim 4:3) but about teaching, informing, and discipling (cf. 4:2). Second, Moses declared that the exposition of God’s Word is inherently theocentric, as internalizing divine truth leads one to “fear Yahweh your God” (וַיִּירָאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם). Finally, Moses proclaimed that hearing the law should make one “be careful to do all the words of this law” (לְעֲשׂוֹת) emphasizes that exposition must include both teaching and exhortation. That Moses stressed *carefulness* in doing the law (וְשָׁמְרוּ) expresses the urgency of exposition. That Moses stressed that God’s Word is the *law* (הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת) implies the unbending authority of Scripture. That Moses stressed *every word* of the law (אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרָי) reflects the exacting detail in true biblical exposition.

At the moment the law was given, Moses commanded that people engage the very text of God’s Word, learn it, fear God, and be careful to heed and obey every detail of Scripture. Biblical exposition is as old as the Bible itself.

This standard was upheld by the Old Testament prophets. Throughout Israel’s time in the land, they proclaimed the law (Isa 1:1–2; Jer 11:3; Ezek 16:1–59; Amos 4:6–13; Mic 3:1–12), brought people back to the commands of God’s Word (cf. Isa 1:10; 8:20; Jer 9:13), lauded the authority of Scripture (cf. Pss 1, 19, 119), affirmed every word of it (cf. Josh 1:8; 23:14), and trembled before the Scripture (cf. Isa 66:2). In Israel’s exile, Daniel maintained this standard, paying close attention to the very details of Scripture. Daniel even focused upon a single number in the book of Jeremiah (cf. 25:11) and pieced Scripture together to gain understanding about it (Dan 9:2).¹⁶

This standard of exposition continued into the post-exilic ministry of Ezra, who studied God’s Word, lived it, and then taught it (Ezra 7:10). The Levites in Nehemiah’s day also “read from the book, from the law of God, explaining and giving insight, and they provided understanding of the reading” (Neh 8:8).¹⁷ They maintained the original charge given by Moses. From the beginning of the Old Testament to the end, there have been a long line of expositors.

That line of expositors continued into the New Testament as the Lord Himself called all to heed what had been written (Matt 12:3; Mark 12:10, 26). In stark contrast to those in His day (Matt 4:5–7; 15:1–9), Christ rightly divided the Word of Truth.

¹⁶ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 241. Miller astutely comments, “As Daniel studied Jeremiah’s prophecy, he came to realize that the seventy-year captivity period was now drawing to a close. This passage illustrates that Daniel believed in the reality of predictive prophecy. Jeremiah had foretold the end of the exilic period seventy years in advance, and Daniel fully expected this prophecy to be fulfilled. Neither did Daniel “symbolize” these seventy years but took the prophecy literally. This is the safest procedure for believers today as they study prophecies of future events.”

¹⁷ Chou, “Unless Someone Guides Me?,” 24.

He paid attention to the details of Scripture, quoting individual phrases in context (21:16, 23, 42; 22:37, 39),¹⁸ highlighting individual words of a verse (22:45), and appealing even to a tense of a clause (22:31–32). Our Lord demonstrated that every jot and tittle of Scripture is authoritative (cf. 5:18). He equally commanded the breadth of Scripture, explaining how the flow of the Old Testament led to Him (Luke 24:27; John 5:46). The Lord Jesus is the ultimate expositor of Scripture.

Just as the Lord told His own that the Spirit would bring to remembrance all that He had told them (John 14:26), so the apostles upheld this biblical hermeneutic. They viewed Scripture as the final authority, analyzed its grammatical details (1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 4:13; 1 Pet 2:6–11; Heb 1:5–13), recognized its historicity (Heb 11:1–40; 2 Pet 3:5–6), and understood its historical setting (Gal 3:6–22). The apostles knew that there was a right way and a wrong way to handle God’s Word. They warned against twisting Scripture to one’s own destruction (2 Pet 3:16) and demanded that God’s people rightly divide the Word of Truth (2 Tim 2:15). The apostles had clarity about what true interpretation looked like. They had observed this pattern from all those before them and entrusted it to those who followed after them (cf. 2 Tim 1:3; 2:2; 3:10, 14–15). So continues a long line of expositors.

As They Read and Wrote: Standing in the Long Line of Expositors

The Master’s Seminary endeavors to stand in that long line. We do not have our own hermeneutical method. We do not desire to foist our own grid upon the text. Rather, we endeavor to surrender to the approach of Scripture itself. We want to be in continuity with the original line of expositors who have gone before us.

What does it take to stand with those who have gone before us? Here is how we would answer:

We read the Bible with the presuppositions of the biblical writers. We believe the Bible to be divine revelation (cf. Deut 29:29; Rom 3:2; Rev 1:1), inspired (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21), inerrant (John 17:17; Rev 19:2), clear (Deut 30:11–14; Rom 10:5–8), authoritative (2 Pet 1:19), and sufficient (2 Pet 1:3–5), just as the biblical writers did.¹⁹ We also have the same Bible as those who have gone before us, affirming the very canon of the law, the prophets, and the writings (Luke 24:44) as well as the New Testament Scriptures (2 Tim 1:13; 2 Pet 3:15; Jude 3).²⁰ Like those

¹⁸ See E. Earle Ellis, “How Jesus Interpreted His Bible,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (1989): 341–51.

¹⁹ Abner Chou, “Is Inerrancy Inert? Closing the Hermeneutical ‘Loophole’: Inerrancy and Intertextuality,” in *The Inerrant Word: Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 243.

²⁰ See Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 187–89. The Old Testament itself affirmed the law immediately (Josh 1:8) as well as the prophets (cf. Jer 26:18). The Old Testament interconnected and recognized its own canon immediately. Likewise, the New Testament also affirmed the Old Testament canon (Matt 5:17; 11:13; Luke 24:44). The biblical writers assumed a well-known canon for the Old Testament. The Lord Jesus set up for the New Testament as He recounted that the Spirit would make known His words to His own (John 14:26). This too was immediately recognized as a canonical corpus such that Paul would talk about “sound words” (2 Tim 1:13) and Jude labeled it “the faith” (Jude 3). See discussion in Robert W. Wall, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary

who have gone before us, we are all anchored to the same book and approach it with fear and trembling as the Lord demands (Isa 66:2).

We read the Bible the way the biblical writers demand. Just as the prophets and apostles appealed to the nature of Scripture to define meaning and interpretation (2 Tim 2:14–15; 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20–21), so we follow their logic.²¹ As the biblical writers revealed the confluent dual authorship of Scripture (Deut 18:18; 2 Pet 1:20–21), so we affirm the same and declare that the true meaning of Scripture is that of authorial intent. As the biblical writers grounded their own writings in earlier revelation (cf. Acts 15:15; Rom 2:24; 8:36; 1 Cor 15:3–4),²² so we affirm that the meaning of Scripture is singular, fixed, and authoritative.²³ There is no fuller meaning than what

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 231. Wall observed that Paul's statement is reminiscent of Moses establishing the Pentateuch. He concludes, "Certainly such an activity of canon-building agrees with the portrait of Paul found in the Pastoral Epistles and with the Pastorals' imperative to preserve and transmit the memory and message of Paul to others" (231).

²¹ In 2 Peter 1, the Apostle Peter links interpretation (ἐπιλύσεως) with inspiration (2 Pet 1:21). While some have argued that the idea of "interpretation" is exegesis proper (see Thomas R. Schreiner, *I, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003], 323), the usage of the term in the Greek translation of Genesis 40:8, suggests not an interpretative act after the revelation was written down but interpretation even in the act of giving revelation. The human author did not insert his own non-inspired perspective into written revelation. This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. Since the human author did not insert his personal interpretation or opinion into the text in composition, that proves without a doubt that there is no place for personal interpretation or opinion anywhere in the text, particularly after revelation has been written down. This sets up for why false teachers objectively twist the Scripture to their own destruction (2 Pet 3:16). The nature of inspiration and its superintendence guarantee the nature of interpretation. Likewise, in 2 Timothy 3:16, the nature of inspiration is directly tied to the Scripture's profitability "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (πρὸς διδασκαλίαν, πρὸς ἐλεγμὸν, πρὸς ἐπανόρθωσιν, πρὸς παιδείαν τὴν ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ). This leads Paul to exhort Timothy to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and teaching" (κήρυξον τὸν λόγον, ἐπίσθητι εὐκαιρῶς ἀκαιρῶς, ἐλεγξον, ἐπιτίμησον, παρακάλεσον, ἐν πάσῃ μακροθυμίᾳ καὶ διδασχῇ, 2 Tim 4:2). The repetition of terms like διδασχῇ (teaching) as well as ἐλέγγω (rebuke) tie the very nature of Scripture with the activity of preaching. In apostolic logic, exposition, hermeneutics, and preaching are all tied to the nature of Scripture.

²² See Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning Interpretation from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 123–25. Introductory formulae argue that the apostles did not change the meaning of the Scripture but rather appealed to the meaning of Scripture as authoritative and affirmed their conformity to previous revelation.

²³ Some have raised certain counter examples to argue against the notion of singular meaning (cf. Hos 11:1; Luke 24:27). Other works have discussed these issues at length. See G. K. Beale, "Questions of Authorial Intent, Epistemology, and Presuppositions and Their Bearing on the Study of The Old Testament in the New: A Rejoinder to Steve Moyses," *Irish Biblical Studies* 21 (1999): 152–80; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007); Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 121–55. However, the examples of Hosea 11:1 and Luke 24:27 can illustrate that these allegations are more than answerable. Concerning Hosea 11:1, some assert that Matthew misused Hosea 11:1 stating that the Lord's trek to Egypt (or from Egypt) was not in Hosea's original purview. Some scholars insist that Hosea's words strictly referred to the historical Exodus from Egypt. It is true that Hosea's original words do refer to the historical Exodus. But that does not deal with the question of Hosea's contextual intent in appealing to the historical Exodus. For that matter, if all Matthew wanted to do was make a parallel between the Exodus and Jesus' life, he could have used Exodus 4:22 which is the source text of Hosea 11:1. By contrast, Hosea 11:1 discusses the historical Exodus in the context of a future deliverance of God's people. In sum, because God did not give His people up the first time (Hos 11:1), that demands that He will never give them up and that a second Exodus will take place (11:11). With the birth of Jesus (Matt 2:13–15) so paralleling the birth of Moses (Exod 1:15–16), Matthew demonstrates that God is setting in motion that very eschatological deliverance.

the author intended even while there are various implications and applications (significance) that stem from what he wrote.²⁴ We affirm that as the biblical writers declared that men, under inspiration, spoke from God (2 Pet 1:20–21),²⁵ so the meaning of Scripture is conveyed by normal patterns of human language. We also affirm that as the biblical writers established that all Scripture is inspired (2 Tim 3:16), down to the jot and tittle (Matt 5:18), so every detail and word of Scripture is significant. As the biblical writers claimed that Scripture was written at various times (Heb 1:1), so we affirm that Scripture should be understood in light of the facts of history (cf. Mark 7:3–4).

Such observations demonstrate that a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic is not a formulation of human rationalism or modern invention. Rather, this hermeneutic corresponds to the very nature of the inspired and inerrant Word, which is the very way the biblical writers thought about their own hermeneutic (cf. 2 Pet 1:20–21). That said, the biblical writers also affirmed that such a hermeneutic could never be applied apart from the Holy Spirit. As the prophets and apostles declared that no one can truly grasp the Scripture apart from the Spirit's regenerating work

Matthew is using Hosea in context; in fact, that is why Matthew cited Hosea (as opposed to Exodus) to begin with. This becomes particularly clear when one observes that Hosea is the first prophet chronologically to make use of the second-Exodus motif and does so pervasively. He not only uses phrases distinctively referring to the Exodus (see *וַיִּזְכֹּר יְהוָה אֶת-יְהוֹשֻׁעַ* Hos 1:11 [Heb 2:2] and note that the combination of *עֲלָה* (with a human subject) and *יִזְכֹּר יְהוָה* exclusively refers to the Exodus, see Gen 50:24; Exod 1:10; 3:8). He also refers to Egypt extensively, thirteen times, far more than any other minor prophet. See G. K. Beale, "The Use of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15: One More Time," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55 (2012): 697–715.

Likewise, while some scholars appeal to Luke 24:27 to contend that Jesus reinterpreted the Scripture around Himself, the opposite is in fact true. Technically the verse simply states that Jesus brought forth the passages about Himself from all the Old Testament. Nothing from this implies that the Lord reinterpreted the text. In fact, the Lord declared, "O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25). In this quote, Christ demonstrated that the disciples' problem was not a deficiency in the meaning of the Old Testament (which Jesus needed to fill out). Actually, the Lord's rebuke indicates that the disciples should have understood this, which certain people at the time did discern (cf. Luke 2:28–38). The Lord contended that the issue was not with a deficiency of Old Testament meaning but rather in the heart of the readers. They were the "foolish ones and slow of heart to believe." Even more, the Lord maintained that the meaning of the Old Testament was "all that the prophets have spoken." Authorial intent, even the original intent of the inspired human author, is the meaning of the text.

²⁴ See Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 30–34. What is outlined here is what hermeneuticians may call the distinction between meaning and significance. See E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 8. Scripture itself recognizes this distinction in several ways. For one, from a legal perspective, the Bible has terminology which discusses the commandments or particular judgments of the law (specific meaning) versus the principles that frame a wide range of implications (significance). That James spoke of being not only a hearer of the law but also a doer also supports the notion of meaning and significance (Jas 1:23). The knowledge of Scripture as opposed to the wisdom it exudes to apply to every situation of life (cf. Prov 2:9) is also an apt way to frame the existence of meaning and significance. The Lord Jesus Himself discussed this when He spoke of what the law dictated with its true and full ramifications upon life (Matt 5:21–48).

²⁵ Schreiner puts it well, "We have strong biblical support here for what B. B. Warfield called *concursum*. Both human beings and God were fully involved in the process of inspiration. The personality and gifts of the human authors were not squelched or suppressed. We can detect their different literary styles even today. And yet the words they spoke do not cancel out the truth that they spoke the word of God. *Concursum* means that both God and human beings contributed to the prophetic word." See Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 324.

(Jer 31:31; Ezek 36:26; Eph 1:17–18), so we affirm that every true expositor relies upon the illuminating work of the Spirit.²⁶

We read the Bible the way the biblical writers read and wrote. The biblical writers not only authored Scripture under inspiration of the Spirit but were also readers of Scripture. They studied God's Word (Ps 111:2; Dan 9:2; Ezra 7:10) and meditated upon it day and night (Pss 1:2; 16:7; 63:6). They knew their Bible.²⁷ In so doing, the biblical writers demonstrated the very hermeneutic they demanded, and we follow in their footsteps. We engage in exegesis in the original languages because those are the languages used by the biblical writers. We believe translations are valid because the biblical writers themselves recognized their legitimacy, translating Scripture and using translations in their writings (Matt 1:23; Luke 3:3–5; Gal 4:27; Heb 1:5–13).²⁸ We understand Scripture in light of its historical background because the biblical writers themselves explained Scripture in light of the facts of history (1 Sam 9:9; Mark 7:3–4).²⁹ We also analyze Scripture in light of its literary context, both innertextual and inter-textual, because the biblical writers did the same (cf. Gal 3–4; Heb 3–4).³⁰ We are cognizant of the genres of the text because the biblical writers understood genres and figures of speech, such as parables (Matt 13:3), narratives (13:53), rhetorical statements (Gal 5:12), commands (Matt 12:5), and declarations (Gal 5:16). We examine the grammar of Scripture and the individual words of Scripture because the biblical writers studied the Scripture to such depth, emphasizing the ramifications of syntax (Matt 22:32; Gal 3:16) and individual terms (Rom 4:2–3; 4:6–7; Heb 3–4).³¹ Every step of the exegetical process, from historical

²⁶ Robert L. Thomas, "The Origin of Preunderstanding from Explanation to Obfuscation," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, ed. Robert L. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 52–53; Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 29.

²⁷ For a list of examples of the biblical writers' awareness of antecedent revelation see discussion in Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 50–54.

²⁸ See further discussion in Chou, "Unless Someone Guides Me?," 5–15; William A. Ross and Gregory R. Lanier, eds., *The Authority of the Septuagint: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2025), 3–5.

²⁹ See William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 245. "Aware that most of his readers will not understand the technical nature of the scribal charge nor its background in Jewish practice, Mark provides a simple definition of defilement and a thumbnail sketch of Pharisaic practice."

³⁰ See discussion in William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (Dallas: Word, 1998), 89–104. Lane rightly synthesizes that the author of Hebrews stitched Psalm 95 with Numbers 12 as well as an entire biblical theology of rest starting from the original Sabbath. "The continuation of the interpretation of Ps 95:7b–11 in 4:1–11 permits the writer to develop a theology of rest. The notion of rest within the Scriptures is one of expanding horizons. For Israel at Kadesh, and in the Hexateuch generally, the promise of rest connoted entrance into Canaan. But the review of Israel's failure to enter God's rest in Ps 95, long after the conquest and settlement of the land under Joshua, indicated that those events did not exhaust the divine intention. They represented only a type of the rest promised to the people of God."

³¹ See above note about the discussion on a singular term like "rest." Note also Paul's argumentation in Romans 4. In Romans 4:2–3, Paul discussed the issue of justification (ἐδικαιώθη) and then quoted from Genesis 15:6 to prove his point as the passage contains the same root with the term "righteousness" (ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην). Likewise, in Romans 4:6, Paul spoke about "blessedness" (τὸν μακαρισμὸν) of one forgiven and then quoted from Psalm 32:1 which has the same term (Μακάριοι ὃν ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι). Paul did this elsewhere. He summarized Psalm 68:18, which discussed Christ's ascension on high (Ἀναβὰς εἰς ὕψος ἠχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλώσιαν), and then discussed that ascension demands an incarnation (τὸ δὲ Ἀνέβη τι ἐστίν; Eph 4:9–10). Peter abided by the same pattern in

backgrounds to word studies, is grounded in the way the biblical writers themselves were excellent exegetes.

We read the Bible the way the biblical writers connected it together. We affirm that the biblical writers were not only excellent exegetes but also the original biblical theologians, weaving Scripture together by quotations, citations, and allusions.³² In connecting Scripture together, the biblical writers maintained and incorporated the import of earlier revelation into their writings and set up for implications to be developed by later revelation.³³ As a result, the New Testament does not reinterpret the Old Testament but builds upon it (as the apostles themselves claim),³⁴ and biblical

expounding the prophecy of Christ as the rejected stone (1 Pet 2:6–9). This also serves as a demonstration that Peter knew the way individual terms connected texts together in Scripture.

³² See above examples (e.g., nn. 30–31). See further discussion in Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 113; Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 55; Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 70–91. See also Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, reprint edition (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

³³ Several arguments support this assertion. First, the biblical writers viewed Scripture as God’s Word, which should not be tampered with (cf. Deut 4:2; Prov 30:5–6; Rev 22:18–19). Second, the apostles asserted the prophets knew what they were speaking about. Peter claimed that David foresaw Christ (Acts 2:30) and that the prophets knew the sufferings of Christ and the glories that followed (1 Pet 1:11). Paul likewise asserted that whatever was written in the Old Testament was written for the instruction of those to come (Rom 15:4) and that the Old Testament anticipated the gospel and Christ (Gal 3:8). Third, the biblical writers claimed to uphold the authorial intent of prior revelation, as indicated by their introductory formulae (see fn. 22). Fourth, the biblical writers also cite the Scripture without explanation, assuming that the original idea is the default idea without any modification (cf. Matt 12:3–7; 1 Cor 2:16; 1 Pet 2:6–8). Fifth, without debate, the biblical writers overwhelmingly used Scripture contextually. Cf. Ellis, “How Jesus Interpreted His Bible,” 350. Sixth, the limited counter-examples to this can be answered and illustrate the rule both in that the supposed exceptions are limited and in that the answers to these exceptions show a very intimate understanding of prior context (cf. fn. 23). Finally, unlike the contemporaries of the time, the prophets and apostles had a remarkably consistent hermeneutical approach where they interpreted (and even often applied) the same text the same way. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Use of Explicit Old Testament Quotations in Qumran Literature and in the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies* 7 (1961): 21.

³⁴ See previous note. Further common counterexamples to this include the Rock in the wilderness (cf. 1 Cor 10:4), the use of the potter concerning Judas (cf. Matt 27:6–10), as well as the use of Amos in the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:15–17). Concerning the Rock, it is of note that throughout the Old Testament the term “Rock” is a title for God, specifically the angel of Yahweh, which was bestowed to Him in conjunction with His provision of water through a rock (cf. Exod 14:19; 23:20–23; Deut 32:4; Isa 28:16; Zech 3:9). Given this association, it is more than reasonable for Paul to assert that the “Rock” followed and provided for Israel in the wilderness and that Rock is Christ. Concerning Matthew’s use of the potter and Zechariah, Matthew appealed to Zechariah’s own use of Jeremiah to show that the potter was a symbol of God’s sovereign judgment of exile. Zechariah, using prophetic drama, himself appealed to this to demonstrate that while Israel had come out of certain trappings of exile, continued exile awaited them because of their rejection of Messiah. Matthew appealed to the fulfillment of that very idea when Judas betrayed the Lord. Concerning the use of Amos in the Jerusalem council, it is of note that Peter did not merely say “prophet” (singular) but “prophets” (plural), as well as that these passages agree (as opposed to were fulfilled) with what the apostle declared (τούτω συμφωνοῦσιν οἱ λόγοι τῶν προφητῶν καθὼς γέγραπται, Acts 15:15). To any who argue that Peter mistranslated the text, Peter’s own claim was that he aggregated multiple passages together. The aggregation of texts points out God’s eschatological agenda to include Gentiles. To any who argue that Peter misunderstood or misapplied the text, Peter only claimed that these texts agreed with what he said (as opposed to arguing for a fulfillment). There is no question that God intends to incorporate and show kindness upon the Gentiles, so what the Jerusalem Council proposed was not out of line with God’s character or purpose. See W. Edward Glenny, “The

prophecy is not reimagined but further detailed by later revelation.³⁵ Such consistent connectivity of Scripture formulates themes that reveal God's truth progressively, unveil His glorious plan, and serve as a basis for all theology.³⁶ As the biblical writers intended their writings to connect with other passages, so we also read Scripture as a unified whole. We do not read their writings in isolation nor do we fabricate our own connections.³⁷ Rather, we follow the connections the prophets and apostles formulated, grasping the richness of context they established for their writings and tracing the ramifications of what was revealed.

We read from the Bible the theology the biblical writers instilled. Some believe that while certain parts of Scripture are theological, other parts (like narratives, parables, or laws and proverbs) lack theological content. But that is not the way the biblical writers thought of Scripture. They declared that all Scripture is profitable (2 Tim 3:16) and instructive for every generation (Pss 22:30; 102:18; Rom 15:4). They understood that narratives are not neutral (2 Kgs 17:7–21), parables have theological points (Matt 13:10–23), and laws and proverbs are theology enacted (Deut 4:6–8).³⁸

Septuagint and Apostolic Hermeneutics: Amos 9 in Acts 15," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 22, no. 1 (2012): 1–25. What the New Testament asserted about the Old was in perfect complement to what the Old had established.

³⁵ In Acts, the Lord did not modify the prophecies and promises made to Israel but only said that the disciples were not to know the timing (Acts 1:6–7). Likewise, Christ had already affirmed many of the eschatological tribulation prophecies to the nation in His Olivette Discourse (see Matt 24–25). Paul affirmed details, including that the antichrist would sit in the temple per Daniel's own prophecy (2 Thess 2:4; cf. Dan 9:27; Matt 24:15). The book of Revelation also affirms eschatological prophecies of Joel (cf. Rev 8:8–13), Isaiah (Rev 6:15–16), Daniel (Rev 13–14), as well as Ezekiel and Zechariah (Rev 19–20). These prophecies are affirmed as distinctive events and are depicted as happening in the future as Revelation declares ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα (Rev 1:19; and see explicit demarcation in Rev 4:1 δειξῶ σοι ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα). Cf. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 54.

³⁶ Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*, 113; House, *Old Testament Theology*, 55; James M. Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 46.

³⁷ On the one hand, a danger in exegesis is having atomistic exegesis and to deal with every text as if it were an island. See D. A. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But," in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 189–202; Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 35, 129. Severing a text from its layers of context would be a mistake as the biblical writers themselves incorporated previous revelation into their own writings. This has given rise to modernistic and higher critical interpretation. On the other hand, an equal danger is license to fabricating any kind of connection possible. This can be seen in typology, where there is the classic question of whether one can see types beyond what the Bible stipulates. Even the question is deceiving. Does the question concern going beyond what the Bible explicitly labels as a type or going beyond what the Bible establishes as a type? Concerning the former, a typological relationship can exist without using the word "type." Concerning the latter, to argue that one can make types beyond what the Bible writer intended is fabricating connections not found in Scripture and makes the reader a new author. See Richard Joseph Ounsworth, *Joshua Typology in the New Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); James M. Hamilton, *Typology-Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022), 18–19; Aubrey Sequeira and Samuel C. Emadi, "Biblical-Theological Exegesis and the Nature of Typology," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (2017): 11–34; Hamilton, *Typology-Understanding the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns*, 18–19. The biblical writers themselves establish typological relationships as they inter-textually link passages together. Typology, like all connections in Scripture, is a function of their intent.

³⁸ See John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1995), 94–97; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 111–42.

The biblical writers viewed all of Scripture as theological, and we uphold their perspective. Just as the biblical writers expressed theology propositionally (cf. John 1:1–5; Eph 2:1–10; Col 1:15–20), so we define doctrine based upon those declarations. Just as the biblical writers point out that certain texts presume the truths of earlier revelation (cf. 1 Cor 8:5–6), so we also recognize that texts can reflect systematic theology.³⁹ Just as the biblical writers discerned that certain passages have theological consequences (Gen 22:12; cf. Rom 8:32), so we too recognize that texts can entail certain theological truths.⁴⁰ And just as the biblical writers did theology as they used and revealed Scripture (e.g., Rom 3:10–18; 4:3; 11:26; cf. Gen 15:6; Ps 14:1–3; Isa 59:20),⁴¹ so our theology also comes from closely reading the Scripture they wrote. The biblical authors, who under inspiration imparted theology into the text, showed how to discern theology from the text. So we follow that precise method of seeing how exegesis drives theology.

³⁹ In the specific example of 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, Paul assumed the reality of the *Shema* both intertextually (as the passage evokes Deut 6:4) and conceptually. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 373. Numerous other examples of such assumption exist. John 1:29 and the statement that Jesus is the Lamb of God, assumes a theology framework of understanding the sacrificial system and penal substitutionary atonement. An ethical theology from the law is assumed when assessing the actions of characters in biblical narrative. See Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 11, 166–70. In that way, biblical inter-textuality reminds and reflects that scriptural passages are often assuming previous revelation and its respective theology for a variety of purposes. Such presuppositions are inherent and necessary for the logic and point of the passage to work. Systematics in that way articulates timeless and universal truths either conveyed in the propositions of Scripture or carried forward by the presuppositions of texts as well. The theological consequence of certain texts is expressed by the connections or inter-textuality of Scripture and is found in the study of biblical theology (see above). Together, biblical and systematic theology (tracing the connections, propositions, and presuppositions of the biblical writers) demonstrate the theological intent of every text and aid to distill those theological assertions.

⁴⁰ See above discussion about the way the biblical writers did biblical theology. As passage compounds upon passage, these chains of texts outline the ramifications of earlier revelation upon the entire canon. Within this progression of biblical theology, the categories of systematic theology are also in operation and disclosure. See Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 71–73; Rikk E. Watts, “How Do You Read? God’s Faithful Character as the Primary Lens for the New Testament’s Use of Israel’s Scriptures,” in *From Creation to New Creation: Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Daniel Gurtner and Benjamin L. Gladd (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), 199–222.

⁴¹ Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 71–72. True theology can only come from divine revelation as true wisdom alone comes from God (Job 28:12–28). General revelation, by definition, reveals only certain ideas about God; namely, His eternal power and divinity (ἄδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης; Rom 1:20; cf. Ps 19:1). Such theological information is only sufficient to condemn and leave man without excuse but not to save or to have a relationship with this God (Rom 1:20). Such theology is not distinctively Christian theology then. Thus, to have legitimate and definite theology, one must have special revelation (cf. Ps 19:7–14). See John MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of Scripture,” in *The Inerrant Word: Biblical, Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspectives*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 27. Out of all special revelation, Scripture stands as its most definitive peak. After all, the Lord Jesus performed many acts, but only certain ones are recorded in Scripture (John 21:25), of which every word is inspired and profitable for every generation (2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21). Scripture serves as the foundation of the church as it is the very work of the prophets and apostles (cf. Eph 2:20). See A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 153. Valid theology for the church then is designed by God to come from Scripture alone, and the biblical writers themselves reinforce this by their very model of using Scripture to derive theology. Confessions, like any commentary or teacher, serve as helpful articulations and full expressions of what is densely present in Scripture, but they are neither an interpretative framework nor a peer of God’s Word.

We read the Bible the way the biblical writers exhorted and counseled. In writing Scripture, the prophets and apostles intended not only to inform the saints but also to sanctify them (Ps 19:7–14; John 17:17) and equip them for ministry (Eph 4:11–12). Just as the biblical writers defined the nature and practice of ministry in their inspired writings (1 Cor 14:26–33; 1 Tim 3:14–15; Titus 2:1–10), so we too uphold Scripture as the standard for true ministry. Just as the biblical writers counseled and disciplined the saints from Scripture alone (Isa 8:19–20; John 17:17; 1 Cor 2:13; Col 3:16; 2 Pet 1:3),⁴² so also we maintain that only Scripture is sufficient for life and godliness. Just as the biblical writers addressed particular areas of life such as science (Gen 1; Ps 104), politics (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17), work (Eph 6:5–9; Col 3:22–25), jurisprudence (Deut 19:15–21; Prov 18:13–17), or economics (Deut 24:6–13; 2 Thess 3:10), so also we define those areas in our lives. And just as the biblical writers understood that Scripture is divine truth and wisdom (Pss 19:7; 119:98; Prov 8:12–36; 1 Cor 2:14–16), so we also seek to have all Scripture shape every part of our existence to please Christ (cf. Col 1:10; 2 Cor 10:3–5).⁴³ The biblical writers understood that God's people were not just to be hearers but also doers of the Word (Jas 1:22), and we handle the Word unto that very purpose.

We preach the Bible with all that the biblical writers intended. We have observed that as the biblical authors wrote, so they read, and as the biblical authors read, so they preached, and as they preached, so they summoned us to imitate them as they imitated Christ. What then does it mean to be an expositor of Scripture? What is demanded is nothing short of possessing the biblical writers' presuppositions,

⁴² John 17 itself establishes that sanctification is achieved through God's Word. Such an axiom is lived out by the biblical writers. Isaiah himself testified that the law and testimony were the resources God's people needed for counsel. Likewise, Paul affirmed that the wisdom of man cannot discern the things of God. Only the Word of Christ dwelling within the believer can affect true transformation and change (cf. Col 3:16). Scriptural writers both eliminate sources other than Scripture for the believer's sanctification and enforce the Word as the mechanism by which one is transformed. For this reason, Peter declared that God had given everything for life and godliness (τὰ πρὸς ζωὴν καὶ εὐσέβειαν, and not just faith and practice, cf. 2 Pet 1:3) through the full knowledge of God (διὰ τῆς ἐπιγνώσεως τοῦ καλέσαντος ἡμᾶς ἰδίᾳ δόξῃ καὶ ἀρετῇ). The articular noun ἐπιγνώσις refers not to the subjective activity of knowing God but rather to the objective content about God, which is found in divine revelation. Cf. Eph 4:13, and see Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 255.

⁴³ Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 680–81. That Scripture shapes the entire life, even the life and operation of an entire nation, is seen in Deut 4:6: "You shall keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" Proverbs 2:9 also declares that divine wisdom allows one to "understand righteousness and justice and equity—every good track." The language of Scripture being a light to one's path (Ps 119:105) demonstrates that the Bible is not merely for spiritual aspects of life but its entirety. That is illustrated in the days of Solomon where the king not only spoke about what are considered purely theological matters but "he spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish" (1 Kgs 4:33). As God created the world, so divine wisdom contains the world. See Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 147–50. That reflects Scripture's eternal nature and that by it one grows in respect to salvation (1 Pet 1:22–2:3). That is also why Scripture is more sure than even supernatural signs (Luke 16:29–31). Scripture is not merely information but the means of God's grace (Acts 20:32) which is able to free the soul (John 8:32), cut through the soul (Heb 4:12), and to aid one to persevere to the end (Acts 20:32b; 2 Pet 1:19b). Given its power, the intent of Scripture then is to shape and secure not just an aspect of one's life but all of it.

approaching the text the way they demanded, reading the way they read, connecting Scripture the way they connected it, distilling the theology that they instilled in their writing, and applying the Word according to their intent. Only then have we truly taken on the mantle of ministry left by those who have gone before us (Deut 31:9–13; Ezra 7:10; Neh 8:8; 2 Tim 2:2; 4:2). Only then have we become expositors, rightly handling the Word of Truth in all that the biblical writers intended, demanded, and modeled. So we wholeheartedly confess:

WE AFFIRM that expositional preaching is demanded by the nature of Scripture and is the culmination of the exegetical process, conveying God’s intended message in its inspired and inerrant details, historical and literary context, theological depth and consistency, and intrinsic implications and applications.⁴⁴ We further affirm that the only type of preaching which sufficiently conveys the divine revelation and its proper application to life is that which faithfully expounds the text of Scripture as the Word of God.⁴⁵

That is what the expositors of old have stood for, and that is where The Master’s Seminary has stood, stands at present, and is committed to stand for the sake of Christ and His church in days to come. And that is what the following statement articulates as our accountability.

We are in a season when the need for the exposition of God’s Word is greater than ever, and we invite those who desire to join the ranks of the expositors of old to join with us. May it be that we preach the Word in season and out of season so that the people of God would be fed, so that the church would continue to be the pillar and grounds of the truth, and so that the God of the Word would be exalted as we unleash His truth one verse at a time.

⁴⁴ Neh 8:5–8; Acts 5:20; 20:27; 2 Tim 2:15; 4:1–2.

⁴⁵ Taken from “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” Article XXV.

THE MASTER’S SEMINARY STATEMENT ON HERMENEUTICS¹

The Master’s Seminary Faculty

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Articles I–X: Concerning Scripture
Articles XI–XVII: Concerning Hermeneutics
Articles XVIII–XX: Concerning Historical Backgrounds and Biblical Languages
Articles XXI–XXIV: Concerning Exegesis
Articles XXV–XXIX: Concerning Biblical Theology
Articles XXX–XXXIII: Concerning Systematic and Historical Theology
Article XXXIV: Concerning Pastoral Ministry and Counseling
Article XXXV: Concerning Exposition

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CONCERNING SCRIPTURE

ARTICLE I: THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that Scripture, the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, is God’s sole written revelation to man.²

WE DENY that Scripture is merely a witness to revelation, becomes revelation only when encountered, or depends on the responses of men for its validity.³

¹ Portions of this document are taken or adapted from the Chicago Statements on biblical inerrancy and biblical hermeneutics. Sentences marked “taken from” are quotations, with, on rare occasion, minor modifications. Sentences marked “adapted from” maintain much of the original wording, but with certain words exchanged or added for greater precision and clarity of expression. See “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21, no. 4 (Dec 1978): 289–96; and “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 4 (Dec 1982): 397–401.

² 1 Cor 2:7–14; 2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:20–21.

³ Adapted from “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” Article III.

ARTICLE II: THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that Scripture is objective, propositional revelation, and that it, in its whole and in every word, is inspired by God in the text that the prophets and the apostles wrote, that is, in the original autographs.⁴

WE DENY that inspiration can be limited to human insight or heightened states of consciousness, or that it pertains merely to the general ideas of Scripture.⁵

ARTICLE III: THE DUAL AUTHORSHIP AND SINGLE MEANING OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that God revealed Himself in Scripture through a process of dual authorship, wherein the Holy Spirit superintended the human authors such that their own writing perfectly conveyed God's Word to man—without error in the whole or in part.⁶ We affirm that the biblical writers, being so moved by God, intended and revealed theological truth in all that they wrote, writing to instruct both immediate and subsequent audiences.⁷ We also affirm that all that they recorded is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.⁸ We further affirm that this harmonious intent between the divine and the human authors is the single meaning of the biblical text.

WE DENY the legitimacy of any methodology that reduces Scripture to a merely human book, thereby rejecting it as supernatural revelation of divine truth. We deny that God, in causing these writers to use the very words He chose, overrode their personalities, literary styles, or manners of speaking.⁹ We also deny that human language is so limited by our finitude that it is unable to express adequately divine revelation.¹⁰

Though we affirm that the biblical authors did not always understand the full significance of their writings,¹¹ we deny that any biblical author was ignorant of the meaning of his writing. We deny that God intended a deeper meaning (i.e., *sensus plenior*) than what He superintended the human author to convey. We further deny that the intended meaning of any text changed as further revelation was given.

ARTICLE IV: THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that Scripture in its original autographs was free from affirming anything untrue or contrary to fact.¹²

⁴ 2 Tim 3:16.

⁵ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article VII.

⁶ 2 Pet 1:21; see Eccl 12:9–11.

⁷ Pss 22:30–31; 102:18; Rom 15:4; 1 Pet 1:12.

⁸ 2 Tim 3:16.

⁹ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article VIII.

¹⁰ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article IV.

¹¹ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XVIII. See 1 Pet 1:10–11.

¹² Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XI.

WE DENY that Scripture's infallibility and inerrancy are limited to spiritual or religious themes.¹³ We further deny that inerrancy is negated by biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and rounded numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of paraphrased citations.¹⁴

ARTICLE V: THE CLARITY AND SIMPLICITY OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that because God revealed Himself in Scripture through human language, the meaning of all Scripture is accessible to those who are regenerated and illumined by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ We further affirm that a believer is not dependent on the expertise of biblical teachers and scholars to understand the Scripture.¹⁶

WE DENY that the meaning of Scripture is simplistic or that the meaning of each passage is equally easy to discern as that of another.¹⁷ We further deny that a believer should ignore the fruits of study by pastors and teachers who are given by God for the church's edification.¹⁸

ARTICLE VI: THE AUTHORITY AND SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that because Scripture alone is both infallible and inerrant, it is also the sufficient and final authority for all life and godliness, including all human intellectual endeavors and concepts.¹⁹ We affirm that while Scripture does not address or contribute knowledge to all matters of human knowledge or experience, it nonetheless enables and guides those pursuits.

WE DENY that any human tradition or experience is equal to Scripture.²⁰

ARTICLE VII: THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments are the complete written record of God's revelation that He intended to give to His people, and to which they are accountable. We further affirm that each of these books is canonical because each book was written by a prophet or an apostle.²¹

¹³ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XII. Cf. Isa 55:11; 2 Tim 3:16–17; 2 Pet 1:3–4.

¹⁴ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XIII.

¹⁵ Deut 30:11–14 (cf. Rom 10:6–8); Rom 1:18–19; 1 Cor 2:14–15.

¹⁶ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XXIV.

¹⁷ 2 Pet 3:16.

¹⁸ Eph 4:11–12.

¹⁹ Deut 6:6–7; Ps 19:7–11; Zech 7:12; Matt 5:18; 24:35; John 10:35; 16:12–13; 17:17; 1 Cor 2:13; 2 Tim 3:15–17; Heb 4:12; 2 Pet 1:3, 20–21; Rev 3:8.

²⁰ 2 Pet 1:19.

²¹ Heb 1:1–2; 2:2–3; 2 Pet 3:2; see Rom 1:1–2; Luke 11:49; 1 Tim 5:18.

WE DENY that at any time the church, any council, or any human institution decided which books were to be in the canon.

ARTICLE VIII: THE POWER OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that Scripture, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, always achieves its divinely intended purpose, whether the salvation of the elect or the condemnation of sinners. We affirm that Scripture is active, certain, powerful, living, cleansing, nourishing, transforming, and sanctifying.²²

WE DENY that Scripture is akin to any other work of human literature, of which all are finite and fallible. We further deny that the hearer's failure to respond to the Scripture's meaning diminishes the Scripture's efficaciousness.

ARTICLE IX: THE PRESERVATION OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that inspiration and inerrancy apply only to the original writings of Scripture. We affirm that God, beginning with His specific instructions to preserve His Word,²³ has providentially ensured that none of the original reading of Scripture has been lost, but that any portion of the text can be recognized by comparing manuscript copies with each other.²⁴

WE DENY that every manuscript is necessarily a perfect copy of the original. We further deny that any text tradition or translation is necessarily a perfect replication of the original. We also deny that any element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs.²⁵

ARTICLE X: THE WRITTEN WORD AND THE INCARNATE WORD

WE AFFIRM that Christ Himself, the Word of God incarnate, affirmed Scripture as inspired, inerrant, clear, authoritative, and powerful.²⁶ We affirm that He declared the entire Old Testament to be the Word of God, recognizing its preservation. We affirm that He pre-authenticated the New Testament as Scripture.²⁷ We also affirm that the normative authority of Scripture is the authority of God Himself as attested by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church.²⁸

²² Ps 19:7–9; Isa 55:10–11; Luke 16:17; John 6:63; 17:17–19; Rom 1:16–17; 1 Cor 1:18; Eph 5:26; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16–17; Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:23; 2:2.

²³ Exod 17:14; 24:4; 34:27–28; Deut 17:18–22; 31:9, 22; Matt 5:18; 24:35; Luke 16:17.

²⁴ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article X. Cf. Isa 40:8; Matt 4:4; 5:18; Luke 4:4; 16:17; 21:33; 1 Pet 1:23–25.

²⁵ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article X.

²⁶ Matt 5:18–19; Luke 16:17.

²⁷ John 16:12–15.

²⁸ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article I.

WE DENY the legitimacy of separating the authority of Christ from the authority of Scripture, or of opposing the one to the other.²⁹ We further deny that the human character of Scripture corrupts its divine infallibility or inerrancy, just as the human nature of Christ does not corrupt His divinity or call His sinlessness into question.

CONCERNING HERMENEUTICS

ARTICLE XI: THE REGENERATING AND ILLUMINATING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

WE AFFIRM that while Scripture is clear, because man suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, the Holy Spirit's regenerating work is necessary for the reader to discern accurately and embrace genuinely the message of Scripture. We further affirm that the Holy Spirit enables believers to discern the meaning of Scripture and to appropriate and apply it to their lives.³⁰

WE DENY that Scripture is linguistically incoherent to man.³¹ We further deny that general revelation is insufficient to reveal certain truths, such as the existence, power, and nature of God, even to those who culpably suppress those truths in unrighteousness.³²

ARTICLE XII: THE NATURE OF SINGLE MEANING

WE AFFIRM that given the confluent nature of inspiration, the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite, static, and fixed to the human author's intent. We further affirm that an author's intent is inclusive of what he wrote, the occasion and purpose for writing, and his desired effects of his writing upon his readers.³³

WE DENY that the dual authorship of Scripture results in multiple meanings. We further deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its applications or implications, that is, its significance.³⁴

ARTICLE XIII: THE LITERAL-GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL HERMENEUTIC

WE AFFIRM that, because God moved men to reveal His message in human language and in the contexts of time and space, the meaning of Scripture is to be found through the literal-grammatical-historical method of interpretation under the illumination of the Spirit.

²⁹ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article I.

³⁰ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article V; Rom 1:18–21; 1 Cor 2:14.

³¹ Matt 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3.

³² Rom 1:18–21.

³³ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article VII.

³⁴ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article VII.

WE DENY that any method in addition to the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic is necessary to determine the authorial intent of Scripture.

ARTICLE XIV: THE LITERAL PRINCIPLE

WE AFFIRM the literal sense of Scripture, which is the intent of the human author as superintended by the Holy Spirit. We further affirm that such intent is expressed by the normative grammar of the text, its literary context, and according to its historical setting, taking into account all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.

WE DENY that an interpretation may be determined to be valid merely because it is linguistically possible. We further deny that the meaning of Scripture is in any way determined by the reader's preference or a community's tradition.

ARTICLE XV: THE GRAMMATICAL PRINCIPLE

WE AFFIRM the grammatical sense of Scripture, that the words of Scripture be understood according to the normal rules of human language as it was used at the time of the text's writing.

WE DENY the legitimacy of any method that violates the rules of human language.

ARTICLE XVI: THE HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE

WE AFFIRM the historical sense of Scripture, that Scripture be understood in light of the facts of history as the author appealed to and assumed them in his writing.

WE DENY that extra-biblical historical information can override what the author expressed grammatically, whether in his intent, historical claims, or implications.

ARTICLE XVII: THE SYNTHETIC PRINCIPLE

WE AFFIRM that, because Scripture is inerrant, no correct interpretation of one text can contradict the correct interpretation of another text of Scripture. We affirm that if a student of Scripture reaches an understanding of a passage that contradicts another passage in God's Word, that interpretation cannot be correct. We also affirm that texts of Scripture that speak of the same events or concepts can be harmonized.

WE DENY that every passage of Scripture is equally easy to interpret or that one passage can override the meaning of another passage of Scripture.³⁵

³⁵ 2 Pet 3:15–16.

CONCERNING HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS AND
BIBLICAL LANGUAGES

ARTICLE XVIII: THE USEFULNESS OF HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

WE AFFIRM that Scripture contains an inerrant record of events, discourses, and sayings which all correspond to historical fact.³⁶ We further affirm that, because Scripture is anchored to history, historical backgrounds of various kinds can be helpful to explain and illustrate what the author described.

WE DENY that Scripture's presentation of historical background is inaccurate or misleading. We further deny that extra-biblical historical information can supplant or correct what Scripture conveys grammatically, whether in its intent, historical claims, or implications.

ARTICLE XIX: THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLICAL LANGUAGES

WE AFFIRM that the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture pertain to its original autographs which were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. We affirm the usefulness of studying these languages to attain greater precision in understanding a passage. We further affirm that exegetical fallacies are committed when the original wording is interpreted outside the bounds of authorial intent and context.

WE DENY that the emphases of Scripture are inherently lost in translation and that knowledge of the original languages is required for the basic understanding of the meaning of Scripture. We deny that simply appealing to the original languages necessitates a correct interpretation of Scripture.

ARTICLE XX: THE USE OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

WE AFFIRM that, since the New Testament translates portions of the Old Testament, Scripture affirms the legitimacy of translation—that is, that translations of Scripture can communicate the divine intent of Scripture. We further affirm that translations, insofar as they express the wording and meaning of the original text, bear the derived accuracy and authority of the original text.

WE DENY that the meaning of any biblical text is so tied to the culture out of which it came that the understanding of the same meaning in other cultures is impossible.³⁷

³⁶ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XIV.

³⁷ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XI.

CONCERNING EXEGESIS

ARTICLE XXI: THE NATURE OF EXEGESIS

WE AFFIRM that exegesis is the skillful application of the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic to the biblical text in the original languages, with a view to discerning the author's intended meaning.

WE DENY the legitimacy of any treatment of the biblical text, or any quest for sources lying behind it, that leads to relativizing, de-historicizing, or discounting its teaching, or to rejecting its claims regarding authorship.³⁸

ARTICLE XXII: THE RECOGNITION OF LITERARY FORMS

WE AFFIRM that knowledge of literary genres and authorial styles is profitable for proper exegesis.

WE DENY that biblical narratives that present themselves as factual can be understood as any literary form that would negate the historicity of those narratives. We deny that literary forms may be used to argue against the historical, miraculous, and supernatural assertions of Scripture. We further deny that human language was too limited for God to convey His message clearly and adequately in Scripture.³⁹ We also deny that genre suspends the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

ARTICLE XXIII: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

WE AFFIRM that context is necessary for the student of Scripture to glean the rightful intent of the author. We affirm that context can include a passage's historical background, immediate literary context, and inter-textual context as constructed by the author. We affirm that previous revelation can inform the meaning of later revelation, and that later revelation can show the full significance of previous revelation.

WE DENY that context can undermine or contradict the assertions of any given passage. We deny the legitimacy of employing the context of later revelation to redefine the meaning of earlier revelation. However, we also deny the illegitimacy of employing the context of later revelation to understand the complete significance of earlier revelation.

³⁸ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XVIII.

³⁹ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article X.

ARTICLE XXIV: USE OF TEXTUAL CRITICAL TOOLS

WE AFFIRM that lower critical techniques, particularly pertaining to grammar, lexicography, and textual criticism, can be useful in ascertaining the original wording of the text and its meaning.⁴⁰

WE DENY any technique of higher criticism that questions the truth or integrity of the writer's expressed meaning or of any other scriptural teaching.⁴¹

CONCERNING BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

ARTICLE XXV: THE PROGRESSIVE REVELATION OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that God's revelation in Scripture was progressive and accumulative, revealing compounding divine truth over time in many portions and ways, and speaking finally in His Son.⁴²

WE DENY that every detail of all divine revelation was necessarily given or known at every point of the progress of divine revelation. We also deny that progressive revelation necessarily precludes certain truths from being present in earlier revelation. We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects, contradicts, or reinterprets it. We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings.⁴³ We deny that the meaning of any given text of Scripture evolves or changes over time, inasmuch as every text of Scripture is immutable.

ARTICLE XXVI: THE UNITY OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM the unity, harmony, and consistency of Scripture, providing a cohesive, interconnected, compounding, and complete revelation of God's character and plan. We affirm that Scripture is its own best interpreter, maintaining and incorporating earlier revelation while progressively bringing out further implications and weaving together themes that span the entire canon.⁴⁴

WE DENY that the complete revelation of God found in Scripture is exhaustive of all that is in God or His plan.⁴⁵ We further deny that Scripture may be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that one passage corrects or reinterprets another. We further deny that later writers of Scripture misinterpreted earlier

⁴⁰ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XVI.

⁴¹ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XVI.

⁴² Heb 1:1-2.

⁴³ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article V.

⁴⁴ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XVII.

⁴⁵ Deut 29:29.

passages of Scripture when quoting from or referring to them.⁴⁶ We further deny the legitimacy of inter-textual connections outside of the author's intent.

ARTICLE XXVII: THE NEW TESTAMENT USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

WE AFFIRM that while the New Testament writers identify and draw out further significance from certain Old Testament texts, they do so in a manner consistent with the single meaning and original authorial intent of Old Testament writers.

WE DENY that the New Testament authors changed the meaning of any Old Testament text.

ARTICLE XXVIII: THE INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

WE AFFIRM that the literal-grammatical-historical method of interpretation should be applied consistently to biblical prophecy.

WE DENY that progressive revelation reinterprets earlier prophecies, detracting from their literal and physical fulfillment. We deny that the genre of prophecy suspends the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

ARTICLE XXIX: THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

WE AFFIRM the centrality of the Person and work of Christ in Scripture.⁴⁷ We affirm that every passage of Scripture ultimately connects with Christ in that every passage of Scripture reveals an aspect of God's redemptive plan, which culminates in Christ.

WE DENY that every passage of Scripture, properly interpreted, directly refers to the Person and work of Christ.

CONCERNING SYSTEMATIC AND HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

ARTICLE XXX: GENERAL AND SPECIAL REVELATION

WE AFFIRM the harmony of special revelation with general revelation and therefore of biblical teaching with the facts of nature.⁴⁸ We further affirm the authoritative priority of special revelation over general revelation, in that creation is fallen and subject to the curse whereas Scripture is infallible.

⁴⁶ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XVII.

⁴⁷ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article III.

⁴⁸ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XXI.

WE DENY that any genuine scientific fact, properly understood, is inconsistent with the true meaning of any passage of Scripture.⁴⁹ We further deny that man's reasoning, experiences, or observations ought to override the authorial intent of any passage of Scripture.⁵⁰

ARTICLE XXXI: REVELATION AND THEOLOGY

WE AFFIRM that true theology is inclusive not only of that which is expressly set forth in Scripture, but also of that which is derived from the legitimate implications of Scripture, the synthesis of the explicit propositions of Scripture, and the theological presuppositions of the biblical authors.

WE DENY that true theology can be derived from anything other than divine revelation. We deny that the priority of special revelation renders general revelation unable to reveal theological truth.⁵¹ We further deny the validity of regarding a plausible implication as a necessary implication.

ARTICLE XXXII: SCRIPTURE AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

WE AFFIRM the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, that Scripture alone is the ultimate, absolute, and infallible rule for faith and practice—the sole norming norm which is not normed.

WE DENY the mischaracterization of *sola Scriptura* that denies the existence of legitimate subordinate norms which are themselves normed by Scripture.

WE AFFIRM that all other forms of spiritual authority, including historic creeds, doctrinal confessions, local church pastors, teachers, and Bible commentators are subject to Scripture.

WE DENY that any creed, confession, pastor, teacher, or commentator is equal or superior to Scripture.

WE AFFIRM that, though Scripture is the supreme governor and final arbiter of Christian doctrine and duty, the creeds and confessions of church history can help protect believers from veering into heresy and false teaching.

WE DENY that such a use of creeds and confessions is at odds with the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.

WE AFFIRM that, insofar as the ancient creeds (i.e., the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Chalcedonian Creed) accurately

⁴⁹ Adapted from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XXI; Rom 1:18–19; 1 Cor 2:14–16.

⁵⁰ 2 Pet 1:16–21.

⁵¹ Ps 19:1–6; Rom 1:18–21.

represent biblical truth, they possess a derived authority that has historically defined the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. We further affirm the ministerial use of church history: while subordinate to Scripture, it is valuable for faithfully guiding believers, particularly in the defense of sound doctrine.

WE DENY the magisterial use of tradition and reject any system that places tradition on a level of authority higher than or equal to the Word of God.⁵² We further deny the notion that church history is of no value for believers today.

ARTICLE XXXIII: THE CHECKING PRINCIPLE

WE AFFIRM that, while no era of church history is without fault, students of Scripture should consider whether or not their interpretation of the biblical text aligns with the conclusions of faithful believers throughout church history. The student of Scripture should be suspicious of espousing novel interpretations and exegetical conclusions that have never been espoused, or that have been espoused only by those who had departed from orthodoxy.

WE DENY that church tradition is inerrant or determinative of the meaning of Scripture. We further deny that teaching not found in a specific church tradition is automatically disqualified.

CONCERNING PASTORAL MINISTRY AND COUNSELING

ARTICLE XXXIV: THE SUFFICIENCY, IMPLICATIONS, AND APPLICATIONS OF SCRIPTURE

WE AFFIRM that, while there is a single meaning of any passage of Scripture, there will be many applications. While certain applications may vary in different contexts, some applications are binding on all generations. We further affirm that the authority and sufficiency of Scripture make it the supreme standard for faithfully carrying out all forms of gospel ministry and the principal means of the sanctification of the saints.

WE DENY that men ought ever to stand in judgment over Scripture. We deny that the distinction between universal and particular mandates of Scripture can be determined merely by cultural and situational factors. We further deny that universal mandates may ever be treated as culturally or situationally relative.⁵³ We further deny that secular-based models of psychology or sociology are adequate tools for pastoral counseling.

⁵² Cf. Mark 7:1–13.

⁵³ Adapted from “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics,” Article VIII.

CONCERNING EXPOSITION

ARTICLE XXXV: SCRIPTURE AND EXPOSITORY PREACHING

WE AFFIRM that expositional preaching is demanded by the nature of Scripture and is the culmination of the exegetical process, conveying God's intended message in its inspired and inerrant details, historical and literary context, theological depth and consistency, and intrinsic implications and applications.⁵⁴ We further affirm that the only type of preaching which sufficiently conveys the divine revelation and its proper application to life is that which faithfully expounds the text of Scripture as the Word of God.⁵⁵

WE DENY that the preacher has any message from God apart from the text of Scripture.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Neh 8:5–8; Acts 5:20; 20:27; 2 Tim 2:15; 4:1–2.

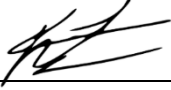
⁵⁵ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XXV.

⁵⁶ Taken from "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics," Article XXV.

THE MASTER'S SEMINARY FACULTY

We the faculty of The Master's Seminary hereby affirm the
TMS Statement on Hermeneutics

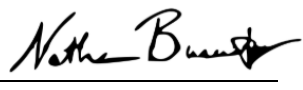
LUCAS ALEMÁN



BRIAN BIEDEBACH



NATHAN A. BUSENITZ




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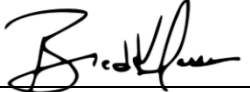
MICHAEL A. GRISANTI



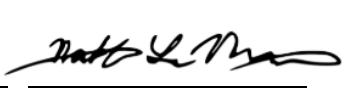
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NATHAN LEMASTER



JAMES R. MOOK



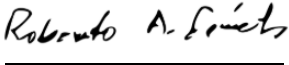
BRYAN J. MURPHY



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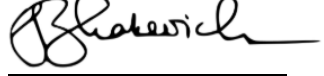
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PHILIP ZHAKEVICH



KEVIN D. ZUBER

