

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus
the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and
built up in him.*

COLOSSIANS 2:6-7

A Christ-Centered People

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INTRODUCTION

MARK PRATER

I can't wait for you to read this second edition of the Sovereign Grace Journal. Our theme is glorious yet practical: "A Christ-Centered People."

The gospel, which shapes the culture in our family of churches, declares what Christ has accomplished for us through his death and resurrection. Based on the finished work of Jesus Christ that we receive by faith, we are a people who joyfully respond to this good news by walking in him, living for him, and staying centered on him. Colossians 2:6-7 says, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him."

Because the gospel is for all of life, there isn't an area of our lives where we aren't centered on Christ—whether that is parenting, politics, living the single life, or our involvement in missions. This edition of the journal speaks into each of these areas and more.

Devon Kauflin has written an outstanding article to help us remain centered on Christ in our corporate worship, entitled "Union with Christ and the Church's Worship." If you currently find yourself in the midst of suffering, don't miss Todd Peterson's inspiring story entitled, "To Live is Christ: Lessons Learned in the Valley of Darkness." And because it is our prayer that the gospel continues to define our family of churches long into the future, Jon Payne shares a timely word for the second generation

of Sovereign Grace and beyond. May God use what Jon shares here to protect our gospel heritage.

We have included four more book recommendations because Christ-centered people love reading books about Christ. Hopefully, these short recommendations inspire you to get these excellent books into your hands and benefit from them.

Our journal is written by Sovereign Grace pastors throughout the world to serve the members and pastors of our family of churches. Therefore, I want to thank the pastors who made contributions to this edition, which by God's grace will help us be a Christ-centered people.

All for the glory of Christ,

Mark

TRUE GOSPEL- CENTEREDNESS IS NEVER BLAND

JARED MELLINGER

There is a kind of “gospel-centeredness” that fails to do justice to the glory and wonder of the gospel. I have in mind an approach to remembering, communicating, and applying the good news that becomes unhelpfully predictable, bland, and rote. It always tends to use the same language; it remains on the surface of Scripture and rarely provides new insights.

In Sovereign Grace Churches, we can appropriately describe ourselves as a gospel-centered people who attend gospel-centered churches where we receive gospel-centered preaching and enjoy gospel-centered fellowship. We aim for gospel-centered marriages and gospel-centered parenting; we do gospel-centered work and enjoy gospel-centered leisure; I hope to live a gospel-centered life followed by a gospel-centered funeral.

All of this is good. The idea of centering the whole of our lives on Christ and his cross is essential and profoundly biblical.

Yet, we need to remember that it’s possible to say the word *gospel* a lot without ever mining the glories of the person and work of Christ in all of Scripture and without applying that message to our daily lives. Gospel-centered has been a popular Christian buzzword over the past decade, but repeating

the buzzword is not what makes a Christian or a church truly centered upon Christ. Some of the most gospel-centered preachers and churches throughout history never used that term at all.

Our goal is not the lingo but the reality. We aim for a deep and vibrant focus on the living Christ and his finished work. It is a focus that ought to expand our minds, thrill our souls, and transform our lives. So how can we continue to cultivate this kind of Christ-centeredness in our lives and our churches?

Learning from Scripture

One way to avoid a stale gospel-centeredness is to follow Scripture in considering the diverse ways Christ is revealed: prophets spoke of him, biblical themes find their fulfillment in him, stories of sinners reveal our need for him, mighty acts of redemption point to him. In our study of Scripture, we never want to move so quickly to Christ that we flatten the Biblical landscape, neglect the careful study of each book and chapter, and fail to discover the unique way each passage and theme uniquely reveals the redemption that is found in Christ.

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We should also consider the vivid and varied language the New Testament uses to communicate what Christ has done. “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3) is a gospel summary of great value, and repetition has its use. Yet, the New Testament writers do not take the approach of always communicating the gospel the same way.

Consider the varied words of Paul:

- “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13).
- “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph. 2:4-5).
- “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are

justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:23-25).

- “He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).
- “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).
- “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).
- “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7).

There is a richness in these biblical descriptions of what God has done for us in Christ. Therefore, every Christian should maintain an expansive gospel lexicon. If we swim in the vast ocean of the biblical presentation of the gospel, it will guard us against a shallow gospel-centeredness.

Christ and His Benefits

The idea of a shallow gospel-centeredness is, in fact, an oxymoron, a contradiction of terms. The reason is that Christ himself is so glorious. If we are truly centered upon him and going deeper into the knowledge of his grace, it is impossible for there to be anything shallow or bland about it.

How can we yawn when we fix our eyes on the excellencies of Jesus Christ? How can the greatest story ever told become boring? How can we pass by the bleeding Savior without being moved to tears of adoration? How can we remember the risen Christ and not experience triumphant hope rushing through our veins? How can we believe in him and not rejoice with joy inexpressible and filled with glory?

Arise, my soul, arise: The Son of God has loved you by taking upon himself the divine judgment you deserve! My Savior bore the wrath reserved for me! I have experienced adoption through propitiation! His death is my freedom and my pardon.

“Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me”

When we are truly centered on the Savior, we realize just how little we know of the glory and love revealed at Calvary. There are always new things to see in the old rugged cross. The slain Lamb of God will be the fascination and praise of the redeemed for all eternity.

Progress in the Christian life is experienced as we go deeper into Christ, deeper into a knowledge of his love, deeper into an understanding of the many reasons he died. He is the glorious Christ, and his benefits are beyond counting. “In their union with Christ, believers freely receive all the benefits of the gospel.”¹ In Christ, we do not receive some benefits of the gospel; we receive all of them. Surveying these manifold benefits helps us avoid unvaried and monotonous views of our salvation.

A Life-Permeating Gospel

We also find that gospel-centricity maintains its power and liveliness as the good news is applied to all of life. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:2, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” This does not mean he was talking about Christ without explaining the relevance of Christ in our daily lives. The opposite is true: to know nothing except Christ is to insist on the relevance of the gospel for all of life.

C.J. Mahaney says, “The gospel is life-permeating, world-altering, universe-changing truth.”² He says we must not only rejoice in it, but we must also “allow it to color the way we look at the world and all of life.”³

1. [SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCHES STATEMENT OF FAITH](#), 40.

2. C.J. MAHANAY, *LIVING THE CROSS CENTERED LIFE* (COLORADO SPRINGS, CO: MULTNOMAH, 2006), 142.

3. *IBID.*, 15.

It was in 2005 that C.J. invited Mike Bullmore to teach at our Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference. His theme was “The Functional Centrality of the Gospel in the Life of the Local Church.” Mike talked about the omni-relevance of the gospel and explained the importance of making gospel connections to everyday life:

“One of the greatest challenges, yet one of the most important tasks, of pastoral ministry is to help people actually see the connections between the gospel and the thinking and behavior that make up their everyday lives. We know well the centrality of the gospel message, but in order for it to have a functional centrality, it must be clearly, carefully, and consistently connected to the real issues—issues of thought and conduct—of people’s lives. This kind of ministry is most greatly needed.”⁴

The maturity of Christians and our effectiveness in ministry depends on cultivating the skill of connecting the gospel to everyday thinking and behavior. To be a Christ-centered people is to strive to “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Phil. 1:27) and to have our conduct be “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14).

*Cultivate the skill of
connecting the gospel
to everyday thinking
and behavior.*

Connecting Christ and Conduct

The good news of Christ’s finished work has powerful application for the most pressing issues in our lives and our world. It shapes our view of ourselves, our relationships, our trials, our future. As we help each other connect Christ to our conduct, the gospel equips us for daily living and obedience.

- How does the gospel connect to living a life of purity? “For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20).
- How does the gospel strengthen marriages? “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

⁴ 2005 SOVEREIGN GRACE PASTORS CONFERENCE

- How does the gospel empower forgiveness when others sin against us? “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).
- How does the gospel compel us to a life of service and sustain us in service when we are weary? “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).
- How does the gospel lead to generous giving? “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Mike Bullmore expands these categories:

Many more examples could be given. The gospel has something to say about racism. The gospel has something to say about suffering. The gospel has something to say about self-control. The gospel has something to say about worship. The gospel has something to say about caring for the poor. Ultimately, all Christian behavior should flow out of the gospel.⁵

A Christ-centeredness that does the hard and joyful work of connecting the gospel to all of life will always be fresh. There are gospel connections for our lives, waiting to be discovered in God’s word.

A Christ-Centered People

By God’s grace, the brothers and sisters in Sovereign Grace are a gospel-centered and Christ-centered people. To my great joy, I have seen this evidence of God’s kindness in our churches and our pastors for many years. The proof is not how loud we shout, how many times we say the word gospel or gospel-centered, or whether we can check the box that we mentioned the cross in a sermon.

To be a Christ-centered people means that our churches are pressing on to see Christ in all of Scripture, applying the work of Christ in daily life, proclaiming the good news of Christ to others, and celebrating the endless glory of Christ and his benefits.

5. 2005 SOVEREIGN GRACE PASTORS CONFERENCE

Doing this together as a union of churches is, to me, the most exhilarating thing in the world. How could centering our lives and our churches on so glorious a Savior ever become dull and uninspiring? Let's continue to demonstrate the joy, the wonder, and the life-transforming power of being a Christ-centered people. True gospel-centeredness is never bland.

JARED MELLINGER

Jared Mellinger is senior pastor of [Covenant Fellowship Church](#) (Glen Mills, PA) and serves on the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team.

UNION WITH CHRIST AND THE CHURCH'S WORSHIP

DEVON KAUFLIN

"There is no doubt that the object of the whole spiritual government of the Church is to lead us to Christ, as it is by him alone we come to God, who is the final end of a happy life."¹

A distinctive mark of Sovereign Grace Churches—one of our seven shared values—is our gospel-centeredness. One of the underlying convictions of this mark is the understanding that we cannot exhaust the riches of the gospel. The good news of God's kingdom cannot be emptied like a gallon of milk. It does not wear out like a pair of jeans. The good news of the gospel is an ever-flowing fountain that cannot run dry. It is a beautiful diamond with which we will never grow familiar. Out of the perfect completeness of the triune God flows the glorious grace and goodness of the gospel.

We are and desire to remain gospel people. One of the places this priority is clearly seen is in our corporate worship. We are committed to preaching the gospel, singing the gospel, praying the gospel, and building our churches upon the gospel. Step into any Sovereign Grace church throughout the world this coming Sunday and you will observe a people passionate about proclaiming the perfect life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, and glorious ascension of Jesus Christ.

1. JOHN CALVIN, "MUTUAL CONSENT IN REGARD TO THE SACRAMENTS BETWEEN THE MINISTERS OF THE CHURCH OF ZURICH AND JOHN CALVIN, MINISTER OF THE CHURCH OF GENEVA," IN TRACTS AND LETTERS OF JOHN CALVIN, TRANS. HENRY BEVERIDGE, (1849; REPR., CARLISLE, PA: BANNER OF TRUTH, 2009), 2:212.

As gospel people, we love reminders of what the gospel has accomplished in our lives. We have received forgiveness, justification before God, reconciliation with him, adoption into his family, and many other blessings. But it can be easy to overlook a primary implication of this good news: *we are united to Christ*. The gospel not only saves us, but it also joins us to Christ, giving us a new identity in him. This doctrine of union with Christ should have significant implications on how we worship as the church.

Indeed, this union is the very well-spring of our salvation, apart from which we, as the people of God, cannot be who God has made us to be. Our identity as the church and our basis for relating to and worshiping the triune God is rooted in Jesus Christ alone. Thus, the church should be tethered to Christ at every point of its corporate worship, where—enabled by the Holy Spirit

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and governed by the Word of God—the church assembles to gratefully witness the revelation of the triune God by doing three things: receiving from Christ, acting in him, and longing for him to come again.

Receiving from Christ

The first implication of union with Christ in our corporate worship is that we gather to receive from him. The church is built into Christ, not by offering something new to God, but by receiving from God what already belongs to us in Christ—his goodness, grace, mercy, and sufficiency. This takes place through the Holy Spirit’s work, primarily through the proclamation of God’s Word.

When we hear Scripture read or preached, Jesus Christ is declaring himself to his people. Our God is a God who speaks to us through his Word, so when we gather that Word should be the loudest and clearest voice. Our corporate worship should be infused with the Bible.

So, our primary disposition in gathering together for worship is not to speak and act but to listen. This means that whenever Scripture is read—whether to call us to worship, prepare for preaching, or send us out—it is not merely a convenient transition to some other event. It is the main event of our worship where God reveals himself to his people through the Word.

Acting in Christ

A second implication of union with Christ for corporate worship is that our activity—the singing, praying, fellowshiping, preaching—is not just done *for* Christ but takes place *in* Christ. It can be all too easy to think that after receiving from Christ, it is now up to us to respond. But the gospel means Jesus is not only the object of our worship—the one *to* whom we offer our praise—but the subject in our worship—the one *in* whom we offer our praise. When we gather in worship, we act together in Christ by the Spirit.

In practice, this means that we are set free to simply bear witness to what God has already spoken. We gather to testify to the “glad news of deliverance” and the “faithfulness of [his] salvation” (Ps. 40:9-10). This applies not only to those preaching but to all of us. We act in Christ as we speak his Word through singing to one another, praying together, and fellowshiping with one another. Our words should be shaped by and flow out of God’s Word revealed to us in the pages of the Bible.

We also act in Christ by recognizing our constant dependence on him. Our worship is not made more holy or more special through anything we do but is accepted in what Christ has done, empowered by the Spirit.

Longing for Christ

A third implication of union with Christ in our corporate worship is that it points us forward. Gospel-centered people know something about the future: Jesus Christ is coming again. Though Christ is indeed present by the Spirit, his ascension tells us that he is physically absent from us. So we long for him to come again.

Peter describes the church as both “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11). Because of who we are in Christ, this world is not our home. We assemble and remember to which kingdom we belong. We remember the place for which we are made.

In practice, longing for Christ in corporate worship means we consistently read and preach Scriptures that direct our attention up to Christ and forward to his return. Life in this world is not all that it one day will be. But in God’s Word, we get a taste of “the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5). We receive the comfort that the Word that is a lamp to our feet now will

soon be the light by which the nations walk (Ps. 119:105; Rev. 21:24). We are oriented to the hope of life in Christ when he returns, and we also “appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:4). And until that day, we make this our prayer: “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20).

Treasuring Christ

Robert Robinson’s hymn reminds us that we are “prone to wander” and “prone to leave the God [we] love.” One subtle but common expression of this wandering is our tendency to forget who we are in Christ. We readily adopt the identities and values the world presents to us through news and advertising, books and movies, Instagram and Netflix, and many other voices and stories.

But for the people of God, only one identity defines who we are. One story supersedes all others. And that story is found in Jesus Christ. He is our life. We have died, and our lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

To be gospel-centered is not just to declare the glories of Calvary; it is to live in the good of them, experiencing the fullness of the life we now have in Christ—and this transforms everything that we do. By receiving from Christ, acting in Christ, and longing for Christ’s return, God has given us a tremendous gift in corporate worship as we grow together to treasure Christ. As a people who delight in the gospel of Jesus Christ, may we experience more and more the joy that comes from being united to him. All we have, all we need, all we want is found in Jesus Christ.

DEVON KAUFLIN

Devon Kauflin serves as an elder at [Grace Church of Clarksburg](#) (Clarksburg, MD) and is on staff for [Sovereign Grace Music](#).

IF CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED: HOW TO LIVE LIKE JESUS IS ALIVE

BRENDAN WILLIS

If my neighborhood was to have an official motto, I'm pretty sure it would sound a little something like this: "Work hard. Play harder."

The North Shore of Sydney, Australia, is not only an incredibly beautiful place to live but an incredibly expensive one as well. Property prices in this part of the world lead the vast majority of locals to work two jobs to service mortgages that would make your eyes water.

But don't be deceived; the North Shore lifestyle isn't just about getting a foot in one of the world's most expensive property markets. It's also about living a certain lifestyle. This means flexible work arrangements to create the ideal work-life balance, endless vacations, dinner parties and weekends away, the latest exercise regimes (Yoga, Pilates, CrossFit, and micro-HIIT) and diets (Keto, Vegan, Paleo, and Intermittent Fasting), all with a common goal of enjoying life as much as possible for as long as is humanly possible.

In fact, my generation (millennial) is plagued by a phenomenon called FOMO: the Fear Of Missing Out. Why? The simple answer is, YOLO: You Only Live Once.

We live in a culture that sees no hope beyond the grave. And if that is true, the only hope for this life is surely to try and enjoy what remains of it as much as you possibly can. To miss out on any opportunity in this life is to sell yourself short in life somehow—to have wasted it.

Salt and Light

Yet here's the truth: even as those who profess to follow Jesus, we can sometimes find ourselves succumbing to the values and worldview of those who live around us. We might trust in Jesus for our future salvation, but on this side of eternity, we want the same work-life balance, the holidays, the good health, the lifestyle, and the property that our neighbors enjoy. I, for one, frequently find myself anxiously examining my bank account or checking the share market, or daydreaming about a vacation up the coast.

It's not that it's wrong to desire homeownership, vacations, or any of the above per se. It's simply that as followers of Jesus, our outlook on life is meant to be completely different from those around us. In the words of

*Our daily priorities
and passions only
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from the dead.*

Jesus, we're meant to be different like salt (Matt. 5:13) and visible like light (Matt. 5:16).

Why? Because Jesus Christ rose again from the dead.

You see, Jesus' resurrection isn't just a complete game-changer for the future; it's also a complete game-changer for the way we live our lives today.

"I Pity the Fool"

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he takes the life-changing implications of the resurrection a step further. If Christ was not raised from the dead, not only is there no forgiveness of sins, but those who have died trusting in Jesus have perished, and our faith is a pointless waste of time (1 Cor. 15:12-18).

Paul says, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Cor. 15:9) In the words of Mr. T, "I pity the fool" who trusts in Jesus Christ if he wasn't raised from the dead.

Knowing with confidence that Jesus Christ is alive and reigning ought to profoundly impact the way we live our lives. Our lives should seem foolish to those around us who have hope only in this life. Our daily priorities and passions only make sense if Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

How can we live like Jesus is really alive?

1. We live like Jesus is alive when we talk about him.

You can tell a lot about what a person loves by what they talk about. If you listen to me for long enough, you'll quickly learn that I love cricket, coffee, running, my wife Charlotte, and my son Elijah.

What would those who know you best say you love to talk about the most? If you met the Apostle Paul, the answer would be the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Paul had encountered the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9), and his life was radically changed. Paul had witnessed and experienced the power of Jesus first-hand, and as a result, he simply couldn't stop talking about him.

If Jesus is alive, what better news is there with which to encourage a believer? If Jesus is alive, what better message is there with which to love a neighbor? We live like Jesus is alive when we talk about him.

2. We live like Jesus is alive when we hope in him.

In our culture, hope is about optimism and wishful thinking. We say, "I hope it doesn't rain today."

In contrast, the biblical concept of hope is about confidently waiting for a guaranteed future. Specifically, for Christians living on this side of the cross, our hope is in waiting for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Peter put it, we have "a living hope" (1 Pet. 1:3), and the Christian is commanded to "set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:13).

How would you feel if the Lord Jesus chose to return today? If we're honest, many of us would feel a little bit disappointed. After all, there are some things we'd like to do first. We want to watch our kids grow up, be married, own a home, travel the world, finish college, or have a successful career.

In other words, there are things in this life that we're waiting for because we've set our hearts on them.

According to Paul, if we feel disappointed at the thought of Christ returning, we haven't grasped the significance of what his resurrection means.

Not only will those who trust in Christ receive a glorious new body on that day, but Christ will usher in the new, eternal kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:24–25). In a new heavens and new earth, all of creation will be renewed, all the effects of the fall will be purged, and we will joyously dwell in perfect fellowship with the Triune God who created us to find our deepest delight in him.

“When Christ our life appears, our hope will be complete
Our longings finally rest as we fall at His feet
When Jesus comes to reign, restoring everything
Our tears will turn to tides of praises to our King”¹

If we live like Jesus is alive, we need to ensure that our lives center on waiting for Jesus.

3. We live like Jesus is alive when we persevere.

For many people, 2020 was an incredibly difficult year, and for some, 2021 has continued to bring trials of many kinds. As followers of Jesus, life can be particularly discouraging when our efforts to serve our King don't seem to turn out the way we had hoped.

For instance, you've been boldly seeking to share the gospel with your colleagues at work, and years later, still, no one is responding. The church you love and faithfully serve is still plagued by division and shrinking numerically. You've been trying to point your kids to Jesus their whole lives, only to recently watch one of them walk away from the faith. You've been struggling to care for a chronically ill spouse and have witnessed not only the decline of his or her health but the decline of your marriage as well.

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When times are tough and our faith is tested, it's easy to wonder, "What was the point of all that?" "Was it all a big waste of time?"

Here's a glorious truth. Because Jesus is alive and seated on his heavenly throne, we can persevere with confidence knowing our efforts to serve the Lord are never a waste! "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

The reality that Jesus is alive and reigning is no mere point of doctrine. Knowing and serving a risen Savior transforms every aspect of our lives and infuses every moment of our lives with significance and hope. In light of this reality, may we continue to live every day treasuring the risen Christ: talking about him, hoping in him, and persevering by the grace that is found in him alone. Christ has been raised, and we will rise with him.

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

BRENDAN WILLIS

Brendan Willis serves as an elder at [Sovereign Grace Church](#) (Sydney, Australia).

GIVE ME JESUS: DELIGHTING IN CHRIST THROUGH THE MEANS OF GRACE

TIM KERR

Living the Christian life without enjoying Christ is like a pie without sugar—it might look like a pie, but it's not what a pie is supposed to be. It is sometimes hard to detect when our relationship with Christ has lost its sense of sweet delight and pursuit. This is a subtle form of drift that all Christians must guard against. Remember, to drift away from shore, all one needs to do is, well, *nothing*. Stop paddling toward the shore, and soon the current will sweep you out to sea.

So how do we prevent ourselves from gradually drifting away from God? Hebrews 2:1 says, “We must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift from it.” *Attention*. This is a valuable commodity in a generation of constant distraction.

The old phrase *means of grace* captures how we practice this attentiveness. A means of grace is a pathway to receiving and living in the good of what we have in Christ. Like the spoon that lifts tasty soup to the mouth, a means of grace is the way spiritual nourishment is delivered to us.

Most believers are well acquainted with the primary means of grace that God uses to keep us delighting in and living in the good of our relationship with Christ. One quickly thinks of concentrated time in Scripture, the life of prayer, and gathering with the community of believers. Though we may practice more than these basic pathways of grace, we certainly cannot prac-

tice less without suffering significant spiritual loss.

The Scriptures are Where We Gaze upon Christ

When we take a picture with our phones, the image imprinted and saved is precisely where we pointed the camera. What the lens “sees” is what is saved on our phones. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, we are told that we are transformed into the same image as we behold Christ. What we “see” by faith is what is imprinted on our hearts. The question is, how exactly does one behold Christ this way?

We behold Christ by looking intently into the pages of holy Scripture. Everything we know about Christ in his eternal glory and flesh-and-bone humanity is found in the pages of Scripture. Jesus himself said, “it is they [the

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in worship.

Scriptures] that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).

This involves unhurried time in the word, individually and in community. We must pause to ponder truths about Christ’s person and redemption in the whole of Scripture until our hearts are warmed and lifted in worship.

Like kindling on a campfire, it sometimes takes a few attempts before the fire starts. The key here is slowing down and deliberately choosing to give our undivided attention to this gazing. That will require us to turn other things off—in the language of Scripture, “go into your room and shut the door” (Matt. 6:6). Then we search the pages of Scripture until we find Christ. And like the Magi of old, when we find him, we will worship Him (Matt. 2:8, 11)!

Prayer is a Pathway to Abiding in Christ

Through the accomplishment of the cross, we are invited to communion with the living God (Heb. 10:22). Here we enter holy ground. In Ephesians 3:14-19, Paul makes it clear that the Holy Spirit’s supernatural power is needed to grasp the “love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” It is also clear that this love is experienced in answer to prayer. It is a prayer asking that we may live in the good of Christ’s love for us.

But this knowledge of God's love is maintained through prayer as well. Therefore Jude 20-21 says, "Praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God." One of my favorite verses in the Old Testament expresses the same thought in a slightly different way: "I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness" (Ps. 26:3, NIV). This kind of praying then begins with a request and continues with simple expressions of trust. We trust that God actually is relating to us the way Scripture says he is—exulting over us with loud singing (Zeph. 3:17)!

This praying involves both a seeking and then a firm standing on what is given. We echo back the Lord's song over us in our prayers (Ps. 42:8) and can confidently say that "We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us" (1 John 4:16).

The Gathered Church Helps Us to Commune with Christ

David Mathis says that fellowship is a help when we drift from other means of grace. "When the desire to avail yourself of hearing his voice (in the word) has dried up, and when your spiritual energy is gone to speak into his ear (in prayer), God sends his body to bring you back."¹ He also says, "Corporate worship is the single most important means of grace and our greatest weapon in the fight for joy, because like no other means, corporate worship combines all three principles of God's ongoing grace: his word, prayer, and fellowship."²

It is easy to forget the reason why corporate worship is so powerful. There is much more going on than simply songs and smiles and encouraging words. 1 John 1:3 reveals the Trinitarian ground and delightful source of the fellowship we experience with each other: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

Here we see the often unnoticed dimension of the gathering of the church. It facilitates enjoyment, communion, partnership, and friendship, which is an overflow of the fellowship we have with God the Father and the Son through the Holy Spirit. Just as a musical concert is best experienced in an appreciative crowd of fans, so the church gathered is where we enjoy, treasure, and commune most deeply with Christ.

1. DAVID MATHIS, *HABITS OF GRACE* (WHEATON, IL: CROSSWAY, 2016), 148.

2. *IBID.*, 156-157.

The key here is presence. This means of grace is for participants alone. To know this reality, we have to be there—each of us indwelt by the Spirit, strengthening and encouraging each other with our gifts, experiencing God’s active presence as his people meet to worship him.

How is Christ best treasured in our lives? By taking the necessary time to ponder Christ in Scripture until affections for him are kindled in our hearts, by abiding in his love through prayer, and by joining our puzzle piece together with the many other puzzle pieces of the church gathered, so that we can display the finished picture of Christ to each other, and delight in the wonder of that picture together.

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CHRIST OUR SONG

BOB KAUFLIN

One of my clearest memories of Sovereign Grace Churches in the early 80s is the singing. It was passionate. Emotional. Engaged. Physically expressive. Jubilant. Expectant. Loud. And a far cry from the formal and often subdued singing I experienced growing up.

Of course, that kind of singing might be expected of any congregation fueled and governed by God's Word, centered on the good news that Jesus came to save sinners and empowered by God's Spirit. And it's the kind of singing we still aspire to today.

But have you ever wondered why passionate congregational worship is so appropriate for those who follow Jesus? It's not as though Jesus came to save musicians. Scripture never records Jesus carrying a guitar, playing a lyre, or pounding on cymbals. We know he sang a hymn with his disciples the night before he died (Matt. 26:30), and we can assume he joined in the songs at the synagogue. But we have no reason to believe his voice was particularly exceptional or that he ever encouraged musical training.

And yet, singing seems to be what followers of Jesus do. It's what we must do and are commanded to do:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

But God isn’t looking for mere obedience. He wants us to understand how singing can benefit us and bring glory to Christ. How does that happen? I can think of at least three ways.

Christology Set to Song

First, *singing is meant to deepen our knowledge of Christ*. The first Christian converts from Judaism were used to praying the *Shema* daily: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). With those words ringing in their ears, they were having to confront the stunning reality that God is

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one, yet also three—Father, Son, and Spirit. Jesus was not simply an exalted teacher and prophet. He was Immanuel, God with us.

Under the Holy Spirit’s guidance, Paul and the other New Testament authors faithfully incorporated the revelation that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh into the monotheistic faith passed down from their forefathers. For in-

stance, in the book of Revelation, John intentionally uses the same titles for Jesus as he does for God (Rev. 1:8; 22:13). In Revelation 5:13, we read, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” Jesus receives the same worship God does.

But teaching wasn’t the only way the new Christians grew in their understanding of who Jesus is. They sang. And the word of Christ, or the gospel, found its way into their hearts.

“Long before the Church had begun to speculate about the Trinitarian formulas in which its later creeds were to be defined, it was confessing that Jesus was one with God and was worthy of such divine and transcendent honours as most properly belonged to the one, true and living God, the Maker of

heaven and earth. Christology was born in the atmosphere of worship.”¹

Likewise, our Christology today is nurtured and deepened in the “atmosphere of worship.” It’s why we take pains to write and sing so many songs that plumb the depths of the nature, actions, and heart of the Savior. From its early years, Sovereign Grace Music has focused on producing songs about Jesus, especially those that articulate substitutionary atonement. Songs like “Before the Throne of God Above,” “Jesus Thank You,” “All I Have is Christ,” and many more have “catechized” us and enabled the word of Christ to dwell richly in us.

But while Christ dying as our substitute on the cross is at the heart of our relationship with God, it’s not all there is to say about Jesus. He is the one through whom creation was made. He is our good shepherd. His beauty shines beyond our ability to express it. His heart overflows with compassion and kindness that should stun us. He will return as the holy judge to mete out justice to all his enemies and right every wrong. All these themes and more are worthy contributions to the songs we sing that help deepen our knowledge of Christ.

From Doctrine to Devotion

A second way that singing benefits us and brings glory to God is that *singing is meant to strengthen our affections for Christ*. Knowledge isn’t enough. God wants us to feel in our hearts what we know to be true in our heads. And that’s what words set to music help us do.

Not too long after it was published in 2005, I had the joy of reading Ron Chernow’s brilliant biography of Alexander Hamilton. I was profoundly affected by the way Chernow captured the conflicting impulses of a highly complex character. But years later, watching Lin Manuel-Miranda’s musical adaptation of Hamilton, I was touched even more deeply. The musical enabled me to feel the grief Hamilton experienced in losing his son, the intensity of the bond between Hamilton and his friends, and the passionate devotion Eliza displayed for her deceased husband.

At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter how I feel about Alexander Hamilton and what he accomplished. But it’s eternally significant how I feel about

1. RALPH MARTIN, *WORSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCH* (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO, 1975), 33.

Jesus Christ and what he accomplished.

To say we believe certain truths about Christ and not be affected by him is dangerous. Knowledge that doesn't move our hearts can lead to boredom and formalism at best, self-righteousness, self-deception, and hypocrisy at worst. Singing helps to align what we believe with what we love. It turns doctrine into devotion.

Of course, we don't need music for that to take place. But God designed melodies, chords, and rhythms to affect us emotionally. It's totally appropriate, and part of God's design, to shed tears of joy when singing, "There is no sinner beyond the infinite stretch of Your mercy," to exuberantly shout out, "No power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck me from His hand!" or to experience an otherworldly peace as we sing, "Christ has regarded my helpless estate." As Jonathan Edwards put it:

"The duty of singing praises to God seems to be given wholly to excite and express religious affections. There is no other reason why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose and with music, except that these things have a tendency to move our affections."²

In other words, we don't sing to Jesus *like* we mean it. We sing *because* we mean it. And we want to mean it even more deeply.

Passionate Singing, Passionate Living

Third, *singing is meant to shape our response to Christ*. An undeniable connection exists between the way we engage with God in corporate worship and how we approach every other day of the week. If our singing is half-hearted on Sunday, it's likely that our desire to glorify Christ will be half-hearted on Monday.

Singing is inherently a full-body experience. It involves our lungs, our lips, our throats, our tongues, our teeth, our faces, our hands, and on occasion, even our feet.

"My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed" (Ps. 71:23).

2. JONATHAN EDWARDS, *THE RELIGIOUS AFFECTIONS*, (CARLISLE, PA: BANNER OF TRUTH, 1961), 44.

“My heart is steadfast, O God! I will sing and make melody with all my being” (Ps. 108:1)!

That kind of engaged singing reinforces for us where our allegiance lies. We’re confronting the empty lies and fleeting pleasures of the world so easily succumb to and confessing with everything in us that unshakeable truth and eternal joys are found in Christ alone.

That’s why passionate singing isn’t a substitute for a life lived for the glory of Christ. It’s meant to reflect and inspire it. As we sing of our Savior’s love in the midst of the congregation, we remember what’s true, what’s beautiful, what’s good, and what’s most important. That leads to changes in our hearts, our relationships, our choices, and our actions.

Typically those changes take place over a period of time and not as a result of a single meeting. That’s why faithfully joining the voices of other believers in our churches week after week matters more than experiencing a worship high at an event or conference. God can certainly use both. But it’s the consistent returning to songs, hymns, and spiritual songs that will leave the greatest mark on our souls.

So as we have an opportunity, let’s take advantage of the gracious gift of singing. It will never fully communicate how glorious our Savior really is, even in eternity. But it can point us in the right direction and grow our love for Christ in the process.

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GETTING SIGHT OF JESUS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

JOHN LOFTNESS

Many of us avoid the book of Revelation because it seems weird. Few biblical books contain visions like this one. None have been given such a wide variety of interpretations. So we tend to stay away, but we do so at our own loss.

The book's original audience was a ring of local churches in seven cities in the First Century Roman province of Asia, what today we call Turkey. These churches were all under pressure—some the pressure of persecution, some the pressure of prosperity. All of them were tempted to compromise their faith. Sound familiar?

God gave John this “revelation,” this *uncovering* or *revealing* series of visions, to help the churches see what was really going on as they faced these many threats to their spiritual existence. The book is about their present and future, just as it is about our present and future.

The Glorious Vision of Revelation 1

We get lost in the book because we think it drops us in a maze that requires that we grope our way through to discover the events of the future. That's not what this book is about. The future may be the book's setting, but it is

not its theme or its main character. The book is about Jesus Christ. That's how it opens: "The revelation of *Jesus Christ*" (Rev. 1:1). And that's how it ends: "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:12-13).

Revelation is about what Jesus reveals, and what he reveals is himself at work in our world.

Following his introduction, John tells of his vision of Jesus in Revelation 1:11-18. This vision dominates the entire book. What John saw and heard in his vision of Jesus fit all that he knew about the transcendent God of the Bible who sent his Son as his Christ, his King—the Savior of the world and the establisher of justice. The eight descriptors John gives us in this passage arise out of the world of the Bible and must be understood in light of the imagery of the Old Testament. One commentator says that John's aim," writes "is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing."¹ But today, we don't carry those associations in our memory, so we must work harder to see Jesus as he reveals himself in the book.

Revelation as a whole, and this opening vision, in particular, provides a vision of Christ designed to guard us and sustain us as we journey in a world opposed to God. I'd encourage you to open a Bible and read Revelation 1:9-20 before you read what follows here.

The Risen Christ Among the Lampstands

John introduces his vision of Jesus by telling us that he was on an island called Patmos, a rocky volcanic island in the Aegean Sea not far from the mainland where the seven churches made their homes. The Romans used it as a place of exile for political troublemakers. John explains that he was there "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." He was there to be silenced. And in his lonely exile, he meets the risen Christ. In God's marvelous irony, he allows John to be taken from the churches he knows and loves so he can receive and write down a vision that will speak to each of them in their particular condition and resound to all churches down to our very day.

1. G.B. CAIRD, *A COMMENTARY ON THE REVELATION OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE* (HNTC; NEW YORK, NY: HARPER & ROW, 1966), 25.

A trumpet-like voice calls John to write down what he sees in a book. When he turns to see who is speaking, he sees Jesus walking among the seven churches—the churches who are to receive his book and read it. These churches are represented by lampstands, each lit by the flame of the Spirit of God. In verses 13-16, John describes what he sees.

“One like a son of man.” In the Old Testament, “son of man” usually designates a human being. For example, God repeatedly calls Ezekiel “son of man.” But when Jesus refers to himself as “the son of man” in the gospels, there is deeper significance. Jesus’ choice of this title made the Jews of his day think twice. Was he saying that he was simply a human being, which he most certainly was, or was he referring to a completely unique “son of man” found in Daniel 7:13-14?

I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

As John’s vision unfolds in Revelation, it’s clear that he’s encountering this particular “son of man.” This is God’s designated ruler of all the earth.

“...clothed with a robe and with a golden sash around his neck.” In the ancient world, a person dressed according to his station in life. In Exodus, God instructs Moses to dress the high priest with an elaborate array of garments, including a robe bound by a “sash of fine twined linen and of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, embroidered with needlework” (Ex. 39:29, also 28:4, 39, 40; 29:9). But the son of man has a golden sash, which would echo in John’s mind as depicting both royalty and the gold reserved for the Most Holy Place in the Temple. This is God’s priest-king.

“The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow.” Again, John hears Daniel’s vision in chapter 7:9

“As I looked, thrones were placed,
and the Ancient of days took his seat;
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair on his head like pure wool. ...”

The Ancient of days carries deep wisdom. Unlike our day, the ancient world valued the wisdom of experience represented by the grey hairs of the aged. The wisdom of the son of man goes deeper still. It finds its source in eternity; it is not grey but the whitest of white—not only ancient but pure.

“His eyes were like a flame of fire...” Here, as in Daniel 10:6, his eyes see through everything, and they bring the flame of God’s judgment. His justice is based on a perfect understanding of the facts and his eternal wisdom; his judgments are sure and right.

“His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace...” His feet depict the direction of his work. His ways are pure, refined in a furnace. His feet clad in the armor of a warrior. In purity and strength, he goes where he wants to go.

“And his voice was like the roar of many waters.” When the throne of Ezekiel’s vision of God moved under the power of the living creatures’ massive wings, it sounded “like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty, a sound of tumult, like the sound of an army” (Ez. 1:24).

We live in an age of so many voices clamoring for our attention. When Jesus speaks, and we have ears to hear, his voice overwhelms them all. He speaks with power and strength.

“In his right hand he held seven stars...” In verse 20, we learn that these stars represent the angels assigned to each of the seven churches. This son of man rules not only earth and all who live on the earth, but he rules the heavenly beings as well.

“from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword...” This sword was

the weapon of choice for the Roman infantry soldier. But it echoes with words of the messianic judge of Isaiah 11:4:

“He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”

And Isaiah 49:2 concerning the Servant of the Lord:

“[The LORD] made my mouth like a sharp sword.”

New Testament scholar Greg Beale writes of the sword wielded by the son of man in Revelation 1:16, “Jesus will do battle in this manner not only against the evil nations (19:15), but also against all those among the churches who compromise their faith (2:16).”² In Revelation 2:12, the angel represents Jesus to the church in Pergamum as, “The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.” We can take comfort in the promised judgments of God on the nations, but we fall under the same scrutiny, and given the grace bestowed upon us, we have even greater reason to hear and respond.

“and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.” This calls to mind Moses’ shining face when he came down from the mountain after meeting with God (Ex. 34:29). When Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a high mountain, he was “transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun...” The ultimate depiction of any human encounter with God is to encounter light. In John’s first letter, he tells us, “God is light” (1:5). There on the barren island called Patmos, John encounters the one who answers the prayer of Psalm 4:6—“There are many who say, ‘Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O LORD!’”

When you put the shining face of the son of man together with the rest of this passage, you are looking at a man of purity and power, a man of wisdom and righteousness, a man strong in his exercise of justice who evaluates and then sets what is wrong to right. You are looking at God incarnate—the one sent as the Lord’s servant to destroy the works of evil and the evil one while at the same time protecting, vindicating, and restoring his people.

2. G.K. BEALE, *THE BOOK OF REVELATION* (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: EERDMANS, 1999), 212.

Falling at the Feet of Jesus

This vision of Jesus overwhelmed John. He collapsed. “I fell at his feet as though dead” (1:17). Just as Isaiah covered his mouth and pronounced curses on himself when he encountered a vision of the living God (Is. 6), so John fears judgment. What human being could stand on his own two feet before such a person? The One who sees all must see John’s sins. Surely the hammer of his justice is about to fall on him.

But Jesus reaches down. He touches John with his right hand, his hand of strength and justice, and reassures him: “Fear not.” As the book unfolds, we learn that if you are faithful to him and live out of the gift of his death for your sins, you have no need to fear him as judge. Jesus underlines this by telling John, “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I live forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.” Death is the final reality that no god of this earth has defeated. And deep in every human consciousness is the awareness that after death, there comes an accounting. Jesus has not only conquered death by his own death and resurrection, but he has the keys of judgment. He will not assign his faithful people to Hades. Their task is to endure by rejecting the seductions of this world and not bending when persecuted.

God gave this book to his church as an invitation to come to him. He calls us to himself. To see him. As I’ve pored over this passage in recent months, it creates in me a longing to see Jesus. I can’t get close to John’s response. I’ve yet to get a sight that makes me drop to the floor as though dead. But there is grace in longing. The more I look, the more I long to see. I want to see Jesus before I see all the problems in my church. I want to see Jesus before I consider all the corruption and temptations from this world.

In seeing Jesus, we are strengthened. His beauty protects us from the beguiling temptations of the world. His authority and power help us see the world for what it really is and bolster us to stand firm against the onslaughts of the enemy.

In the sight of him, everything else falls into place—including the book of Revelation.

JOHN LOFTNESS

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KING JESUS AND THE IDOL OF POLITICS

RICKY ALCANTAR

I think I realized I might have a problem when the producer of a well-known show on MSNBC left a voicemail for our church trying to get me on the show that night.

In 2016 I never would have said that I was too political, or that politics was an idol for me, or that politics had too great a place in my mind and heart. But that phone call, and what it brought out of me, changed my mind.

Here's what happened: In 2016, I really enjoyed following political news. At first, I loved the rhetoric and the strategy. Gradually, political news took up more and more of my internet time after work. I started to have a lot more opinions about policies as I saw the relative merits or problems with various positions. I began to get invested in specific candidates. But I didn't think it should be any concern.

Then in the primaries, a particular candidate made several statements that angered me. Before I knew it, I wrote a fiery blog post against the candidate and posted it. A reporter retweeted it, leading to a request from a media outlet to republish it. I didn't think it was a real problem. This time the republished article led to the call from an MSNBC producer. At the moment I got word

of the voicemail, a question occurred to me that I hadn't been asking:

"What do I want to define me?"

Defined by Devotion to Christ

This isn't a new struggle or issue. One of the 12 disciples of Jesus was broadly known for his political affiliation, so that it became part of his name and identity: Simon the Zealot. Three of the gospels use this designation for Simon (Matt. 10:4, Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15). It is a debated point among scholars, but I agree with R.T. France, Darrell Bock, and others who say the designation is likely due to Simon's nationalist political leanings and his zeal for Jewish independence from Rome. The Zealots would later emerge as a formal political party, a group of activists seeking to overthrow the Ro-

man government, who often resorted to violence.

The defining characteristic in his life was his relationship to Christ, not to politics.

This is why Simon's trajectory in the gospels is fascinating: He was part of a cause that required him to be "all-in." And it would be hard to argue that the cause wasn't worthy on some level. Was it right for Rome to oppress people by implementing an unjust and exploitative tax system, and to brutally

enforce the whims of a pagan emperor after God had given that land to the Jewish people?

But Simon's life radically changed when he met Jesus. He followed Jesus 24/7, listening to his teaching, imitating him, and learning from him. He became Simon the Christ-follower. The defining characteristic in his life was his relationship to Christ, not to politics.

In my own story, I had not been careful enough in my heart to make sure Christ had a place of absolute rulership. I could confess with my mouth, but more often, my heart and emotions were moved by things in the world of politics, than by Christ.

Now, hear me on this: It is appropriate for Christians to care about politics. We should pray for our nation's leaders, desire a government to function

as God intends, seek to be good citizens, and work toward justice and the common good as we have the opportunity. Some Christians are called to hold political offices or work for the government in other ways, and we should thank God for them. So I'm not saying a Christian can't write a political op-ed, although hopefully after prayer and counsel, and pastors especially, need to avoid taking public political positions that alienate those to whom we are to proclaim the gospel. I'm saying that the experience of writing my own op-ed revealed that in my heart, the place Christ should hold was slowly being ceded to political concerns.

Ultimately I decided that I couldn't pursue a hobby of political news and posts and keep my heart entirely devoted to Christ. I feared that ultimately I would be defined by one more than the other. I feared that it was easy for politics to replace Christ as the controlling influence on my life in my own heart.

Natural Enemies Brought Together

Alongside Simon in the group of twelve disciples was Matthew the Tax Collector. It would be difficult to find two more politically and naturally opposed people in Judea. Zealots were feared for wanting to overthrow an unjust Roman government, while tax collectors were despised for collaborating with the Roman government. These two men lived and ministered and worked alongside each other. But how?

Here's how: Their relationship to Jesus superseded their relationship to political concerns. Their political concerns or opinions were not meaningless, but allegiance to Jesus and his cause rendered them secondary at best. And it was their relationship to Jesus that transformed their relationships to one another.

Christians should feel a far greater sense of identification with each member of our church family, whatever their politics may be, than we do with those who share our politics but not our savior. And it is only when we treasure Christ above politics that we can genuinely love, honor, and enjoy those with different politics.

This is crucial in my own context. In El Paso, there are two major political defaults in my city: the average longtime El Pasoans who default to be liberal, and the military service members and federal employees who default to be conservative (though there are undoubtedly many exceptions), and a

large number of Mexican nationals thrown in for good measure. How can people whose parents never voted Republican be united in heart and mind with people whose parents never voted Democrat and with people born in another country altogether? It is only when they are united by a King whose rule and reign transcend all those labels.

I realized that I was in danger of elevating political concerns in my own life to the point that someone must share my political perspective to be relationally close to me. And by being most known for a political opinion, I ran the risk of cutting off the relationship before it even began. When Christ is most clearly and loudly where our allegiance lies, it allows us to form relationships beyond those of political affinity.

A Different Sort of Revolution

In Acts 1, after Jesus ascends, Simon is mentioned again. On the day of Pentecost, he was also there, after the Spirit falls: “But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words’” (Acts 2:14). Perhaps some in

*He now proclaims
a new king is
already on the
throne of heaven.*

the crowd even knew Simon before as a passionate apologist for political revolution. But after Christ, he’s proclaiming a different sort of revolution. With Simon next to him, Peter proclaims: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). In Acts 5, Simon is with “all the apostles” (verse 12) who, after being imprisoned, proclaim a new Leader and Savior whom God has exalted.

Simon had spent his old life trying to get a new king or ruler on the throne, but he now proclaims a new king is already on the throne of heaven. He, along with the other apostles, spend themselves, risk themselves, and devote themselves to the building of the church and proclamation of the gospel above all else.

In our own lives and situations, we can hold political opinions on the best candidates or the best policies, but our life mission as Christians is some-

thing much bigger. Our mission is redefined, and stewardship of our lives reprioritizes the proclamation of Jesus as King, even over the noble goals of seeking good political leaders.

This means that we must get used to building relationships, doing good, and sharing the gospel across political lines. We don't get to first ask someone's political leanings before we share the gospel. No, we freely share the good news that Jesus is Lord. That's the only way to reach the city.

The King of Kings in our Heart of Hearts

Political idolatry is a tricky thing to spot. It's possible for someone working on a congressional campaign to be living firmly with Christ at the forefront of their heart as they do good and tell others, even their political opponents, about the better rule of Jesus. It's also possible for someone to never speak a political word to someone else in their small group but hold politics as an idol as they drive home listening to talk radio or political podcasts.

How can we identify political idolatry in our lives?

- *Identity.* What most shapes my identity? Do I get sinfully angry when an aspect of my identity is threatened? What would others say is the most important thing about me?
- *Relationships.* Do I have friendships in the church across the political aisle? Am I tempted to back off from or get angry at someone in church when they have a different political opinion? Do I demand that my pastors or friends share my political views?
- *Mission.* What mission does my heart beat most for? Do I build relationships with unbelievers over political lines? Do I subtly or openly demand that parts of my political platform become part of the church's mission?

I didn't end up on MSNBC as a political talking head, and I'm grateful for that. But it still pains me that perhaps the most widely-read thing I've ever written is about a candidate in the 2016 primaries. The last thing I want is to be known as Ricky, the Political Commentator.

But I have no control over what ultimately defines me in the view of others. I have control over who reigns in my heart and where I invest my time, energy,

and worship. And what I should care about most is how the Lord sees me.

To that end, I hope to imitate Simon the Zealot. I wonder if perhaps years after Pentecost, he would smile when people would ask him about his old political life: “Weren’t you the guy zealous for getting a new king on the throne of Israel?”

Perhaps he would reply: “Oh yes, friend, in fact, he’s already on the throne. Let me tell you the good news about him ...”

RICKY ALCANTAR

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TRAUMA AND THE TREASURE OF CHRIST

ANDY FARMER

Can I let you in on a little secret? There are people in your church who are struggling with trauma. Maybe you can't see it as you gather together on a Sunday or in a small group—or these days through Zoom. But there are people all around you who have experienced something so horrific, so painful, so shameful, that it crowds into their present life, no matter how long ago it happened.

Trauma reaches out of the past and grips them with all the emotion, dread, and adrenaline-charging panic they faced when that horrible event first happened. It can feel like it is happening over and over and over. Maybe their trauma traces back to an experience of abuse or assault, maybe from a devastating event in their lives, or a violent or tragic event experienced while serving in the military or as a first responder.

Whatever the original event, they may manage life despite it, but it never leaves them. They live with an unrelenting sense that they can run from it, but they can't hide from it.

Maybe that person you know is you.

If so, I'd like to offer you a few thoughts that may help you navigate out of the grip of trauma and into safer days. Of course, these are not steps to instant freedom; they're more like handles to hold onto in the journey. But, ultimately, we discover that Jesus speaks to our trauma and leads us on the long path of renewal and hope.

Understanding the Struggle

First, trauma is usually understood not as what happened but how what happened affects you now. Trauma is the aftershock effect of a life-arresting event. Not everyone responds to horrible events the same way. Some cope better than others. Some find help where others suffer alone. Some can channel the reverberating effects of traumatic experiences into productive

*Jesus speaks to our
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expression. For example, it is said that the actor Jimmy Stewart came back from his experience watching friends get shot out of the sky as a bomber pilot in World War II and learned to push those experiences into his acting in a way that helped him navigate through life.

Another thought to consider is this. What is traumatic to me may not affect

you the same way. That's why we must be careful not to compare trauma. In this way, trauma is a bit like grief. Just as there is no 'typical' experience of grief, there is no 'typical' experience of trauma. Lots of factors go into what makes a life event a trauma experience. How it happened, when it happened, what kind of support we receive after it happens, what kind of helpful or unhelpful strategies we bring to it, how it plays into other elements of our story, all shape a trauma experience.

There is no 'my trauma is worse than yours' comparison chart. When we go down that road, one of two things will happen. We may become convinced that our trauma is worse, and therefore no one can understand or help us. Or we may feel like other peoples' trauma is more legit than ours, and all that does is compound our struggle with shame.

A third thought, and this may be hard to consider. Identifying and validating experiences as trauma only gets us so far. There is a tendency to diagnose

trauma like a disease—something you have. Trauma has physical manifestations, but it is not just a physical phenomenon. Yes, our brains are involved and our adrenaline glands—really, a trauma response is a full-body experience. And, yes, medication can help mitigate our physical responses. But to simply treat trauma like a disease or medical condition is to replace you as an embodied person with a soulless, defective chemical machine.

Also, the term *trauma* is used an awful lot these days. At its base, trauma is a description, not an answer. A cultural rule of thumb can be helpful here: when any descriptive term becomes in vogue, it tends to lose power in its meaning. If I can classify any unpleasant experience as traumatic, then I can identify any single event as a trigger. Where that leads is endless self-protection, habitual victimization, and a craving for validation of our personal experience, which is a hole best left un-dug.

The Trauma of the Cross

If I've got your attention, you may be saying, "So pastor, what do you offer?" Well, my pastoral answer, of course, is I offer Jesus. But what does that mean? Does saying, "The answer is Jesus" get me any farther than saying, "The problem is trauma?" Absolutely, because at the heart of Jesus is a heart to deal with trauma.

Think about it like this: Jesus came to experience trauma. Read the trauma story of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. The cross checks all the boxes of a traumatic event. It was horrible. It was evil. It was premeditated. It was humiliating. It was isolating. It was crushing. You have in Jesus one who is intimately familiar with trauma.

But there are some things about the trauma of the cross that move beyond how Jesus can identify with our trauma to how he can transform it. First, Jesus welcomed his trauma. Read the passion narrative of Matthew 26–27. He embraced the trauma of the cross; he moved toward it, he offered himself up to it.

God became flesh to move relentlessly toward the deadly trauma of the cross. Why? Because that's exactly what you needed him to do. That's exactly what I needed him to do.

You see, the fundamental trauma that shapes us all is our corruption due to

sin. Our lives apart from Christ are an endless reverberation of the self-traumatizing effects of the fall in Genesis 3. Genesis 3 is fundamentally the story of our rebellion against God. But Genesis 3 is also about the effects of that rebellion: the loss of innocence, the loss of identity, the loss of blessedness, the loss of love, all in one tragic moment that couldn't be taken back. This is where all people do their coping, their escaping, their self-medicating, their self-justifying—the trauma of sin-guilt is the great problem underlying everything else we experience in life. Read Romans 1 and see the effects of the trauma of the fall. Jesus came to address that trauma once and for all.

Your Life is a Story of Redemption

If you have received the gift of forgiveness of sin in the atoning death of Jesus, you have a re-written story. It is a story of grace and mercy. It is a story of power and light and life in Christ. Read John 1:1–18 to see the introduction to your new story. Is it a story of “bad things won't happen to me now?” No. Jesus didn't come to prevent bad things; he came to overcome them, to redeem them, to turn them into the stuff of glory. Read the long, glorious run-on sentence about God's grace to you in Ephesians 1:3–14.

Reject Jesus? Bad things will happen to you, and you will cope until you die. And you will live in fear of inevitable judgment the whole way. Receive Jesus? Bad things will happen, but never without a place in the story of redemption, never without strength to endure, never without meaning. And then, yes, your time here will end in death—it always does. But with that end, all trauma will cease, and you will live free of tears and full of joy.

Read about your glorious forever-future in Revelation 21:1–5. Trauma has an end. It will, like death itself, be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:54–56).

If you struggle with trauma now, there are helpful things you can do to battle it and manage it. You can't do it alone, but you can do it. Your friends can help, as can your pastor, a sound biblical counselor, perhaps a wise medical practitioner. But don't lose sight of the more profound work taking place. There is a deeper thing going on in your life below the trauma. Paul describes it like this:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look

not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (1 Cor. 4:16-18).

That's the work of the Spirit renewing you day by day. The power of God's Word is replacing lies about who you are with the truth about who you are in Christ. Do not lose heart; Jesus is working in every affliction. He is the answer. Treasure Christ in your trauma because he treasured you in his.

ANDY FARMER

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TO LIVE IS CHRIST: LESSONS LEARNED IN THE VALLEY OF DARKNESS

TODD PETERSON

It all started very innocently. I was sitting at the eye doctor with my son, watching him look into all of the cool machines that tested various parts of his eyesight. I wondered if I should get an eye test since my eyes were last tested in elementary school. I inquired, and the optometrist promptly scolded me for my negligence. A week later, I was sitting in the same place my son had been, looking into cool machines.

My appointment was routine until the last phase where the optometrist dilated my eyes. He would tell me later that he wasn't going to do this, but something changed his mind. As he looked at my right eye, I could tell he was shocked by something he saw: "I'm not sure what I'm seeing, but something is in there that shouldn't be."

He said that he'd never seen anything like it before, that it looked like a tumor, and that I needed to see a specialist. The aide came back and said that the next appointment for a specialist would be the following week. The optometrist sternly replied, "No, he needs to see someone tomorrow." That's when I began to realize that this may be something much more serious.

Facing a Fearful Prognosis

The specialist I saw the next day confirmed what the optometrist saw: I had a melanoma in my right eye, a very rare and very deadly location for melanoma cancer found in only about six out of every one million people. The specialist told me that there was no one in El Paso that could treat me. So, three days later, my wife and I were on our way to Phoenix to see a cancer specialist who could give us an idea of what we were facing.

In Phoenix, the doctor was straightforward and told us that even if they could radiate or remove the tumor itself, this form of cancer spreads through the bloodstream and usually attacks the liver. The cancer cells were already in my bloodstream, and there was nothing they could do but wait and see if

*I realized that I
had to get a hold of
what I believed to
be true about God.*

it would metastasize. If it did spread, there was no known treatment available to stop it. He said I had about a 30% chance of it spreading, and at that point, I would only have about 6 to 9 months to live.

My wife and I had no idea that this type of prognosis was even possible, and the immediate weight of his words seemed overwhelming. I learned then

what it is to cry to the Lord out of the depths (Ps. 130:1-2).

I remember very distinctly driving back home in the passenger seat, making call after call to tell family and friends what we had learned. I remember hearing reactions of shock, fear, and sadness and trying to process all of those same emotions myself. One of my employees lost her father when she was 16, and I had heard many stories of the difficulties she experienced going through the rest of her teen years and early adulthood without a father.

Would this be the same for my ten-year-old daughter? Would I not see her complete high school or walk her down the aisle at her wedding? Would I not be able to see my 12-year-old son through the formative years of high school and college and on to adulthood? Would my wife and I not grow old together after all?

When we returned home, we faced the prospect of telling our children about my prognosis and the possibilities that lay ahead for our family, including

the fact that this might be our last year together. I realized that I had to get a hold of what I believed to be true about God in light of these circumstances before I could try to explain it to them.

Am I Ready to Die?

It is said that during adversity, you find out what you truly believe. The Lord had graciously saved me at a young age, but I now realized that many of my beliefs about life and death were largely academic. Many questions came to mind that I had always believed to be true, but the possibility of them actually coming to fruition soon gave them a new sobering reality.

Did I truly believe that there was life after death? Did I truly believe that I would be with God when I died? Did I truly believe that Jesus's death would atone for my sins? Was I ready to die and stand before God to give an account for my life?

Even as these questions were coming to my mind, God mercifully began to impress upon me his great love for my family and me. He reminded me that he had set his love upon us from the foundation of the world, that we might know him in this life and in the life to come. His plan for our lives would always be better than the plans we were making, and he would use what seemed like a devastating prognosis for our good and his glory.

Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus is the “founder and perfecter of our faith,” and as faith began to well up in my heart that day, I knew that it was birthed by the Lord. I could never create it on my own. My soul was being “strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1).

Discovering and Spreading Hope

Over the following weeks and months, as we walked through multiple surgical procedures to stop the tumor from growing, God began to impress two distinct truths in my heart. One: for the first time in my life, I began to feel joyous anticipation at the thought of being with God one day, perhaps much sooner than I had ever imagined. In his presence, there is fullness of joy, and at his right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11).

Two: I experienced the distinct awareness that each day, every encounter with other people was an opportunity to reflect the realities of a personal relationship with God and the hope in the gospel of Jesus. The Lord prepared me to give a reason for the hope in me (1 Pet. 3:15).

On my frequent trips to MD Anderson in Houston, I began to see each encounter with patients, workers, doctors, and nurses in the hospital as a small moment of opportunity to reflect the reality of the “peace that passes understanding” (Phil. 4:7) that comes from a relationship with Jesus even in the direst of circumstances. I bought shirts that said “Jesus Strong” and “Pick Jesus” so that I would be a billboard of hope as I walked through the hospital.

I’ll never forget an encounter with a nurse on an elevator. She looked at me and saw my shirt that said “Know Jesus, Know Peace” and then saw my patient wristband. As tears welled up in her eyes, all she could say was, “I’m just overwhelmed at your shirt. Thank you!” She worked there every day, but the message that there was hope beyond the death she regularly witnessed was comforting and life-giving.

I also began to realize a very profound insight about myself: I wasn’t ready to die. I didn’t feel that I could stand before the Lord and honestly say that I had done my best to reflect the truth of the gospel to those around me in my life up to that point. Cancer had given me a new urgency that I have never lived with before, one that saw life as much more fleeting, but one filled with daily opportunities to share the hope that is in Jesus.

Christ is Mine in Life and Death

Eight years later, God has chosen to continue to preserve me year after year and continue to let me live day to day for his glory and the testimony of his love through the gospel. There are still no real treatments for the cancer if it spreads, so I still have to get checked twice a year to see what God’s plans are for our lives.

The reality is that we are all in that same boat. None of us are promised tomorrow; we are all truly living day to day by God’s grace.

But through this cancer journey, God has pulled back the curtain of my mind to see his plans and his promises clearly in life and death: in life, that joy is not only found in the current relationships that he has given us, but also in the opportunity to be God’s ambassadors, to be a part of his merciful ministry of reconciliation as he makes his appeal through us (2 Cor. 5:20).

And even in the face of death, the peace of knowing that in God, we can indeed have faith that he will work “*all* things together for good” (Rom.8:28).

The day is coming when all of the trials of life will be over, and we will live for all eternity in the rest and joy of the presence of Jesus Christ, our Savior.

I now truly understand Paul when he declares, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

TODD PETERSON

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I WILL GLORY IN MY REDEEMER

SOVEREIGN GRACE MUSIC

VERSE 1

I will glory in my Redeemer
Whose priceless blood has ransomed me
Mine was the sin that drove the bitter nails
And hung Him on that judgment tree
I will glory in my Redeemer
Who crushed the power of sin and death
My only Savior before the holy Judge
The Lamb who is my righteousness
The Lamb who is my righteousness

VERSE 2

I will glory in my Redeemer
My life He bought, my love He owns
I have no longings for another
I'm satisfied in Him alone
I will glory in my Redeemer

His faithfulness my standing place
Though foes are mighty and rush upon me
My feet are firm, held by His grace
My feet are firm, held by His grace

VERSE 3

I will glory in my Redeemer
Who carries me on eagles' wings
He crowns my life with lovingkindness
His triumph song I'll ever sing
I will glory in my Redeemer
Who waits for me at gates of gold
And when He calls me, it will be paradise
His face forever to behold
His face forever to behold

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THE PLACE OF CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE IN CHRIST-CENTERED PARENTING

PETE PAYNE

I was mid-stride, making my way across the family room to deliver some well-deserved discipline to my young son, whose sinful rebellion was on full display. The Lord mercifully stopped me in my tracks with this thought: *“That’s exactly how you look to me sometimes.”* It was a loving correction from my heavenly Father, and it was exactly what I needed.

Parenting is not easy, but God is faithful, and he is with us. He has given fathers and mothers one of the most glorious privileges of human existence. The opportunity to have a hand in shaping the lives of children, created to reflect God’s image, should evoke both gratitude and the fear of the Lord in the heart of every parent.

The biblical responsibilities of parents are many: we are called to set an example, to teach the way of wisdom, to pray for our children, to nurture and provide for their needs, to love and affirm, to discipline and correct, and to help them treasure Christ above all. We read in Deuteronomy 6:7 of the vast scope of parental practice, to teach them diligently day by day. Ephesians 6:4 describes the magisterial content of parental instruction: “the discipline and instruction of the Lord”—in other words, we teach them to live in conformity to God’s righteous commandments. Psalm 78:4 calls us to the

joyful work of telling the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord.

As parents, we are called to bring all of the Word of God to bear in all of life to help our children fulfill the purpose for which they were created: to glorify God.

Great Sinners and a Great Savior

Sadly, we entered the world as enemy combatants, tainted by the evil of sin. Apart from the grace of the gospel, we would still be estranged from God. Likewise, our children also come into this world and our lives as beings created in the image of God, and yet “dead in [their] transgressions and sins” (Eph. 2:1). They, too, begin life as enemies of God and his kingdom. Like us, their greatest need and only hope is the powerful and miraculous inter-

vention of God the Father through the atoning work of Jesus the Son.

*Our work as parents
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work of Jesus.*

Effective biblical parenting is ever mindful of the status of children apart from the gospel and proceeds accordingly. We must never forget who we were.

At the same time, we must never forget what Christ has done. The gospel

of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—provides for us and for our children a new birth, a new status as beloved children of God (Eph. 5:1), and a living hope for a glorious and eternal life, which begins the moment the divine gifts of repentance and faith in Jesus are exercised. Paul spends the first three chapters of his letter to the Ephesian church extolling the glories of God’s work on their behalf. There is only one command in those chapters: to “remember” all that God had done for them. Our work as parents is, above all, to remind our children, through both our words and deeds, of the person and work of Jesus, the one who is our Savior and our example.

An Imperfect Reflection of the Father

In preparing to bring discipline to my young son, I had forgotten the most important thing about myself—I am a beloved child of God, rescued from enmity and death by the sacrifice of my older Brother, Jesus. Striding an-

grily across the family room to bring the wrath of Dad to bear, I forgot my most fundamental identity. I, therefore, was about to act as an independent “moral” agent.

How kind of God to admonish me at that moment and to remind me of my rescue and his ongoing, patient work in my life! “*That’s how you look to me sometimes.*” He reminded me of the great privilege he had given me, to parent as an imperfect reflection of his perfect parenting, to represent him in the interaction I was about to have with my young son. I am called to imitate God as a dearly loved child (Eph. 5:1).

A Love that Corrects

The thought jolted me back to reality, and I was immediately tempted not to discipline because I had just been appropriately warned by the Lord. I have often heard fathers say, “I can’t discipline my son because I am a bigger sinner than he is.” This represents a pendulum swing from unbiblical and angry discipline—the kind that I was going to bring to my son—to another unbiblical extreme, which is the failure to discipline at all.

Correcting or disciplining our children is not the only method of parenting or the main thing parents do. I am focusing on correction here because it can seem inconsistent with grace, our culture often rejects it, and even a growing number of Christian parents are making the mistake of neglecting it.

Scripture is clear that wise parenting includes correcting our children in love. Corrective discipline is a broad category that includes words of reproof, the wise and loving application of corporal punishment, loss of privileges, and other negative consequences. Children should never be disciplined in anger. Parents must not be harsh. Abuse should always be reported to authorities. But discipline administered in wisdom and love is good for our children and pleasing to God. Proverbs 29:15 says, “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”

Sam Crabtree has written an excellent and timely book titled, *Parenting with Loving Correction: Practical Help for Raising Young Children*. He says, “The wise, corrective discipline of our children glorifies the truth-speaking God of the Bible, honors parents (all parents, as well as the specific child’s parents), protects our children, strengthens the church, serves society, and gives

hope to the nations.”¹ Loving correction is God’s path of grace and blessing.

Repentance, Reception, Return

Why do parents neglect correction? There can be many reasons for failing to discipline our children, from laziness and abdication to guilt to poor teaching. Still, all of these reasons are ultimately rooted in the same theological problem: a lack of understanding our position and role before God and a similar lack of understanding the deepest need of our children before God.

A proper Biblical response to a rebuke from the Lord comes in the form of *repentance* (“Lord, forgive me for my anger and self-righteousness”); a grateful *reception* of God’s restoring grace (“Lord, thank you that you are faithful and just to forgive and cleanse me”); and a *return* to walking “in a manner worthy of the gospel” (Eph. 4:1). In the case of parenting, that means a recommitment to walk as a beloved child of God, representing and imitating the heart and actions of my Father to the children he has entrusted to my care.

What did this mean in the situation with my son? My Father, who had just demonstrated his unending patience and gentle but firm discipline concerning my sin, now expected me to turn from my sinful attitudes and to show my young son the same grace and patience through the gentle application of appropriate, God-honoring discipline. God had loved me by correcting my attitude. I now needed to love my son through the rod of discipline that he needed and the Gospel-motivated instruction and restoration that accompanies biblical correction.

For the Good of Our Children

Too often, particularly in the past decade, I have heard Christian parents avoid corrective discipline, saying things like:

- “*I like to give them grace.*”
- “*It doesn’t work for my kids.*”
- “*Discipline will damage their self-image and our relationship.*”
- “*It’s legalistic.*”
- “*They’re God’s kids—they’ll turn out okay.*”

These comments reflect misunderstandings of the character and the plan of

1. SAM CRABTREE, *PARENTING WITH LOVING CORRECTION: PRACTICAL HELP FOR RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN* (WHEATON, IL: CROSSWAY, 2019), 35.

God for the glorious task of parenting. God commands corrective discipline for the good of our children. Grace and discipline are not mutually exclusive. Our Father is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,” *and* he “will by no means clear the guilty...” (Ex. 34:6-7). As we follow in his footsteps and apply his ordained means of discipline, our children will come to understand the seriousness of their sin before a holy, unchanging God.

He will use this means, as he has done down through the centuries, to teach your children the devastating truth (he will not clear the guilty), leading to the anguished cry, “How then can I be saved?” And in those holy moments, like the millions of Christian parents who have represented the Father before you, you will have the astounding privilege of teaching, again and again, “With man, it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.” You have the joy of introducing them to Jesus, the Son of God, who received the wrath of God so that they could become, like you, God’s beloved children.

Fathers and mothers, as those called to care for the souls of his little ones, let us again become “imitators of God” in our parenting. Corrective discipline plays a crucial role in Christ-centered parenting. A biblical approach to our task will protect our homes from the “winds of doctrine” that masquerade as wisdom and will point our children to the grace and truth that are found in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

PETE PAYNE

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MY SOUL IS SATISFIED: SINGLENESS AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF CHRIST

JASON STOWELL

I am not quite sure how this happened, but a long time ago, my friends and family got it in their minds that I really, really love turtles. As a result, for the past 25 years, for Christmas and birthdays, and random gatherings, I have been getting various types of turtle gifts. Usually, they are not real turtles but toy turtles, model turtles, or turtle keychains.

Perhaps way back when I was ten, I might have thought turtles were cool. But I am in my thirties now, and I don't care anymore. It's not that I dislike them; I just feel indifferent towards them. I saw a turtle on the side of the road the other day, and I just kept driving. I didn't stop to see if it was okay. I didn't add it to my collection. I just kept going. It's just a turtle.

But multiple times every year, without fail, I am given this gift over and over again. And, of course, I always pretend to like it. I pretend that I don't mind that I am a full-grown adult and still get turtle socks for my birthday. I don't want the gift of turtles anymore! But at this point, I have gotten hundreds of them, and every year I think to myself, "great... another turtle."

All of us can probably think of an unwanted gift we've received at some point in our lives. And when we read Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 7

on the gift of singleness, it might seem like one of those unwanted gifts for many. It might not be something you want, but Paul seems excited for people to have it.

Some Christians view singleness as a bad thing, an unwanted gift, understanding singleness primarily through the lens of the trials it may bring or the blessings it deprives us of. The New Testament, however, presents both marriage and singleness as unique blessings and gifts from God. Yes, each brings challenges as well. Many are unhappily married or unhappily single. But God has graced each of us for the situation we are in presently.

As a single man, I've learned that my situation provides unique opportunities to serve Christ and display his sufficiency in my life. And I am eager for the

lives of all Christians who are single to testify to the satisfaction that Christ alone can give.

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The Goodness of Singleness

In 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul says (speaking of his singleness), "I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has his gift from God, one of one kind and one of another." In the next verse, Paul even says that it is good for someone

who is not married to remain single, and in much of the rest of the chapter, he explains the opportunity that singleness can be to invest in the church and advance the gospel. Indeed, like Paul, there are some whom God has given a unique ambition to remain single and to use that freedom from the commitments of married life to give more time and energy to serving the church and spreading the gospel (verses 32-35).

There are also those who are single who haven't received clarity that this is their lifelong calling. Yet even in these situations, God has given the grace to honor the Lord in our singleness, and he affirms the importance of single men and women in his kingdom. The truth is, we all started our lives single, and many of us will end our lives single. We will certainly all spend eternity without earthly marriage, fully to enjoy the one eternal marriage between Christ and the church.

Churches today should affirm the goodness of singleness and equip those who have this gift. We do singles a disservice when we create undue pressure for them to get married. When we idolize marriage and family, we view singleness as a threat to Christian maturity—in short, when we treat their singleness as inferior. As the Statement of Faith for Sovereign Grace Churches affirms, “Single men and women are no less able to enjoy and honor God and no less important to his purposes. They also are to give expression to God’s image in distinct and complementary ways, flourishing as his image-bearers and bringing him glory in their singleness.”¹

Singleness is not an inferior status. Singles are no less important. God has called us to full human flourishing, just as we are.

When Singleness Brings Sorrow

And yet, it is a mistake to think that singleness is easy, just as it is a mistake to believe that marriage is easy. Many singles have the God-given desire to serve Christ in the context of marriage and family. And to have this desire while remaining in a season of singleness often brings many hardships. This might be where you find yourself right now.

Maybe you have been married in the past but are no longer. Perhaps you have never been married and are longing for the Lord to give you the gift of marriage. Maybe this season is a very difficult one: Lonely Friday nights ... attending yet another wedding alone ... coming back to an empty home and an empty bed ... longing for a family of your own ... feeling the heartbreak of a lost spouse ... caring for your children without a partner.

The pain of these things can be very real. And, friends, Jesus knows these sorrows. Hebrews 4:15 says that “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” That truth applies fully to the difficulties of single life. Jesus himself was a single man all his days on this earth. He understands our needs and he loves to draw near to us in our pain and sorrow.

A Unique Opportunity

In 1 Corinthians 7, we see that we can trust Jesus in every season to give us joy and give us purpose. There are certain truths about Christ and his kingdom that shine most brightly through the lives of single men and women.

¹. [SOVEREIGN GRACE CHURCHES STATEMENT OF FAITH](#), 22.

God in his goodness has designed singleness to provide a unique opportunity to demonstrate how satisfying Christ is. Paul saw singleness as a unique way to serve Jesus, but he knew it also meant forgoing other good things in life. The single life lacks many of the wonderful things that marriage brings: companionship, sexual intimacy, and family, among others.

For all who are single, there is an excellent opportunity for us to show the world how satisfying Christ is by pursuing Christ more than we pursue marriage and family, by placing our hope more in Him than in a change in our marital status, and by looking to Him above all else for joy. If we live like this, Christ promises to be our satisfaction, and we will find that Jesus is enough.

*God has designed
singleness to provide
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to demonstrate how
satisfying Christ is.*

Singleness also provides a unique opportunity to serve. Paul recognized that his season of life provided an opportunity to devote his full time and attention to building up the church and to grow in godliness. For many, singleness also provides that freedom and flexibility to study, serve, and invest in those around you.

And, of course, the pursuit of these things should not stop if you are married. The point is that singleness can be a season of great value because of the unique opportunity it provides to pursue these things without the additional responsibilities of marriage.

Our Truest Joy

Singleness is not a holding pattern while awaiting true purpose or joy in life. Nor is singleness somehow a second-class standing in the Kingdom of God. One Corinthians 7 speaks to ways in which singles are uniquely valuable to the church. It speaks to ways in which singles can show with more clarity the satisfying love of Christ. It speaks to ways in which singles can serve the mission of the church with great effectiveness.

This is because our truest joy and deepest purpose are not found in our marital status; it is located in the person and the work of Jesus Christ. He is sovereign over your season of life. He has walked this road before us. He

is present to sustain and to satisfy your soul. And he has a meaningful and necessary purpose for your life in your current circumstance.

“O Father, use my ransomed life
In any way You choose
And let my song forever be
My only boast is You”²

Christ is sufficient.

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JASON STOWELL

Jason Stowell serves as an elder at [Redeemer Fellowship](#) (Newark, DE).

THE GLORY OF CHRIST IN MISSIONS: HOW GOD CALLED ME TO ETHIOPIA

MICHAEL GRANGER

I had to crouch as I walked into the dim mud home that was not much larger than a king-sized bed. The walls were made of plywood as thin as cardboard, and covering them were posters of western singers like Usher and Justin Timberlake. On a bed, a mother lifted her voice in pain. Several years earlier, her husband had died of AIDS. Now she lay dying of the same disease.

This was in Addis Ababa, three days after Christmas in 2004. I was 19 years old, and this was my introduction to Ethiopia.

I asked if I could sit down at her side. She gave me a nod and stretched out her hand to hold mine. She looked at me through tears and cried out, "What will happen to my children when I die?" We listened and lamented. We spoke of the hope of the gospel. And then, with wonder, we watched as this dying mother repented of her sin and expressed her faith in the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on behalf of sinners.

As I walked back to the street over cobblestone walkways through alleys of shacks, my ponderings became boisterous, ranting: "What will happen to my children when I die?" AIDS claimed another single mother that night. And for the first time in my life, I felt confronted with a dilemma I could

not ignore—a call to Ethiopia.

Compelled by the Preciousness of Christ

The precious blood of Christ has purchased a people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. And if Christ has gone to such great lengths to secure such a salvation, would he not see to it that his sheep are shepherded along the way?

In partnership with a couple of other brothers, the following years brought about establishing a non-profit organization based in Addis Ababa that supported over 80 children on the verge of streetism, a drop-in center for children who live on the streets, and a children's home. But in due time, I was confronted with another dilemma.

We were doing the meaningful work of keeping children off the streets, keeping a roof over their heads and meals in their bellies, and putting them through school. But what about their souls?

I recognized in Ethiopia that the gospel was missing in many churches. The good news of a wrath-absorbing Savior was replaced with the demonic lies of the prosperity gospel. As that false doctrine was propagated, it was accompanied by an over-emphasis on and perversion of the charismatic gifts.

For me, the primary dilemma went from being, “What will happen to my children when I die?” to “Who will pastor the children of God for whom Christ died?” This, too, became a dilemma for me, one that I could not ignore. I was not only called to Ethiopia. As Ephesians 4:11 says, “And He gave ... shepherds.” I was called to shepherd in Ethiopia.

“Let Your Gospel Fill The Earth”

Statistics suggest that by 2100, just shy of 85% of the world's population will live in Africa and Asia. That likely means that by the time my one-year-old daughter is on her deathbed, the world will have undergone a major transformational shift, and only 15% of the world will be in Europe, the Americas, and Australia. That's only 79 years from now. Yet, despite this coming shift, the lion's share of resources—pastors, professors, books, training, seminaries, funds, successful businesses that fund ministries, etc.—are still largely in the West.

God has richly blessed several denominations and networks, and Sovereign

Grace Churches is among them. One of God’s purposes in being gracious to us and blessing us so richly is that the name of Christ would be honored among the nations. Psalm 67:1-2 says, “May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.”

Just as we have come to know God’s saving grace, we desire for this message of grace to be made known across the earth, including those places where the gospel is presently not known. It is because we treasure Christ that we are committed to the advance of his glory among the nations. The one who died for us commands us to go and make disciples of the nations, and he promises he will be with us.

For Sovereign Grace Churches, the Lord has put a song in our hearts:

“ Jesus, come and build Your church
Let Your gospel fill the earth
Till the day that You return
We look to You, we look to You”¹

A Church is Planted

Alongside my Ethiopian ministry partner Abenezer Dejene and our church planting team, Sovereign Grace Churches planted a new church in East Africa. On October 4th, 2020, Trinity Fellowship in Addis Ababa was born.

That Sunday morning, we began with a call to worship from Isaiah 40:9-11, inviting the redeemed to “Behold your God.” That was followed by singing “He is Our God”:

“Now to the King on the throne
Who was and is to come
And to the Lamb Who was slain be glory”²

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I preached from Hebrews 11:39-12:2 on looking to Jesus in the first sermon of a 3-part series entitled “Why We’re Gospel-Centered.” We ended our service by taking communion together. It was an indescribably sweet time with our glorious Savior and with one another. The last words of the service were, “As my dear pastor and friend C.J. Mahaney always says, “I wish tomorrow were Sunday!”

Not a Sacrifice

The glory of Christ makes a man delight in doing hard things in hard places for Jesus. The glory of Christ causes a man to look at discomforts, challenges, trials, and sufferings and to say, “He is worthy!” For me, ever since my conversion, serving the Great Shepherd has been a sort of heaven in and of itself. It is not a sacrifice.

*Brothers and sisters,
let’s continue to
cultivate God’s heart
for the nations.*

I praise God that I am just one of many arrows being shot by the bow of Sovereign Grace to the nations. The Grangers could not be here in East Africa doing what we’re doing if we didn’t have the training, encouragement, prayers, and support that flow from gospel partnership.

It’s an exciting time to be a part of a small family of churches with a passion for partnership and a longing to see Christ exalted among the nations. The one who gave his life to ransom a people from every nation has promised that he will build his church.

Brothers and sisters, let’s continue to cultivate God’s heart for the nations. Let’s seize the opportunities and open doors before us. Let’s thank God for every testimony of his grace in distant lands. And let’s pray that God uses our feeble efforts to lead men and women from many nations to treasure Christ, to the praise of his glory.

He is worthy!

MICHAEL GRANGER

Michael Granger serves as senior pastor of [Trinity Fellowship](#) (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia).

A WORD FOR THE SECOND (AND THIRD) GENERATION OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

JON PAYNE

In the year 2082, my youngest son will turn 67 years old. If the Lord does not return by then (Come soon, Lord Jesus!), and if He is gracious to preserve us, Sovereign Grace Churches will turn 100 years old that year. Current children will see our 100th anniversary. I've been pondering that future celebration for some time now.

There are obviously denominations that have been around much longer and have had a much more significant impact in the world. I thank God for the churches and generations of believers in the broader body of Christ that have gone before us and have proven faithful. Motivated by their example, I'm pondering our future in Sovereign Grace.

What will we be when our centennial comes? What should we be? And what can we do about it?

The Generational Transfer

We are currently experiencing the first broad generational transition in our denomination's brief life. Sovereign Grace affirms doctrines that have been confessed throughout church history, but our little family of churches is very

young. Born in revival, nurtured in grace, matured through trial, united in faith and practice, we now face this crucial generational test.

We can look to the future of our churches with confidence, not because of human gifting or wisdom, but because God is faithful. “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Ps. 20:7).

And yet, we have a crucial part to play. To be a second-generation member or pastor in Sovereign Grace is to have received a challenging and honorable assignment from the Lord. It is a slightly different calling from a founding generation and yet a pioneer calling in its own way. We are called to pioneer a faithful gospel transition from those who came before to those who will come after. We must ensure that our gospel heritage is our legacy—not because we care about our renown, but because we care about the renown of Christ through us.

How do we go about this? Let me share four pitfalls we should avoid as we embark on this transferring adventure.

The Pitfall of Idolizing Newness

First, we must avoid the danger of idolizing newness. A faithful first generation is “first” because they have rediscovered orthodox doctrines that have been neglected in some area or age of the church. In Sovereign Grace, it was exciting to hear “gospel-centered,” “the doctrines of grace,” and “New Testament church life” for the first time—and not just because they are biblical and true, but because they were also new to us. But a second-generation in Sovereign Grace is not called to discover a “new” foundation or “new” first priorities, but to find fresh joy in preaching the same things.

To keep the main thing the main thing for the third generation, we must keep the same thing the main thing right now. This requires perseverance, creativity, courage, and the humility to embrace our place in God’s timeline. Like Timothy and Titus before us, we are called to guard the foundation and build upon it. We should develop doctrinally, we should keep growing, but without demoting the Cornerstone we’ve received.

And this second-generation calling has its own challenge. As D.A. Carson warns about another denominational transition, “One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social,

economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the ‘entailments’ became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.¹ We must resist the drift and keep the same thing the main thing.

The Pitfall of Assuming Affection

Second, we must avoid the assumption that affirmation equals affection. As we’ve heard from Carson before, “If I have learned anything in 35 or 40 years of teaching, it is that students don’t learn everything I teach them. What they learn is what I am excited about, the kinds of things I emphasize again and again and again and again. That had better be the gospel.”²

The second generation of Sovereign Grace cannot, must not, assume that since our churches still affirm the same doctrines confessionally, we are still prioritizing those doctrines functionally and emotionally. Our centennial celebration must not find us affirming Christ and Him crucified as a technical doctrine that no one shouts and weeps over. But if we are to shout and weep then, we must be shouting and weeping now at the person and work of Christ and the shocking mystery of grace.

This requires personal heart work and not assumptions, pressing for affections and not just accepting affirmations. We were not inspired by mere affirmation a generation ago, and our spiritual children will not be either. A hundred years of gospel zeal for Christ will require modeling affirmation and affection.

The Pitfall of Pastoral Apathy

Third, we must discern and confront current doctrinal threats to our centennial legacy. Pastoral coasting leads to denominational shipwreck. Some threats will remain or be amplified from the past (for example, the unrelenting attack on Biblical sexuality), and some rejuvenated threats to Biblical authority, church faithfulness, and gospel centrality will arise (the idol of cultural power comes to mind).

1. D.A. CARSON, *BASICS FOR BELIEVERS: AN EXPOSITION OF PHILIPPIANS* (BAKER ACADEMIC: GRAND RAPIDS, MI, 1996), 26-27.

2. JUSTIN TAYLOR, “CARSON: PEOPLE DON’T LEARN WHAT I TEACH THEM; THEY LEARN WHAT I’M EXCITED ABOUT,” [HTTPS://WWW.THEGOSPELCOALITION.ORG/BLOGS/JUSTIN-TAYLOR/CARSON-PEOPLE-DONT-LEARN-WHAT-I-TEACH-
THEM-THEY-LEARN-WHAT-IM-EXCITED-ABOUT/](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/carson-people-dont-learn-what-i-teach-them-they-learn-what-im-excited-about/)

Second-generation pastors do not have to build from the ground up, but they cannot relax and presume upon their inheritance of churches and doctrines, lest they squander them in pastoral apathy. Doctrinal and pastoral vigilance, genuine partnership, prayer, and earnest preaching are our watchwords—lest our stewardship is squandered and apathy becomes our legacy. Lord, help us.

The Pitfall of Self-Trust

Finally, we must renounce self-trust for our future. All of the pitfalls above should be avoided, but none compare to the danger of self-trust. We were born by the power of the Spirit, and we will only continue by His power as well. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

*We were born by
the power of the
Spirit, and we will
only continue by
His power as well.*

The future of the church rests in the hands of the Lord. As John Owen said on his death bed, “I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm. But while the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond. The promise stands invincible, that

He will never leave us, nor forsake us.”³

We must commit the second (and third and fourth!) generations to the Lord. We are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love, and any Biblical and gospel heritage is due to him. So we say now, “Lord, here’s our heart and our future, take and seal it for Your courts above. ‘Tis grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.”

His Glory Alone

And should the Lord be pleased to preserve us for our 100th birthday, should our gospel heritage become our legacy, it will be to his glory alone. And saints above and below will say, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness” (Ps. 115:1)!

3. JOHN OWEN, “THE LIFE OF DR. OWEN,” IN *THE WORKS OF JOHN OWEN* (EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND: JOHNSON & HUNTER, 1850-1855; REPRINT BY BANNER OF TRUTH, 1965), VOL. 1, CIII.

So—to my brothers and sisters in the second generation (and third!)—let us build on Christ the Cornerstone and watch over our gospel heritage. Let us pray that the favor of the Lord would continue to be upon us and that he would establish the work of our hands. And let us be confident and full of faith for the future, knowing that God is able to do far more than all that we ask or think. Lord willing, our 100th birthday will find our spiritual children and grandchildren weeping, shouting, and singing of Christ and him crucified.

This article is dedicated with affection and gratefulness to our fathers in the faith, the first generation of Sovereign Grace. Thank you for making Christ our foundation.

JON PAYNE

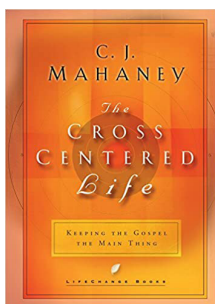
Jon Payne is senior pastor of [Redemption Hill Church](#) (Round Rock, TX) and serves on the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team.

Recommended Reading

“We are quite persuaded that the very best way for you to be spending your leisure time, is to be either reading or praying. You may get much instruction from books which afterwards you may use as a true weapon in your Lord and Master’s service. Paul cries, ‘Bring the books!’—join in the cry.”

CHARLES SPURGEON

Paul, His Cloak and His Books



THE CROSS CENTERED LIFE

BY C.J. MAHANEY

(MULTNOMAH, 2006/166 PAGES)

JOSHUA EARL

Almost eight years ago, I was frantically trying to prepare my Easter Sunday sermon, laboring to produce a fresh perspective on the old, old story. I combed through the commentaries and books on my shelf pleading with men smarter than me to shed light on an event which, to my shame, had become “old hat” rather than “good news.”

Then, I saw it. Tucked out of sight was a small book entitled *Living the Cross Centered Life (LTCCCL)* by C.J. Mahaney, which apparently had been gifted to me but never opened. Hope (for my sermon) flickered when I saw the word *cross*. I took the book down, opened the first page, and began reading. Something like an hour later, I finished the book with wet eyes and a gaping mouth. It felt like a revival.

Until that moment, my lack of joy was a symptom, according to Mahaney, of not being cross-centered—and more specifically, no longer being amazed at the wonder of God’s grace shown to me in the gospel. Apparently, I wasn’t alone. Recognizing that this apathy is the temptation of every Christ-follower, Mahaney leads his readers by the hand on a thoughtful and compelling journey to the foot of the cross, weaving in both a personal story and powerful quotations. After all, he says, “grace is never more amazing than when I’m looking intensely at the cross” (21).

The book is as pastoral as it is practical. About half of the book paints a vivid, nearly photographic portrait of what Jesus did and the significance of His work. The other half is an indispensable application (the last chapter, “The Cross Centered Day,” is especially beneficial).

Chapters three through eight provide an escape route for the Christian stuck in the pit of dreary introspection. Chapter six, “Staring into the Cup,” is incredibly potent. Peer into the heart-wrenching scene of Gethsemane and

be baffled anew by the thought that the cup of God's wrath "should rightfully be thrust into my hand and yours...[but] instead, Jesus freely takes it Himself...so that from the cross He can look down at you and me, whisper our names, and say, ' I drain this cup for you...who have hated Me '" (p. 82).

The chapters on assurance of salvation, legalism, and condemnation are timely for the weary soul, reminding us "that those who trust in Christ can never be condemned" (126). Breathe in this fresh air: "You can't atone for your sin. That's why Jesus did it for you...you need carry [it] no more" (129).

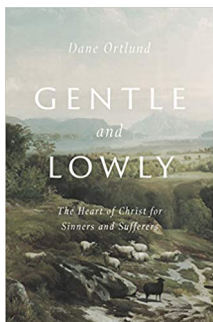
I have reread *LTCL* several times since stumbling upon it eight years ago, and each time I open it, the amazingness of grace flowers again in my heart like a long-awaited springtime thaw. Whether you are a new Christian or a seasoned saint who has forgotten the shining beauty of Christ's work, put it

on your yearly reread list, and allow the gospel to revive your weary soul!

*The chapters
on assurance of
salvation, legalism,
and condemnation
are timely for the
weary soul.*

JOSHUA EARL

Joshua Earl serves as senior pastor of [Grace City Church Wilmington](#) (Wilmington, NC).



GENTLE AND LOWLY

BY DANE ORTLUND

(CROSSWAY, 2020/224 PAGES)

JARED TORRENCE

If you and I have had a conversation in the past year or so, it's likely that at some point I found a way to bring Dane Ortlund's book, *Gentle and Lowly*, into the conversation. Do you feel weary? Let's read *Gentle and Lowly*. Do you want to raise your affections for Christ? Let's read *Gentle and Lowly*. Are you struggling with anger? Let's read *Gentle and Lowly*. Did the Eagles have a humiliating football season? Let's read *Gentle and Lowly*. You get the picture.

This book appeared on the top of many best-book lists for 2020, and you might have noticed the entire Christian world seems to be commending it. This is appropriate, and I happily add my voice to the choir. Dane Ortlund has given the church a remarkable gift.

Gentle and Lowly is a treasure because it helps Christians grow in treasuring Jesus Christ. Drawing from the puritan Thomas Goodwin, as well as Richard Sibbes and John Bunyan, Ortlund highlights a particular facet of the glory of Christ that is too often neglected: the affectionate heart of Christ. His theme verse is Matthew 11:29, where Jesus declares, "I am gentle and lowly in heart."

The 23 chapters are relatively short, making this an ideal book to work through in your devotions. The Table of Contents itself is edifying, with chapter titles including "I Will Never Cast Out," "An Advocate," "A Tender Friend," and "Buried in His Heart Forevermore." Each chapter highlights a different section of Scripture. Our pastoral team read through this book together and spent several small group meetings discussing the heart of Christ for us.

In order to worship Christ appropriately, we need a theological understanding of his love. *Gentle and Lowly* provides this by displaying the gracious disposition of Christ toward sinners and sufferers.

Warning: This book is corrective in that it challenges our fleshly instincts to believe that Christ relates to us on the basis of our moral performance, our limited love, and our sin-stained relations. Christ's heart is not like ours; my heart is law-ish, his heart is lavish. He is a tender and happy friend who deals gently and is able to sympathize with us. He is our advocate who defends our cause on the merits of his substitutionary death. He loves us now and will love us to the end.

Is this what comes to mind when you think of Christ? If that answer is a sorrowful no, or a knee-jerk yes, then I invite you to spend unhurried time in this book. There is certainly more to Jesus' heart than "gentle and lowly," but this book stresses something important and life-giving. Ortlund guides us to meditate on the gentle and lowly Savior, and helps us rest our souls in the deep and unchanging love of Jesus.

*Christ's heart is
not like ours; my
heart is law-ish,
his heart is lavish.*

In the conclusion of his book, Ortlund raises the question of application and response:

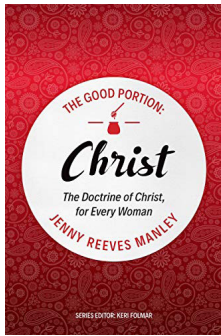
To ask, "Now how do I apply this to my life?" would be a trivialization of the point of this study. If an Eskimo wins a vacation to a sunny place, he doesn't arrive in his hotel room, step out onto the balcony, and wonder how to apply that to his life. He just enjoys it. He just basks.

But there is one thing for us to do. Jesus says it in Matthew 11:28. "Come to me" (215).

Enjoy Christ. Find rest for your soul. Bask in the Savior's love. Let *Gentle and Lowly* lead you there.

JARED TORRENCE

Jared Torrence is an elder at [Covenant Fellowship Church](#) (Glen Mills, PA).



THE GOOD PORTION: CHRIST

BY JENNY MANLEY

(CHRISTIAN FOCUS PUBLICATIONS,
2020/250 PAGES)

JARED MELLINGER

Jenny Manley is a former Chief of Staff in the U.S. Senate who now lives on the Arabian Peninsula with her husband and five children. Amid home-schooling her children, she has written an impressive theological primer, expressly written to encourage women on the person and work of Christ. *The Good Portion: Christ* is all about who Jesus is (Part 1), what he has done for sinners (Part 2), and the difference this makes in our lives.

The book has appropriately received high praise from leading Bible scholars. Thomas Schreiner describes the book as “biblically faithful and theologically astute” and at the same time “wonderfully clear and accessible.” Stephen Wellum expresses his hope that it will be used in many churches to equip Christians better to treasure and proclaim Christ, and says, “If you want to grow in your knowledge, love, and trust of Jesus, then this book is a must-read.”

Every Christian a Theologian

Manley’s book is profoundly doctrinal, which contributes significantly to its value. Theologically rich books are not likely to be bestsellers, but they are the books most likely to serve the church. In *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem says, “I am convinced that there is an urgent need in the church today for much greater understanding of Christian doctrine, or systematic theology. Not only pastors and teachers need to understand theology in greater depth—the whole church does as well.”¹

Manley understands this urgent need and writes with a desire to see women grow in sound doctrine, knowing Christ, and loving the whole of God’s word.

1. WAYNE GRUDEM, *SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL DOCTRINE* (GRAND RAPIDS, MI: ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC, 1994), 18.

Every Christian is a theologian, and women with theological depth and discernment—especially in their doctrine of Christ—are well-positioned to be women of great maturity and influence. Not every woman is called to publish a 250-page Christology. But all Christians—men and women—should continually learn and apply Christian doctrine. We are all commanded by God to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom” (Col. 3:16).

This book goes a long way in meeting an urgent need for a greater understanding of Christian doctrine among women. It will help believers grow in their knowledge of Christ and his saving work throughout all of Scripture.

Knowing is for Living

The Good Portion: Christ is not written for scholars but women in every season of life. The doctrine of Christ is deeply practical, and Manley writes with a desire to see the truth about Jesus connected and applied to daily life.

Each chapter begins with a brief case study of a woman in need: Dana is a stay-at-home mom who has struggled off and on for years with depression and finds no joy in her children; Noura is angry with God because she just found out her new baby boy has a genetic disorder; Jada is losing hope because her adult son has been wayward for years; a Christian colleague at work carries guilt and shame from an abortion she had as a college student; Shannon recently received a shocking health diagnosis of stage 3 breast cancer and is questioning the goodness of God; Tamela’s marriage is in shambles; Stephanie’s closest friends have all gotten married, and she feels insecure and lonely being single.

These examples help us connect the truth about Christ to our own lives and to practical conversations and counseling. Each chapter also ends with questions for personal reflection or group study. Consider reading this book together with a friend or in a small group.

The Good Portion: Christ has helped me personally treasure Christ more. Chapters 8 and 9 on the cross of Christ were my favorite and led me to

*All Christians—
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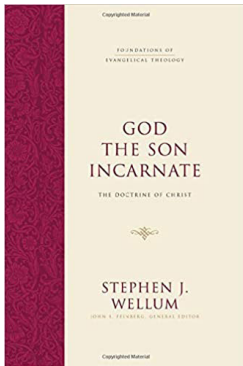
marvel once again at the one who was punished in my place.

If you want to grow as a Christian, make Christ the great theme of your study. Is anything more relevant for Christian living than our knowledge of Christ? Manley explains, “Our joys, our parenting, our marriages, our trials—are all directly influenced by what we believe about the Son of God” (230). And she testifies, “My study of the person and work of Christ has shaped my parenting, the way I love my husband, the manner with which I seek contentment, and the vigor with which I serve my church. . . .In fact, it seems every aspect of life has been touched by my deeper understanding of Christ” (231).

Use this book to deepen your knowledge of Christ and anticipate the life-changing power of Christ to leave no aspect of your life untouched.

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GOD THE SON INCARNATE: THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

BY STEPHEN J. WELLUM

(CROSSWAY, 2016/495 PAGES)

JEFF PURSWELL

“There is nothing more important in life than to know, trust, love, and obey Jesus Christ our Lord.” So concludes the preface in Steve Wellum’s *God the Son Incarnate* (*GSI*), succinctly summing up the ultimate aim of this book on the doctrine of Christ. Wellum succeeded admirably in this goal, and along the way, accomplished so much more.

There are a number of helpful treatments of Christology, from the expanding array of systematic theologies to individual books on the doctrine of Christ. It is not a weakness that these works cover much similar ground; one would hope for that in books that adhere to historic orthodoxy. Wellum, however, is not content to merely assemble scriptural data or to restate creedal affirmations. For him, theological method is critical to articulating a Christology that is both orthodox and contemporary—in other words, a Christology aimed at sharpening and enriching our grasp of Christ, protecting it from error, and proclaiming it within our secularized cultural moment.

Among its many strengths, three, in particular, distinguish *GSI* from many other treatments and illustrate Wellum’s careful theological method and the fruits it yields.

Cultural Awareness

The church does not testify to Christ in a vacuum but within a culture shaped by numerous intellectual currents and captive to certain presuppositions. Sensitive to this, Wellum begins by laying important epistemological foundations aimed, in essence, at answering the question, “*How can we know anything at all about Jesus?*” After tracing some of the key intellectual shifts over the past few centuries and their effects on doing theology, he

demonstrates the coherence—indeed, the necessity—of a “revelational epistemology” in arriving at true knowledge about Christ. *There is nothing more basic (i.e., foundational) than God’s revelation in Jesus Christ from which to do Christology.* Evangelicals might take this for granted, but such worldview grounding is vital to understanding the futility of autonomous human reason in understanding Christ and securing Scripture’s unrivaled authority in our reflection about him.

Biblical-Theological Rigor

In Part 2 of his book, Wellum proceeds to explore the biblical data concerning Christ, and it is here that *GSI* makes a particularly incisive contribution. Before compiling texts about Jesus, Wellum contends for a Biblical-theological reading of texts, accounting not just for their *content* (what they say about Jesus) but their *structure* (how they present Jesus across the span of redemptive history). In other words, the Christological task involves not only drawing data from Scripture but doing so according to the *pattern* of Scripture—honoring its nature as a unified revelation that progressively unfolds, in eras and epochs, throughout salvation-history. This Biblical-theological method governs Wellum’s treatment of the Bible’s witness concerning Christ, and the resulting portrayal of Christ is at once thorough, textually sensitive, and richly illuminating.

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Historical Reverence

It is a peculiarly modern tendency in theology to pit a “biblical” approach against a “classical” approach. Wellum rightly avoids this false dichotomy and admirably demonstrates the critical interplay between exegesis and church history—and nowhere is this more important than in the area of Christology. Following the book’s exegetical treatment, Part 3 of *GSI* carefully explores the church’s Christological reflection in three stages: pre-Nicene issues and heresies, the foundational formulation from Nicaea to Chalcedon, and post-Chalcedonian reflection and clarifications. The fulcrum of this presentation is the Chalcedonian definition, and Wellum wisely shows how Chalcedon set forth parameters and guardrails for all future formulation,

even as it spurs further reflection within its boundaries.

Clarity in Service of Doxology

These three qualities—cultural awareness, Biblical-theological rigor, and historical reverence—are executed by Wellum with a remarkable blend of sophistication and clarity. The pastor especially will find much help here as Wellum patiently walks the reader through some of the thorniest Christological issues: the person-nature distinction (which has massive implications for current debates); *anhypostasia* vs. *enhypostasia* (yes, it matters!); the relationship between Christ's two natures; the extent of Christ's knowledge on earth; and so much more. But the non-pastor should not be put off by those deep-dive moments, as Wellum never loses sight of the theological and personal import of such issues.

All of these strengths combine to make *GSI* not only an important book but a versatile resource for the church. And so, I conclude with three modest exhortations concerning this book. First, *turn to it for growth*—there is an education contained within these pages, and any reader will find their understanding of Scripture's presentation of Christ deepened and enriched. Second, *turn to it for clarity*—there are few Christological questions not explored here, and all are treated with remarkable accessibility. Third, *turn to it for adoration*—all that is contained in *GSI* is directed to this end. To know and confess Jesus as God the Son Incarnate is truly to behold nothing less than the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). Such knowledge of the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent, is eternal life (John 17:3).

JEFF PURSWELL

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