

# FRONTLINE

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME

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# Using Your Words: Glorifying God with Language

**H**ow we speak matters. It matters when words sound from our mouths. It matters when words flow from our keyboards. It matters for preachers, and it matters for ordinary church members. In this issue of *FrontLine*, we want to ask how God wants us to speak.

The first essay is by Ryan Martin, who makes an extended case for why our words matter. In “Every Idle Word,” he warns us against taking any of our speech casually. God will someday demand that we account for everything we say.

In the next essay, Steve Thomas addresses pastors. He insists that preaching should be characterized by biblical accuracy, attractiveness, and authenticity. His long experience as a pastor lends weight to the encouragement he offers in “Teaching the Word with Words.”

Michael Riley wrestles with an apparent contradiction in Scripture. Paul disavows the use of “lofty words,” yet he and the other biblical authors constantly frame their writings in rhetorically magnificent ways. So should we speak plainly, or should we speak eloquently? Pastor Riley argues in “Lofty Words Versus Rhetorical Excellence” that this may be a false dilemma.

Greg Stiekes takes up the problem of bearing false witness, but he does it

in a unique way. He presents God as the teller of the great Story. We, too, tell stories. But the truth of our stories must be judged by how well they match the indisputable truth of God's own story. Not surprisingly, his essay is entitled, “God's Story and Our Stories.”

Gossip is not just a problem for unsaved people. We can find plenty of it in our own churches and often in our own lives. Preston Mayes examines and applies biblical teaching about gossip in “Let the Fire Die.”

As the divisions within our culture widen, more and more people are resorting to sarcasm as their main form of argumentation. Their goal is to “own” an opponent. Is this always the best strategy? Is it ever? Kevin Bauder tries to answer these questions in “Stinging Rebukes and Sarcastic Retorts.”

We Christians have a responsibility to speak rightly. The authors of this issue of *FrontLine* hope that we are providing you with genuine help in understanding what biblical, godly speech sounds like. We do not claim to be without fault in this area. But we do hope to encourage you—and ourselves—toward a more biblical pattern of speaking the truth in love.

**Kevin Bauder**, Associate Editor

Our sincere thanks to Kevin Bauder for coordinating this issue of *FrontLine* magazine.

# Every Idle Word



*Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. (Matt. 12:36)*

In the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet saw thrice-holy Jehovah seated upon His glorious throne. What was his response? He said, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (6:5). Are you surprised at this response? Surely Isaiah had other sins that were worse. Of all his transgressions, why confess “unclean lips”? Who has ever scheduled a meeting with his pastor so he could get a handle on his battle with sinful speech?

We face huge moral challenges. Should we, with Isaiah, be concerned about words? In liberal democracies, freedom of speech remains a bedrock principle. With such a core value, are we prudes to advocate purity in speech? By some estimates, people speak 16,000 words each day. They write many more on their electronic devices. Why sweat the small stuff?

God, the author of human speech, cares a great deal about it. He is the God who spoke the heavens and the earth into existence. His speech is truth. His Son is the Word. When He speaks, He reveals Himself and thus acts in grace and mercy toward unworthy sinners. For God, to speak is a moral act that communicates His glory. He is good, so His speech is good.

Just as God’s speech is a moral act, so is human speech. God gave people tongues, like His other gifts, to use for His glory. Our words have the potential for much good or much evil. Just a few words between the serpent and Eve brought the Fall (Gen. 3:1). God will hold human beings accountable for what they have said. Christians

especially have an obligation to remember the importance of their words whenever they speak.

## “EVERY IDLE WORD”

In Matthew 12, our Lord Jesus warned that all people will be judged for their speech, even the least of their words. In the original context, the Pharisees had denounced Christ. They asserted that it was “by Beelzebul” that He had power to exorcise demons (12:24). Jesus called this “blasphemy against the Holy Ghost” (12:31). Blasphemy is a sin of the tongue.

The Pharisees’ sin led Jesus to discuss the connection between one’s speech and one’s heart. Most Jews considered the Pharisees to be holy men, spiritual leaders among the people. The Jewish leaders’ words against Jesus and the Holy Spirit betrayed their evil hearts. An inseparable bond connects the inner self of a person and his words (12:33–35). J. C. Ryle said, “The lips only utter what the mind conceives.”<sup>1</sup>

You may claim that you did not mean to say those harmful words. Jesus sees it differently. Our words reveal our hearts.

Jesus went further still in [MATT.] 12:36. “But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” He begins this remark with His authoritative declaration, “I tell you.” Jesus uttered this warning with both certainty and sobriety.

The word “idle” has two possible meanings. Many Bible teachers take “idle” to mean that unproductive speech is sinful (see John Chrysostom, Matthew Henry, John Gill, Jonathan Edwards, John Calvin, Alan Hugh McNeile, William Hendriksen). Yet Jesus’ point is that God will hold us accountable for even our most seemingly insignificant words (see J. C. Ryle, D. A. Carson, Craig Keener, John MacArthur). As John Broadus correctly explained, “This passage must not be understood as condemning all light pleasantries of conversation; it simply declares that the idlest nothings we ever utter are included within the range of accountability to God.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus’ word “idle” speaks of value. To us, such words are nothing, even worthless. Yet God values those words. He will demand an accounting of those very words when we stand before Him. Jesus emphasizes the word “every.” Neither careless nor weighty words will be excluded.

Even the words we regard as unimportant fall under God’s scrutiny. Yet “greater” words—like those having to do with the Holy Spirit—face even greater scrutiny.

Words have the power to justify us or condemn us (12:37). The Judge will evaluate all actions when we stand before Him. Our words will factor into our final destiny. Heaven and hell will rest on the words people speak. God knows our words even before we speak them (Ps. 139:4). He measures every word against His perfect, holy standard.

But what about church saints? Do we not face a different judgment than the wicked? We do, but even so, justified believers will also give an account of their words when they appear before Christ’s Judgment Seat (2 Cor. 5:10).

## “A WORLD OF INIQUITY”

Christian pastors and teachers especially should think about divine judgment for speech. James 3:1 offers a sober warning: “Be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.” God will hold Christian teachers to an even stricter standard for their words.

As James continues, he shows why God insists on holding people accountable for their words. Our “small” tongues can cause great havoc. They are a “world of iniquity” (3:6). James makes the same point as Jesus: “Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?” (3:11). Our words betray who we are. That is why they are so appropriate as objects of accountability.

The Scriptures bear unified testimony to the importance God places upon human speech. At least two of the Ten Commandments have to do with our words. The third commandment forbids using His name in vain and the ninth forbids bearing false witness. Of the 613 commands in the Mosaic law, many others dealt with other aspects of these sins of the tongue (for example, Exod. 22:28; 23:1, 7; Lev. 19:16; 24:16).

God has a holy standard for human speech. In Psalm 15:1, David asked, “LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle?” Who enjoys fellowship with God? Those who fear the Lord. Such God-fearers are, among other things, holy in speech. “He that backbiteth not with his tongue . . . nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor,” and him “that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not” (vv. 3–4). Those who live with God on His “holy hill” are those whose speech is pure.

The Proverbs are well known for addressing the problem of human speech. The wise son who fears Jehovah recognizes that his words matter to his God. The Proverbs anticipate what Jesus will later say in Matthew 12. Proverbs 10:19 states, “In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.” In a similar spirit is the brief warning of Ecclesiastes 5:2: “Let thy words be few.”

Jonathan Edwards’ admonition to his Northampton congregation remains relevant: “When persons for so much of their time have nothing else to do but to sit, and talk, and chat in one another’s chimney corners, there is great danger of falling into foolish and sinful conversation, venting their corrupt dispositions in talking against others, expressing their jealousies and evil surmises concerning their neighbors.”<sup>33</sup> Exchange “chimney corners” with your favorite social media site and you will appreciate the relevance of these words.

Biblical narratives anticipate God’s final judgment of speech. God struck Nebuchadnezzar with madness because he boasted about “great Babylon” (Dan. 4:30). Herod “was eaten of worms” because “he gave not God the glory” (Acts 12:23). God killed Ananias and Sapphira because of their lies (Acts 5:1–11). The response of the church to that episode should be the response of all Christians to Jesus’ warning in Matthew 12:36: “Great fear came upon all the church” (Acts 5:11). If this happened in

**JESUS WENT FURTHER STILL IN [MATT.] 12:36. “BUT I SAY UNTO YOU, THAT EVERY IDLE WORD THAT MEN SHALL SPEAK, THEY SHALL GIVE ACCOUNT THEREOF IN THE DAY OF JUDGMENT.” HE BEGINS THIS REMARK WITH HIS AUTHORITATIVE DECLARATION, “I TELL YOU.” JESUS UTTERED THIS WARNING WITH BOTH CERTAINTY AND SOBRIETY.**

your church, you too would think twice about what you say.

Spurgeon's catechism asks, "Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God?" The answer is sobering. "No mere man, since the fall, is able in his life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but does daily break them in thought, word, and deed." Jesus' words in Matthew 12 and the Bible's unified testimony support this answer. Our "throat is an open sepulchre" indeed (Rom. 3:13). We need a Savior. As J. C. Ryle observed, "If there were no other text in the Bible, [Matthew 12:36] ought to convince us, that we are all 'guilty before God,' and need a righteousness better than our own, even the righteousness of Christ."<sup>44</sup>

Isaiah surely was right to confess his "unclean lips." His people were also of unclean lips. After Isaiah's confession, God addressed his guilt with atoning grace. A seraph applied "a live coal" from God's heavenly altar to Isaiah's mouth, saying "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged" (Isa. 6:6-7). God alone can cleanse sinful lips.

If we remember humbly, we will recall many sinful words over our lives. We have forgotten many more. Slanders, blasphemies, vain worship, rude replies, filthiness, gossip, flirtations, lies, profanities, complaints, mocking, deceits, harsh criticisms, foolish talk, crude jokes, irritable remarks, boasts—who can bear such a burden of guilt? Yet God clears the massive debt of our sinful words when we by faith receive the Lord Jesus Christ and are justified (Rom. 3:24). Such are the riches of Christ's grace. Certainly our "idle words" are important to God, since He gave His only Son to cleanse us from them.

Forgiveness is not enough. We need God's sanctifying grace to change our hearts and thus our words. Our prayer for God's help should be like that of David in Psalm 19:14: "Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer."

We Christians ought to know the holiness of God. We ought to be convinced that every person will appear before our Maker. We should know the close inquiry God will make of even our idle words.

So, we Christians must wield our words most carefully, whether those words are spoken or written. We know what God demands, and we, by His grace, have been forgiven of countless, sinful "idle words." In the midst of internet chatter, online forums, and podcasts, we of all people should have the reputation of "sound speech, that cannot be condemned" (Titus 2:8).

**Ryan J. Martin**, PhD, pastors Columbiaville Baptist Church in Columbiaville, Michigan.



<sup>1</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Matthew* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 107.

<sup>2</sup> John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 274. Also see the use of *argos* as "useless" in James 2:20.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 22, *Sermons and Discourses, 1739-1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout (Yale University Press, 2003), 98.

<sup>44</sup> Ryle, 108.

## USING YOUR WORDS

Steve Thomas

# Teaching the Word with Words



*My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. (James 3:1-2)*

**A** young man sat across from his pastor in a booth at a local restaurant. Over bacon and eggs, they enjoyed a wide-ranging conversation about the Christian life. At one point, the young man asked, "Is it OK for a Christian to use swear words?" He explained further that he meant swearing of a mild sort—nothing grossly vulgar. As if anticipating the pastor's answer, he added, "After all, they are just words." He obviously wanted approval for an already-established habit. The pastor gave scriptural guidance about God's purpose for words. He showed him how misuse of words harms others (Eph. 4:29-32). He tried to make it clear: what we say is never "just words."

### SPEECH IS NEVER "JUST WORDS" ...

Society tends to minimize or dismiss the importance of words, but God does not. God is a speaking God. Communication exists as part of the Triune Godhead and sets the trajectory of the Bible's story.

- God communicates and delights in His own glory within the Godhead (John 17:5).
- God spoke to bring the world into existence, though He did not need to. Powerful verbs of speaking appear sixteen times in Genesis 1: *said, called, and blessed*.
- God gave the gift of language to His image bearer. Adam did not learn to speak, nor did he struggle to understand what God said to him (Gen. 2:16-17). Instinctive interpretation is part of the gift of language.
- God directed Adam to use language to exercise dominion over creation. Adam's words accomplished God's good purposes (Gen. 2:19-20).
- The Bible's story flows out of this initial emphasis on words. The ever-communicating God spoke to and with His image bearers.
- God gave to His people Israel a covenant founded on ten "words" (Deut. 4:13).
- God spoke to His people through the prophets at many times and in many ways (Heb. 1:1).
- Then God spoke through His Son, the living Word (Heb. 1:2; John 1:1). Christ gave God's words to the apostles and expects His people to believe their words (John 17:8, 20).
- Today, Christ gives men to the churches to preach His words without fear or favor (2 Tim. 4:2-4).

What we do with God's words shapes our relationship with Him and with all other image bearers (Eph. 4:15-16). For this reason,

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each of us will account for what we do with the Lord's words and with our own (John 12:48; Matt. 12:36). No, speech is never "just words."

**... ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE WHO SPEAK FOR GOD**

The 16th-century Second Helvetic Confession contains a startling statement: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God." The author did not mean that God speaks today through preachers the same way He spoke through the prophets. He meant that "when a preacher speaks the word of God truly, it is just as true, and just as authoritative, as it is on the pages of Scripture."<sup>1</sup> This explains why God often uses preaching to convert people to faith in Christ.

Someone once called preaching an "audacious act."<sup>2</sup> It is! Who would dare speak for God except those called to do so? James began his discussion of the use of the tongue with a warning to those who desire to teach the Word of God: "My brethren, be not many masters [lit., "teachers"], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (James 3:1). Those on whom the pastoral mantle falls must give careful attention to their words. At least four indispensable characteristics must mark a preacher's words.

**ACCURATE WORDS**

Accuracy must form the bond between words of the text and the preacher's words. The apostle Paul insisted that Timothy handle the Scriptures accurately. To do otherwise would cause shame (2 Tim. 2:15).

William Perkins (1558–1602) penned the first book on preaching published in English.<sup>3</sup> The influence of his insights continues to this day. He advised preachers to organize each sermon using three elements. First, explain a biblical text. Next, identify the doctrine (teaching) of the text. Finally, apply the doctrine of the text to the audience. Thus, he challenged preachers to have a singular focus: the text of Scripture from first to last. The text glues each element of the sermon together. Preachers today may use a variety of sermon formats. Yet, all three of Perkins's elements should grace every sermon. The preacher's words of explanation must align with what God said in the text. It would be a terrible thing to place words in God's mouth that God never said.

**ACCURACY CARRIES LITTLE VALUE FOR PEOPLE WHO CANNOT UNDERSTAND THE PREACHER'S WORDS. IN THE QUEST FOR ACCURACY, THE PREACHER MUST NEVER LEAD HIS AUDIENCE DOWN A PATH THAT ENDS IN VERBAL OBSCURITY.**

**CLEAR WORDS**

Accuracy carries little value for people who cannot understand the preacher's words. In the quest for accuracy, the preacher must never lead his audience down a path that ends in verbal obscurity. Several common mistakes obscure the meaning of the text.

- *Misuse of the original languages.* Some use Greek and Hebrew, whether words or grammar, as if everyone should know what these things mean. This not only obscures the message, but it also exudes a sense of elitism.
- *Misuse of specialized terminology.* How many average churchgoers understand words like *eschatology*, *hypostatic union*, and *aseity*? It is best to treat such words as if no one does. Then, if necessary, teach the terms.
- *Misuse of illustrations.* Little-known historical events in church history illustrate nothing without an explanation. An unexplained reference to the Council of Trent or the Marburg Colloquy will only distract an audience.
- *Misuse of logic.* Complex philosophical arguments are better suited to the classroom than the pulpit. Simplify the message.

Each of these practices darkens rather than illuminates the message. Martin Luther (1483–1546) captured the importance of clarity in a letter to a colleague: "We preach in public for the sake of plain people. . . . There are sixteen-year-old girls, women, and farmers in the church, and they don't understand lofty matters!"<sup>4</sup>

**ATTRACTIVE WORDS**

Preachers should use common language for clarity's sake. That does not mean language should become common in a base or crude sense—never! The preacher represents the living Lord. He

should deliver his words with statesmanlike respect. Neither should his language be so common that it never has a tinge of beauty that attracts the hearers. A sermon can be accurate and understandable yet never capture the hearers' interest. Conviction does not occur within the heart of a disinterested listener.

Paul said that he did not rely on "excellency of speech" or "enticing words of man's wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:1–5). He disdained rhetorical forms established by Greek philosophers and deployed by Roman politicians. But he did not commend dull, colorless speech. Who could ever argue that Paul refused to use attractive words? His writings contain flourishes of literary beauty:

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . (Phil. 2:9–10)

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! (Rom. 11:33)

Paul even borrowed the unforgettable words of a pagan poet:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

One wonders what lay behind Paul's chastening of the foolish Galatians "before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you" (Gal. 3:1). They had not been present to behold the crucifixion of Christ in person. They saw the spectacle with eyes of sacred imagination. Paul opened their eyes with vivid preaching. He used common language with a gilded edge to activate sacred imagination. In turn, imagination uses the truth to touch the hearer's affections.

**AUTHENTIC WORDS**

Any man with proper training and a bit of skill can produce a sermon that has some measure of accuracy, clarity,

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# Lofty Words Versus Rhetorical Excellence

*And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God.* (1 Cor. 2:1)

**A**s Shakespeare's *Henry V* closes, the English king has conquered France. He now seeks to conquer the heart of the French princess Katherine to unite their kingdoms through marriage. But the soldier-king professes himself ill-qualified to this task:

Marry, if you would put me to verses or to dance for your sake, Kate, why you undid me.

... If I could win a lady at leapfrog or by vaulting into my saddle with my armor on my back..., I should quickly leap into a wife. Or if I might buffet for my love, or bound my horse for her favors, I could lay on like a butcher and sit like a jackanapes, never off. But, before God, Kate, I cannot look greenly nor gasp out my eloquence, nor I have no cunning in protestation, only downright oaths, which I never use till urged, nor never break for urging.

For the reader, the irony is both rich and delightful. Henry's supposed incompetence at verse is expressed in far-more-than-competent verse. Even on the page, Henry's language is beautiful. Read by a skilled actor, it is tremendously endearing

and moving. It is precisely what Henry claims he cannot be.

Readers of Scripture find themselves facing a similar irony. Paul describes his own presentation as "not with excellency of speech" and "not with enticing words of man's wisdom." Yet when we read Paul's letters or his preaching in Acts, we find much "excellency of speech." Even Paul's repudiation of lofty language is beautifully written.

Such beauty and excellence are not confined to Paul's epistles. From Genesis to Revelation, we confront countless examples of rhetorical excellence. The Bible offers a beauty so wonderful that it even survives translation.

How do we reconcile Paul's admonition and his *stated* example with the pervasive rhetoric in Paul's *actual* example and the rest of Scripture? Should we aspire to employ lofty language? Or should we aim to avoid it altogether?

## AGAINST LOFTY WORDS

A recurring theme of Paul's Corinthian correspondence is his attempt to dislodge the Corinthians' misplaced regard for the super-apostles (2 Cor. 11:5). These men were false teachers. But most of Paul's condemnation has less to do with their specific false doctrines and more to do with their character—a character suited for maximum appeal in Corinth (and America, for that matter). To borrow Luther's phrase from the Heidelberg Disputation, they were "theologians of glory."

A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. This is clear: he who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil. 3:18), for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works.

Luther's framing is helpful. As Christians, we are the disciples of a crucified Lord. To be sure, in the resurrection the Father has decisively begun the exaltation of the Son (Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9), but the fullness of that glory awaits His return and reign (Heb. 2:8). A very practical implication is that Christian ministry during this age should be characterized by the cross more than it is by glory. "If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.... Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." (2 Cor. 11:30; 12:9). This is the ground of Paul's repudiation of the super-apostles: those men glory in the things typical of natural men. Their desire to be well-regarded now is determinative proof that they, unlike the bruised Paul, do not represent Jesus Christ.

A brief survey of the Corinthian correspondence bears this out. Paul begins

1 Corinthians by reminding the church, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect" (1 Cor. 1:17). This verse is worth our attention: too often we hear the argument that if the content of the message is sound, the method of communication does not matter. Paul disagrees. To employ the "wisdom of words" in the preaching of the gospel empties the cross of its value—no trivial evil. A ministry of lofty words pulls the glory of ministry to the *minister*, rather than to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Therefore, he says,

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1–5).

Once again, note Paul's conclusion: if he had spoken with "enticing words," the faith of the Corinthians would be grounded in Paul's rhetoric. This would detract from the unique glory of "the power of God." (Incidentally, Paul's exhortation against manipulative rhetoric might lead us to

question those commentaries that find an interpretive key in endless chiasms or other literary devices.)

We find the same emphasis in 2 Corinthians. Paul says that because of the glory of the gospel, "we use great plainness of speech" (3:12) and "have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (4:2).

## THE RHETORICAL MODEL OF SCRIPTURE

If we had nothing other than this instruction from Paul, our conclusion would be simple: gospel ministers should simply avoid any hint of rhetorical loftiness. Artistry is forbidden. A minister's entire calling is to announce the message without ornament.

But the Bible is filled with examples of ornamented language. The couplets of Hebrew poetry fill close to a third of the inspired text. The Psalms are not improvisational. If plenary verbal inspiration does not demand dictation, we can still presume that the human authors, under the supernatural influence of the Spirit, likely labored over their composition. The images, wording, and structure of the psalms are calculated to affect the listeners and readers, and they do.

Our Lord's own teaching was hardly a model of straightforward clarity: He spoke

in parables (in fulfillment of Isaiah's word) so that those to whom "it is not given" to know the truth would be obstructed from understanding it (Matt. 13:10–16). He employed extended metaphors that manage both to capture attention and confound easy interpretation.

We have already noted the paradox of Paul's ministry. The same man who wrote the Corinthian epistles also quoted the Greek poets Epimenides and Aratus in his address in Athens. Some have suggested that Paul, in 1 Corinthians, was repudiating his own strategy in Athens (Acts 17). For my part, I remain unconvinced. The chronology works, in that Paul went directly from Athens to Corinth. But Acts contains no hint that Luke intends us to see Paul's sermon as a compromise of his calling.

If this observation is correct, it follows that even quoting pagan poetry has a place in Christ-centered, cross-shaped preaching. Even the misguided Corinthian super-apostles had some respect for Paul's writing. Even they conceded that Paul's letters were "weighty and powerful" (2 Cor. 10:10).

## WISDOM IN SPEAKING

So how should we reconcile this apparent biblical tension? We cannot simply consider a piece of writing or a sermon, count its formal rhetorical structures, then drop it in the rejection bin if it exceeds some arbitrary quota. We cannot disclaim

all excellence in language. Still, we certainly must heed Paul's stern warning that employment of lofty language empties the cross of its power.

This paradox is a call for wisdom. Wisdom is not found in policies and procedures. A wise person knows that Scripture calls him both to answer *and* not to answer fools according to their folly (Prov. 26:4–5). A wise person has also learned which response the current situation demands.

Motivations matter. We sometimes hear that while we might be called to judge a person's actions, we cannot judge his intentions. Such a sharp distinction is not supported by the New Testament. Regularly, the epistles highlight the twisted *purposes* of false teachers: their love of money, sexual indulgence, and (very relevant here) prestige. Jude tells us that “their mouth speaketh great swelling words, having men's persons in admiration because of advantage” (Jude 16). Paul says that a false teacher is “puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words” (1 Tim. 6:4, ESV). Paul evidently thought that

the grand show of the ministry put on by the super-apostles was part of their strategy to exercise lordship over the “lesser” Christians.

Such judgments require us to examine our hearts carefully and honestly. When pastors hone the perfect wording of their sermon opening or consult another thesaurus to complete the elusive triple-alliterated sermon point, are they pointing attention to Christ or themselves? Modesty, whether in dress or rhetoric, has a cultural component. Paul's citation of Greek poets likely raised no eyebrows on Mars Hill, but I suspect it would in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. We do not blindly follow the current fashions of the places where we minister—that was Paul's whole point in 1 Corinthians 1—but we must remain aware of those expectations, violating them when the culture itself must be challenged.

The same tensions apply as we listen to preaching. Paul's refusal to speak in lofty language means that the Corinthian Christians should restrain their appetite for such flourishes. The super-apostles are responsible for their own sins, but they were certainly playing to the desires

of their audience. But when we listen to preaching, not everything should be simple. Peter tells us that Paul wrote “some things hard to be understood” (2 Pet. 3:16); we assume Paul also spoke in ways that challenged his listeners' comprehension. Complexity in preaching can be a sign of a pastor out for applause—but it can also be a sign of a shepherd who is offering “solid food” (Heb. 5:14). A faithful pastor will welcome questions and offer answers suitable to each sheep.

On this side of glorification, we must be wary of our motives. Pastors are sinners ministering to sinful people. Pride is insidious. Even the loftiest words of men cannot exhaust the glory of God's person and works, and He is worthy of our highest efforts. Ministers of the gospel of a crucified Lord are, and must remain, “earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

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## God's Story and Our Stories

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* (Exod. 20:16<sup>1</sup>)

*Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another.* (Eph. 4:25)

Perhaps the most iconic example of “fake news” is the October 30, 1938, radio broadcast of H. G. Wells's sci-fi novel *The War of the Worlds*. Under the brilliant direction of Orson Welles, the story was performed as a series of news flashes so realistic that many people believed Martians had actually landed, had killed thousands of National Guardsmen with “heat-ray” weapons and poisonous gases, and were marching on New York City.

The following day, newspapers reported nationwide hysteria. “Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact,” reported the *Times*. “Fake Radio ‘War’ Stirs Terror through U.S.,” the *Daily* headlined. Families fled their cities with damp rags over their faces, while others grabbed their shotguns to defend their homes. Church members went to their churches to pray, and switchboards were jammed with calls to police stations.

Meanwhile, Welles was the picture of innocence. Threatened with fines and lawsuits for his “hoax,” Welles told reporters, “I was frankly terribly shocked to learn” that the broadcast had caused listeners to believe the story.<sup>2</sup>

Today, however, historians look back on that famous broadcast as representing several media spins. First, the *War of the Worlds* broadcast dramatized the story to seem like a real invasion. Then the reports of widespread panic were exaggerated by news outlets for sensational effect. Finally, later comments by Welles indicate that he knew full well that some listeners would take the broadcast seriously. He feigned ignorance to get himself out of trouble.



Media spin is nothing new, nor has it ever abated. To the contrary, scenarios shrouding and misrepresenting the truth of a story are lived out every day in the media, especially in the current political atmosphere. Climate change, election fraud, immigration, COVID-19, January 6, Hunter's laptop, Biden's cognitive acuity—both sides of the political aisle have advanced their own versions of these stories. The rise of the internet and social media provide the tools for lightning-fast communication to anyone with a mobile device, compounding the potential for misinformation and competing narratives. Ironically, we have more ways to share and receive information efficiently than at any other time in human history, but we can no longer be certain that we are getting the true story.

From hysteria to bewilderment, the confusion and indecision created by competing narratives is caused by a single dynamic. People believe false reports about the world when they do not know the true story. And when people believe the wrong story, they cannot respond in the right way.

Here we discover why God condemns lying and exalts truth. Truth is always related to a story that includes personalities with motives and actions. The Bible does not present us with a mere list of declarative facts and propositions about

God and the world. The Bible tells us a story—the true story of the world and our place in it. The Storyteller is the epitome of truth itself, a God for whom lying is impossible (Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18), a God whose very word is truth (John 17:17).

This truthful Storyteller weaves the tale of a good world that He created for His glory. It tells of the people He made for unbroken, loving fellowship with Him. But conflict arose when Satan, the “father of lies” (John 8:44), introduced the first false narrative into the world. He suggested that if Adam and Eve disobeyed God, “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). Adam and Eve acted on this falsehood. They chose to rebel, and sin and death entered the world (Rom. 5:12). Instead of loving and serving God, they refused to honor God. The world became corrupt, and its inhabitants rightly stood condemned to destruction.

The main storyline of the Bible is God's progressive plot to rescue the world and fallen humanity, ultimately through His Son, Jesus. God's Son entered the world to receive the just wrath for our sin. At the still-future climax of the story, Jesus, as Lord and King, will return to rule. He will abolish sin and darkness once and for all. Then He will usher in a new heaven and earth with unbroken joy and communion between God and humanity forever.

God's story is the true story in which we are all living, whether we believe it or not. The truthfulness of all other stories must be judged by how accurately they correspond to God's. If we get the story wrong, we will respond in the wrong way. If we believe a false story about creation and human origin we can end up with the lies of evolution, nihilism, racism, and anti-biblical ideas of human sexuality. If we reject the story about God's wise and loving control of the world we may end up with the lies of secularism, existentialism, and pragmatism. Most tragically, if we fail to embrace the true story of

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salvation through the gospel of Christ, we will certainly end up in the lake of fire.

We live in a climate of competing narratives. Truth is now judged by whether it is the best way to twist a story. Stories are told to advance some desired narrative, to save face, to cover up or misconstrue facts, or to misdirect attention.

Tragically, we Christians can be tempted to mimic this media spin. We may misrepresent key facts of our story to twist or shade the truth. We manipulate our timeline. We tell how we went to one place but neglect to mention the other places we stopped along the way. We fail to reveal who else we went with or who was there when we arrived. Perhaps we tell the right story but lie about our motivations. We omit details. We embellish or exaggerate a part of the story, or we downplay some crucial event as unimportant. We explain certain elements as coincidences or unavoidable conflicts.

Why do we twist the truth in these ways? We are trying to create secret spaces in our tales where we are accountable to no one. We want to protect ourselves or others from negative consequences. We hope to manipulate people and situations. Perhaps we wish to lead people to see us as better than we are, or at least not as bad as they otherwise might think. Sometimes we tell ourselves and others a modified version of our story so that we do not have to face up to what we have done.

One lie always leads to another. When we lie about our stories, we become obliged to continue to speak and act in a way that is contrary to the truth. In turn, we lead others to respond in false ways. They do it unwittingly, and they may be harmed because they do not realize they are responding in good faith to a lie. When we mislead people, we remove ourselves and others from God's true story, where certain just and holy responses are commanded for our good, for the good of those around us, and for God's glory. Two examples will illustrate this point.

#### **DISHONESTY IN THE HOME**

First, untrue stories attack the spiritual health of the home. Family members are tempted to distort their stories when confronted by common questions. "How much did you spend? What did you spend it on?" "What is your social media and website

**WHY DO WE TWIST THE TRUTH IN THESE WAYS? WE ARE TRYING TO CREATE SECRET SPACES IN OUR TALES WHERE WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO NO ONE. WE WANT TO PROTECT OURSELVES OR OTHERS FROM NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES. WE HOPE TO MANIPULATE PEOPLE AND SITUATIONS.**

history?" "Where were you? When were you there? What were you doing?"

Sociologists have been saying for decades that parents commonly do not know where their children are and how they are using their time. Children hide their true stories to avoid accountability to authority. As one author put it, this behavior "comes as second nature, not as a means of 'getting away' with something but rather as 'creating space' for the lives they want to live."<sup>3</sup>

Family members can also tactically manipulate their stories in difficult conversations. They can downplay a legitimate concern: "He's making too big a deal about this." "She's just being dramatic." Or they can play the victim: "You're always harder on her than me." "You don't know what I'm going through." They can also resort to emotional blackmail: "If you loved me, you wouldn't be questioning me about this." Blame-shifting, gaslighting, character assassination, and name-calling are all tactics designed to keep others from discovering our full and true narrative.

When false narratives are allowed to overshadow the family dynamic, it is nearly impossible for family members to live out their story in the context of God's story. The Bible presents God as the sovereign authority over all things. God, in turn, delegates His authority to humans to have authority over other humans. Divinely ordained authority is distributed through human governments, churches, and families. God grants husbands authority over wives. He grants parents authority over children. We must act faithfully within these authority structures if we are going to align our stories with God's story.

Thus, children are commanded to honor and obey parental authority, and parents must guide them under God's authority (Eph. 6:1-4). When children are allowed to be dishonest about their own stories—what they are thinking, what they are doing,

who is influencing them—parents cannot faithfully guide them into truth. But happier and healthier is the home in which children are transparent about their stories, even if honesty leads to consequences. Truthful children can experience God's wise and gracious control over their lives.

#### **DISHONESTY IN THE CHURCH**

Second, false narratives attack the spiritual health of the church. The same kind of shading and twisting that we see in biological families can also take place in church families. It can occur in the same ways, using the same tactics. But for a church family it seems that the stakes are higher, for the church is called to be "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15, NASB). Paul warns that the church can be "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting"—in other words, malicious and false stories (Eph. 4:14). On the other hand, spiritual maturity comes through "speaking the truth in love" (4:15).

At the relational level, Paul specifically commands church members, "putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.'" (Eph. 4:25). James admonishes, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:16). But how can we lovingly minister to one another, especially a hurting or fallen brother or sister, if we twist our stories? If we always mask the story of our spiritual struggle we will remain discouraged and unassisted. If we exaggerate our spiritual successes we will become fake or unapproachable.

Furthermore, pastors, elders, and other church leaders bear much of the responsibility for creating a truthful culture. As a pastor, I can experience the temptation to wrongly color my own story for the sake of

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LET THE FIRE DIE

Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; And where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. (Prov. 26:20)<sup>1</sup>

**G**ossip involves the spreading of “rumor or talk of a personal, sensational, or intimate nature.”<sup>2</sup> Most of us either spread it or listen to it more than we realize. We enjoy it: the juicier, the better. One book asks, “What is conversation for, if not hush-hush chatter about other people? ‘Did you know?’ ‘Did you hear?’ ‘Guess what I discovered!’ ‘Did you see online?’ ‘So and so told me that . . .’”<sup>3</sup> Gossiping is so tantalizing that Proverbs compares it to “tasty trifles [that] go down into the inmost body” (26:22). Like some expensive dessert, we know we shouldn’t eat it, but we consume it eagerly and want seconds.

Of course, discussing sensitive personal information may be appropriate. If the information is accurate, such conversations may protect a boss, friend, or acquaintance. These warnings are especially necessary when the danger comes from a likeable con artist who tricks others to gain their trust. But before choosing to talk about others, we must ask several hard questions about gossip.

**WHAT ARE MY MOTIVES FOR SHARING THIS INFORMATION?**

Christ stated, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance [the overflow] of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). So whatever we are thinking about or motivated by influences what we choose to discuss. If we are self-centered and insecure, gossip “draw[s] attention to ourselves without talking about ourselves . . . [and] helps us preserve our self-esteem by elevating ourselves in the process of tearing others down.”<sup>4</sup> For example, people who might not share negative information about a relative would gossip about a coworker up for the same promotion. A high school athlete would probably not gossip about an uncoordinated friend, but he might spread rumors about a competitor for a starting position.

More simply, people have a fascination with hearing bad news about others. As one author noted, “I don’t hear people buzzing about the news that someone’s daughter is valedictorian at her high school. I hear them buzzing that someone’s

daughter got picked up by the police.”<sup>5</sup> Knowing something negative about someone else makes people feel better about themselves. Whisperers and recipients alike feel superior because they are not guilty of the crime. Engaging in this kind of chatter ignores the characteristics of Christian love, which “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). Rather than enjoy scandalous information, believers should grieve over it. Someone has ensnared themselves in sin while dishonoring the Lord. By contrast, we should rejoice in the good accomplishments of others and thank the Lord for them.

Our approach to dealing with scandalous news should be like that of Mary’s husband, Joseph. When he learned Mary was pregnant with the Messiah, he thought at first that he could not marry her. But breaking a betrothal then was more difficult than a broken engagement would be now in the United States. Joseph would have had to subject her to legal proceedings, permanently marring her reputation. Instead, he chose the quietest option possible, and because he was “a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Matt. 1:19). Joseph certainly knew such information would eventually become public. But he took every step he could to avoid unnecessarily adding fuel to the fire. We should take the same care.

**HAVE I GOT ALL THE FACTS STRAIGHT?**

Gossip often passes from person to person in the form of ill-founded rumors or half-truths. It happens when those newly aware of spicy information want to pass it on to others, unaware of how many other people filtered it first. The secondhand tale becomes a distorted version of the truth for which the gossiper now bears responsibility. As the Red Queen tells Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, “When you’ve once said a thing, that fixes it, and you must take the consequences.”

To illustrate the distortion of truth, my junior high class played the rumor game. About six of us sat in chairs while the teacher quietly told a story to the first student. The first student passed it on to the second, who passed it on to the third, and so forth. At the end of the exercise, the first and last students both retold the story. The results were stun-

ning. The final tale bore little resemblance to the first. Each person changed or omitted details even though the story was fresh in everyone’s mind.

Even a firsthand witness of an event may accidentally skew the truth with each retelling of the story. Research on human memory describes the process:

When we describe our memories to other people, we use artistic license to tell the story differently depending on who’s listening. We might ask ourselves whether it’s vital to get the facts straight, or whether we only want to make the listener laugh. And we might change the story’s details depending on the listener’s attitudes or political leaning. Research shows that when we describe our memories differently to different audiences it isn’t only the message that changes, but sometimes it’s also the memory itself.<sup>6</sup>

**SHOULD I BE SHARING THIS INFORMATION WITH THIS PERSON?**

Always ask whether the person you are about to share information with needs to know it. “Gossip may ultimately turn out to be true, but that does not exonerate those who speak it to others. If true, then the report is being given to inappropriate people at an inappropriate time.”<sup>7</sup> A believer who witnesses some sinful activity, of course, will have to do something about it. Depending on the situation, this could involve confrontation and the involvement of pastors, teachers, or a government authority. People who are not in positions of authority may still need warnings about another person.

Even when it is necessary to disclose negative information about somebody, however, the line between legitimate discussion of an issue and gossip is easy to cross without realizing it. A conversation may begin appropriately but subtly veer into gossip. This is a particular risk in modern culture, which frequently bombards people with scandalous information in supermarket tabloids, news broadcasts, and social media. People are so used to public discussion of scandal that it seems acceptable to talk freely even when one realizes the need to avoid gossip.

**HOW WILL SHARING THIS INFORMATION AFFECT PEOPLE?**

Victims of gossip obviously resent it. But gossip also puts the speaker’s reputa-

tion at risk. Others may avoid the speaker to avoid becoming victims. They understand the old saying that “the dog that’ll bring a bone will carry a bone.” And they take the warning in Proverbs 20:19 seriously. It states, “He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; Therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.” By contrast, handling sensitive information carefully leads to respect and trust even with those least affected.

Second, sharing gossip can create conflict on a large scale. This type of strife often happens when people weigh in on decisions made by leaders of organizations such as churches and Christian schools. Even when leaders can be completely transparent about decisions without violating confidentiality, the audience may not fully understand the issues. Excess discussion and critique of disagreements muddies people’s understanding and produces unwarranted criticism of leadership.

Often the best advice regarding these large-scale situations is to speak positively about them or say nothing at all. As Proverbs 26:20–21 states, “Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases. As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife.” The sharing of such information can be so damaging as to drive a wedge between even close friends: “a whisperer separates the best of friends” (Prov. 16:28). A wiser approach works for reconciliation whenever possible. “He who covers a transgression seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates friends” (Prov. 17:9).

Finally, people who gossip affect themselves negatively, too. In addition to being unloving, how does spending time and mental energy dwelling on some sin help a believer to fulfill the command in Philippians 4:8? “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.” Warnings and discussion of problems sometimes have a place but should always be done soberly and not for personal enjoyment.

**CONCLUSION**

Deciding when to speak about other people requires care, lest we gossip. But

sometimes the risk of not talking is too great. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates the difficulty and the danger. The novel is set in a period where gossip and scandalous information were viewed differently than today. People would gossip, of course, but were nonetheless more guarded in their sharing of information. The plot turns on this tension between when to speak and when to stay silent. The antagonist, Mr. Wickham, was a womanizing gambler. He schemed to marry a wealthy heiress whose fortune would pay his debt and provide him with a life of ease. The sister of the main character, Mr. Darcy, had almost been a victim of what would have been a disastrous marriage. Darcy himself stopped the marriage from happening but wished to keep the matter secret not only for the sake of his sister, but for his family honor. When Wickham later succeeded in seducing another woman, Darcy regretted his decision to avoid warning others. Protecting his young sister was noble. Seeking to protect his own reputation while putting others at risk was not. In the story, Darcy took personal responsibility at great cost for undoing the damage, at least as much as possible, to the family Wickham had taken advantage of.

This story illustrates the problem of knowing when to speak and when to stay silent. May the Lord grant us the character and wisdom to know the difference.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations in this article are from the NKJV.  
<sup>2</sup> *American Heritage Dictionary*.  
<sup>3</sup> Quentin J. Schultze and Diane M. Badzinski, *An Essential Guide to Interpersonal Communication* (Baker, 2015), 63.  
<sup>4</sup> Schultze and Badzinski, 63.  
<sup>5</sup> Tim Stafford, *That’s Not What I Meant!* (Zondervan, 1995), 92.  
<sup>6</sup> Robert Nash, “Are Memories Reliable? Expert Explains How They Change More than We Realize,” *The Conversation* (December 17, 2018), <https://theconversation.com/are-memories-reliable-expert-explains-how-they-change-more-than-we-realize-106461>.  
<sup>7</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Baker, 2006), 356.

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*  
(Matt. 11:29)

In Christian discourse we talk to different kinds of conversation partners. Sometimes we speak to fellow believers. Sometimes we speak to unbelievers. Sometimes our partners enter the conversation with good will. They genuinely want to understand what we say and are open to being persuaded. Other times our partners don't really want a conversation. Instead, they want to use us as an opportunity to contradict and destroy what is good. By granting them a hearing, we give them the chance to mislead others.

We need to decide how to talk to different sorts of people under different kinds of circumstances. When we make those decisions, we run the risk of making mistakes in at least two directions. On the one hand, we can express ourselves with an unwarranted pungency that shades into street-brawling and even brutality. We are most tempted to adopt this attitude when we are defending ideas that we believe are important to the Christian faith. This attitude becomes ugliest when we begin to attack ideas that we have not even tried to understand.

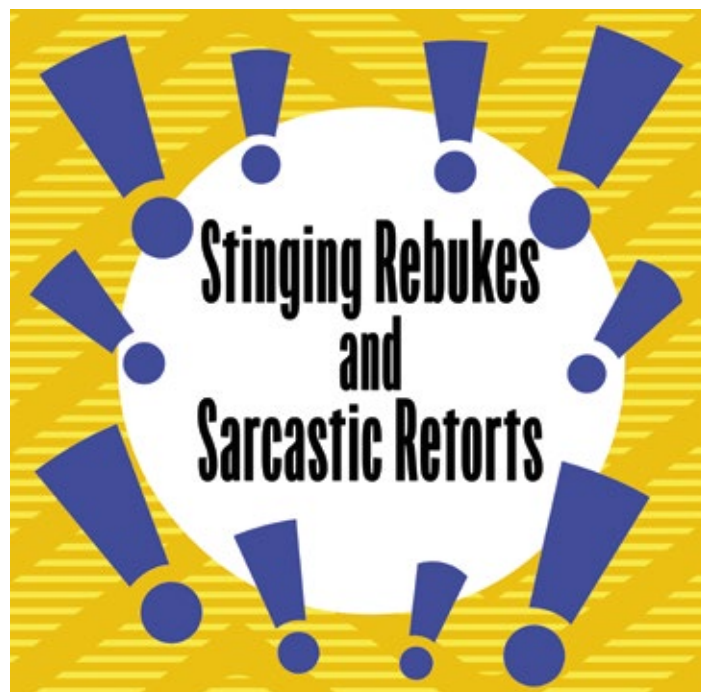
The equal and opposite error is to adopt a syrupy politeness. We want to bend over backwards not only to be fair, but to be seen as fair. We end up bending so far that we treat inane and outrageous ideas as though they deserved our dignified attention. We are most tempted to assume this attitude when we are eager to impress others with our charity. This attitude becomes ugliest when we confuse it with Christlikeness. Better honest if misplaced touchiness than affected deference.

**BIBLICAL EXAMPLES**

Christ's speech used no artificial sweeteners. While He dealt gently with sinners

of the vilest sort, He had little patience for those who pretended to have knowledge or authority that they lacked. He denounced the scribes and Pharisees in the harshest terms (Matt. 23), and He was quite prepared to administer a dose of sarcasm even to His own disciples. Can Peter really have enjoyed the Lord addressing him as Satan (Matt. 16:23)?

Jesus was following plenty of prophetic precedent. Who can forget Elijah mocking the priests of Baal (1 Kgs. 18:27)? An anonymous psalmist provides an equally satirical depiction of idols: mouths that



cannot speak, eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, noses that cannot smell, hands that cannot grasp (Ps. 115:4-8). Isaiah also mocks the absurdity of idolatry (Isa. 44:9-20). David even depicts Jehovah as mocking His enemies (Ps. 2:4).

The same is true of the apostles in their writings. Paul could be as gentle as a nursing mother with spiritual newborns (1 Thess. 2:7). Nevertheless, he applied high standards to those who put themselves forward as teachers. In Galatians he wrote against Judaizers who wrongly tried to get Christians to submit to circumcision. Paul expressed the jeering wish that they would go all the way and "cut themselves

off" (Gal. 5:11-12). This clear reference to emasculation constitutes a sarcastic dismissal of Paul's opponents.

The apostle did not reserve sarcasm for apostates and unbelievers. Paul delivered some of his most biting remarks to people whom he cared about deeply. Writing to the Corinthians, he could offer an endearment, saying, "Our heart is enlarged" toward you (2 Cor. 6:11). Yet a few chapters later he could tell the same readers, "For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes

advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison" (2 Cor. 11:19-21, NASB). These words contain more than a note of mockery—more like a whole sonata.

The Bible certainly has a place for irony, satire, sarcasm, and mockery. Yet these devices are rarely or never the main way the biblical writers talk. The biblical norm tilts in the other direction, even when we are talking to unbelievers. A wise relationship to the lost requires us to speak graciously (Col. 4:5-6). We must avoid rotten speech (corrupt communication), choosing instead to speak in ways that build up and minister grace (Eph. 4:29). We

are not supposed to return evil for evil, but wherever possible to live peaceably with everyone (Rom. 12:17-18).

The example of Jesus is relevant here, too. When He was reviled (insulted and verbally abused), He did not revile in return (1 Pet. 2:23). We are supposed to follow His example (2:21). When we are tempted to make biting remarks, we really ought to ask, What Would Jesus Do? The answer is that we must not return evil for evil or insult for insult (1 Pet. 3:9). Instead, people should recognize us because we bless them—indeed, blessing is part of our calling (3:9). At least part of our job is to do good, seek peace, and pursue it (3:11).

**BIBLICAL WARNINGS**

Furthermore, we must remember that using insulting speech can be a serious error, at least some of the time. In the key text about church discipline (1 Cor. 5), Paul names several scandalous behaviors: fornication, greed, idolatry, drunkenness, swindling (5:11). These are patterns of conduct that, if not repented of, should lead a church to deliver a so-called brother to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (5:5). The church should cease all Christian fellowship with such individuals (5:11-12).

Significantly, one of the behaviors that Paul names is abusive speech (5:11). The word that Paul uses is the same one that describes Jesus being insulted but not insulting in return (1 Pet. 2:23). Peter also uses this word when he forbids us to return insult for insult (1 Pet. 3:9). If we become addicted to mocking and "owning" our opponents, we are launching ourselves along a hazardous spiritual trajectory.

**TODAY'S CULTURE**

What is true of our speech is also true of our publications and our social media. The principles that govern healthy words apply there as much as they do in face-to-face interactions. Our public persona must match our private demeanor.

Hiding behind pseudonyms or anonymous accounts makes this behavior worse, not better. Remember Pierre Delecto? He was Mitt Romney's alter ego, a false persona created so that Romney could follow and comment anonymously on other people's posts. The revelation of this account did not boost Romney's credibility. Indeed, it damaged his reputation as much as anything he has done.

Social media started to become a big thing during the early 2000s. Since that time, multiple Christian leaders have been toppled from their ministries when they were discovered using anonymous accounts to insult and demean others. This behavior creates scandal even among the lost. Let it not be named among Christians.

Our society now celebrates behaviors that would have been considered intolerably rude just a generation ago. Don Rickles built a career around using rudeness for humor, but people in real life hardly ever acted that way. Now, however, insult has become the main way that some people communicate. Our civilization celebrates

the satiric remark, the sardonic quip, the snarky one-liner. Simply because these things have become socially acceptable, however, does not mean that God thinks more highly of them.

Sarcasm has a place. It is not always wrong, and sometimes it is indispensable. But in a culture like ours, the temptation will be to go there too quickly, immerse ourselves too deeply, and remain underneath too long. Sarcasm is often like the One Ring. If we try to use it, even for the good, it corrupts us, and we cannot resist its pull.

**JUDICIOUS SARCASM**

How, then, can we judge wisely whether sarcasm is called for under a particular circumstance? Are there any rules that can help us to use it without becoming fruitlessly combative? While Scripture never addresses this question directly, certain generalizations can be drawn by observing the general use of sarcasm in Scripture.

First, sarcasm is like salt. A sprinkling of it in the right proportions will bring speech and writing to life, but it is a seasoning and not food. Too much of it chokes discrimination and spoils the dish.

The biblical pattern here seems clear. The writers of Scripture do occasionally employ sarcasm. Even Jesus did. But none of them relied upon it as a regular and ongoing rhetorical strategy. Quite the opposite. Jesus usually spoke gently, even to His enemies. Paul is notable for his expressions of tenderness. In the Bible, sarcasm was reserved for extreme situations.

Second, we should never poke fun at what we do not understand. By employing biting humor too quickly, we can easily dismiss concerns that are at least partly legitimate. When the biblical writers resort to sarcasm, they always understand exactly what they are attacking. Elijah's mockery of Baal would not have been half as effective if he had not understood exactly how idolatry worked and how idolaters thought.

As a rule, our first response to our opponents should not be to dismiss their position, but to understand it. On the one hand, understanding may give us a measure of compassion even for people whose ideas we reject. On the other hand, by understanding an opponent's position, we will better know how and where to attack it. In any event, hasty mockery

usually goes astray. It often does little more than to display our ignorance.

Third, on those occasions when we might resort to sarcasm, the degree of scorn must be proportioned to the demonstrable gravity of the error. Sometimes sarcasm can be used to point out how serious an error is. There is a time to dismiss a position with laughter. If our listeners or readers do not understand why we take the error so seriously, however, our sarcasm is likely to ricochet back at us and make us look foolish.

Fourth, the use of sarcasm should normally be nested in a context of concern for those whom we mock. They should be able to see that our scorn is not directed at them as persons and image-bearers of God, but at ideas or behaviors that are unworthy of those who bear God's image. Most of Paul's sarcasm comes in 2 Corinthians. Yet this book is exactly where he most displays his loving heart for erring Christians.

One more suggestion, this one not so much biblical as practical. Sarcasm must be served with wit. Nothing is more dull or juvenile than loutish derision. Sarcasm is like a horse that anyone can mount, but only the truly skillful can ride. Thoughtful and sensitive people have no appetite for playground scuffling. They instinctively recoil from it and try to break it up. Wit is the spur that gets them over this hurdle and helps them appreciate the point.

Occasions do present themselves when sarcasm is morally permissible and even commendable. Still, most of us cannot use it to our best advantage. In fact, most people who think that they can, can't. In most cases, sarcasm is a tactical mistake. When it becomes the main way that we argue, it does a disservice to biblical Christianity. Even where appropriate, sarcasm is an addictive drug. Those who use it will become tempted to rely on it even when it harms the testimony of Christ.

Are you tempted to make a snide rejoinder so that you can "own" your opponent? Think a long time before you hit the "send" button. Sarcasm may be the easiest response, but it is seldom the best.

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## News From All Over



**Pastor Jeff Bailie** has been the pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Pensacola, Florida, for over eighteen years and is now retiring from the senior pastorate. He and his wife, Debbie,

will be moving to Maranatha Baptist Church and Maranatha Village in Sebring, Florida, where he will serve as Administrative Pastor. Jeff and Debbie have been in the ministry for forty-nine years, with Jeff serving as a pastor for forty of those years. They are the parents of two children, both in the ministry, and the proud grandparents of eight. They look forward to serving the Lord together in the years that lie ahead.

**Pastor Ed Mason** will be retiring from pastoring Carleton Community Baptist Church in Carleton, Michigan, at the end of September 2025. Along with his wife, Judy, Ed has been at the church since August of 1980, completing over forty-five years of ministry as senior pastor at Carleton. This was Ed's first and only pastorate. **Pastor Timothy Pherson** will be stepping into the pastoral leadership of the church on the same day Ed steps down. Pastor Pherson and his wife Sarah have two small boys and are excited about the ministry at Carleton.



On June 15, Tri-City Baptist Church in Westminster, Colorado, voted to call **Pastor Nathan Steadman** as the next senior pastor, replacing Dr. William J. Senn III. A special installation service was held on July 20 with Dr. Senn and Dr. Bud Steadman

delivering charges to the congregation and pastor respectively. Pastor Steadman joined Tri-City in 2017, serving as the youth pastor for seven years before transitioning to adult ministries. He is a graduate of Bob Jones University and Heart of America Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Janelle, have been married for fifteen years and have three sons: Elijah (11), Ethan (9), and Micah (6). The Steadmans praise the Lord for the opportunity to serve Him and His people at Tri-City.

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transparent, and genuine. This is the way that God has called us to live within His story. It is the only way that we can exalt Him and proclaim His story. As Wayne Grudem says, "The truthfulness of God is communicable in that we can imitate it by striving to have true knowledge about God and about his world."<sup>4</sup>

We cannot walk in truth if we do not know the true story. Neither can we walk in truth if we do not tell the true story.

**Greg Stiekes**, PhD, is pastor of Gateway Baptist Church in Travelers Rest, South Carolina.



<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NKJV.

<sup>2</sup> *Universal Newsreel*, vol. 10, release 715 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcRoo0dcxbA>).

<sup>3</sup> P. Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (Random House, 1999), 197.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*,

# SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS—2 TIMOTHY 1:13

## FIRST PARTAKER

*"The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits" (2 Tim. 2:6)*

## Our Praying Can Be in the Spirit, Consciously

*"Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit" (Eph. 6:18a).*

This phrase in Ephesians 6:18 must be read with mental emphasis upon the right words in order to capture its primary point. Despite what our initial assumption may be, the emphatic word is not *always*, as if the phrase's focus were upon *when* we are to pray. Nor is the primary point *what* our praying is to consist in (its content): *prayer and supplication*. Rather, the phrase's critical emphasis lies in its final words, *in the Spirit*. These tell us *how* we are to pray, and this is the primary point. Whenever it is that we pray (*always*) and whatever may be the content (*prayer and supplication*), that praying is to be emphatically *in the Spirit*.

Why is this stressed? I believe that it is exceedingly important to consider that question and to be certain of the scriptural answers to it. Those answers prove to be vital to effectual praying. In considering this matter, I would like to accomplish four objectives.

First, I want to confirm that this actually is the primary and emphatic point of the verse's admonition. Happily, there are ways of doing so that will also take us a long way forward toward grasping why this kind of praying is so essential.

Second, because these confirmations might incline us toward a hasty misgeneralization about our usual praying, I'll need to explain some factors that should correct this.

Third, I would like to discuss briefly the primary factor that should alert us to when we are not, in fact, praying

*in the Spirit.*

And fourth, I'll attempt to explain systematically, and in some detail, what it is to pray in this way *consciously*.

The last objective is my ultimate one, which is why it is stated as the title or proposition for this column. In Puritan preaching it would be what they called the *Doctrine* of the text, and therefore of the sermon as well. I've stated the proposition, or doctrine, in such a way that the final word, *consciously*, is the very nub of what is being proposed. What I intend by this is to alert us to the fact that we actually can know with certainty whether or not we really are praying *in the Spirit*.

This is not to say that we *must* be conscious of it. Our obligation to God is to pray in this way, not necessarily to be conscious that we are. But if we wonder, or if there are times (and there are) when we feel that we just must know, the thesis is that we *can*.

I'll begin, then, with confirmations of the specific emphasis of Ephesians 6:18a.

### CONFIRMING THAT PRAYING IN THE SPIRIT IS THE EMPHATIC POINT OF EPHESIANS 6:18A

Our first confirmation is exegetical, and it emerges from examining our translation's underlying text. It reads literally, *Through all prayer and supplication, praying in every time in spirit.*

The first word, *through*, is best understood as *by means of*. It reflects the fact that when we speak to God, we do so in variations that are classifiable. This verse names two: *prayer and supplication*. Other classifiable types are adoration, blessing, confession, lamentation, praise, and so on. These categories of praying are the various *means* that we employ to compose prayers of a variety

## God's Story and Our Stories

Continued from page 14

effect in my preaching. I can retell my story to make myself seem to be a better pastor than I am. What would people think about me if they knew that I myself was struggling in some way? What would they say if they knew that I had actually forgotten about that meeting? How would they judge me if they knew that I hadn't been eager to fulfill my pastoral duties? Even worse, a prideful lack of pastoral transparency can easily translate into pharisaical pride among the congregation. It can create a culture of comparison where everybody is trying to measure up to an artificial and unattainable standard.

In summary, we who have trusted in God's true story and have found salvation are warned by God to make certain that our own stories are always true. Our truthfulness should extend from the big-picture stories to the everyday stories we narrate about our lives. We ought not to spin or shade the truth, but to imitate our Lord and Creator, the divine Storyteller. The stories that we tell must be true,

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of contents, as well as to express our broad spectrum of feelings about them.

The *all* (*through all prayer and supplication*) refers to every one of these prayers, regardless of its category. Each is to be brought before the Lord in the way that the verse will go on to describe.

The words *in every time* do not refer to hours of the day but to the various instances when we pray. Privately or publicly, whether walking or working or playing or whatever the circumstance or occasion may be, each prayer is to be expressed to God in the same way.

***The fierce opposition isn't ultimately from fellow human beings. It is from invisible, fallen, other-than-human spirits; rulers, powers, darkness, and wickedness residing in another sphere (6:12). Literally, our terrific conflict is with the spirits of wickedness in the heavenlies.***

So read again literally, and with interpretive understanding, the text says, *By means of every prayer and supplication, praying on every occasion in spirit.* You can see how everything tapers down to one, sharp concluding point: *in spirit.* And that brings us to this question: what are we to understand the word *spirit* to be referring to?

Our literal translation begins the word with a lower case “s,” suggesting that our inner human person (what some call *my deepest spiritual being*) is referred to. Is that the right understanding?

Lenski argues for it, due to the absence of the article here, in contrast to its inclusion in the previous verse: *take . . . the sword of the Spirit.* And it is true that this word does sometimes refer to the praying of our human spirit. Paul states, *I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with my mind also* (1 Cor. 14:15, NASB), and the previous verse unambiguously clarifies what spirit is under discussion: *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays.* The “spirit” praying is clearly Paul’s own spirit.

Eadie, Morris, Stott, Lincoln, and Hoehner, however, point out that “spirit” without the article is sometimes used in the NT for the Holy Spirit. They reference Ephesians 2:18 and 1:7 as the nearest contextual examples. Here in Ephesians 6:18, then, “spirit” even without the definite article almost certainly refers to the Holy Spirit (as in Gal. 5:16, 18). A parallel statement in Jude (v. 20, NASB) reads, *praying in the Holy Spirit.* Interestingly, even Lenski concludes his comments on Ephesians

6:18, “Nor does ‘in spirit’ ignore the Holy Spirit; for none of us prays in spirit save by the Spirit’s help.”

But the more weighty and conclusive factors are contextual. There are two of them.

The first will be apparent if you will glance at the verse immediately preceding verse 18. It concludes with the admonition to *take the sword of the Spirit.* Look at the admonitions of verses 17 and 18 in sequence.

*And take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. By means of every prayer and supplication, praying on every occasion in [the] Spirit.*

You can see that verse 18 appears to be calling for a kind of praying which in its nature corresponds to the nature of the words we’re reading. Those words are the Spirit’s, and we’re urged to respond back with words which are, in some complementary sense, *in [the] Spirit.* God’s Word comes to us through the Spirit’s inspiration (of its content) and illumination (of its readers). Though not inspired, our prayers back to Him are to be in words correspondingly *in the Spirit.*

How to do this is not explained in this passage. We’ll take that matter up later. But for now, we can see at least that verse 18’s immediate context suggests strongly that what we’re concluding about its emphatic point is correct. In fact, this is heightened still further by comparing the verb *take* (17) with the verbal *praying* (18). The first is a simple grammatical imperative. A command. The second reads as though it also is a command. But strictly speaking it is not. There are not two imperatives here, each independent of one another; as though prayer is the next “piece” of a Christian’s armor. There is only one command (*take*). What follows in verse 18 is descriptive of what is to be attendant to the taking—namely, *praying.* It is so closely attendant, in fact, that it may be expressed as mildly imperative: *take . . . praying.*

What becomes both clear and instructively practical, then, is a necessary Spiritual (please give full weight to the capitalizing of the “s”) complementarianism. We are commanded to take hold upon the Spirit’s words. The necessary attendant is words from us that are in some sense similarly in His Spirit.

But there’s a second and even more instructive contextual consideration that also argues for this emphasis. Earlier in this passage, verse 12 informs us about the true nature of the opposition that we are up against while we’re attempting to live the ideals of chapters 5 and 6. Those ideals concern our marriages, our parenting, our responses to parents (while yet children), and our work relationships (regardless of whether we are *slaves* or *masters*). Our living up to those ideals is what brings great honor and praise to God. However, the enabling to do so consistently and successfully requires nothing less

than our being filled with His Spirit (5:18). No merely human energy can be anything close to sufficient.

One of the primary reasons that this Spirit-filling is absolutely vital to God-glorifying success in any of these areas is because of the staggering reality of what lies behind the really intense opposition that we experience. If we suppose that the ugly reality is our spouse, or our children, or our parents, employers, employees, or others, verse 12 informs us that we’re greatly mistaken. The fierce opposition isn’t ultimately from fellow human beings. It is from invisible, fallen, other-than-human spirits; rulers, powers, darkness, and wickedness residing in another sphere (6:12). Literally, our terrific conflict is with *the spirits of wickedness in the heavenlies.* Even more specifically, behind it all lie *the wiles of the devil* (11). What can possibly stand up to these powerful spirits? Nothing less than a superior Spirit, God’s Holy Spirit. Nothing merely human has any possibility of surviving, let alone prevailing. What we must have is God’s *Spiritual* sword. And correspondingly, the way we must pray is *Spiritually*, that is, *in the Spirit.*

These, then, are the sound confirmations that Ephesians 6:18a is indeed emphasizing this. The nearest context (17), the larger context (11–12), and the greater context (5:18–6:9) all point to it conspicuously.

Before commencing upon my second objective, I want to expand upon just how important it is to accept and to respond consciously to this reality. I’ll do it through two credible voices from the past. The first is the early 18th-century Scottish minister Thomas Boston.

I don’t know how much you know about Thomas Boston, but if very little, J. I. Packer provides a ten-page introduction to him in Christian Heritage’s republication of his work, *The Crook in the Lot* (1737; repr. 2002). Packer states his opinion that Boston, along with Jonathan Edwards, *represents most brilliantly the prolonging into the eighteenth century of pure Puritanism.* Edwards himself called Boston *a truly great divine* (i.e., *theologian*). The fact that the twelve volumes of his works (7400 pages) continue to be reprinted (Reformation Heritage) is a noteworthy, persisting testimony to the esteem in which he is held to this day.

It has been observed that Boston *did more to fan the flame of true piety in Scotland than any other single minister in his generation.*<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons for this was his prayer life. When you read his autobiography, it reminds you of David’s description of himself, *I am prayer* (Hebrew text of Psalm 109:4). What Boston wrote about prayer—and he wrote a great deal—was not out of unpracticed idealism but knowledgeable, personal practice.

Boston distinguished between two sorts of prayer. First of all, he said, there is *prayer wrought out by virtue of a gift of knowledge and utterance.* He means prayer that is

the production of these things only. Perceptively, Boston acknowledged that even though this kind of prayer fails to be accepted in heaven (for many obvious reasons), it still may be somewhat useful to its human listeners because it both reflects Scripture and is delivered by a person gifted for speaking publicly.

Then, Boston explained, there is a second sort of praying that not only edifies on earth, but much more importantly, is effectual in heaven. It is, he said, *prayer wrought in men by virtue of the Holy Spirit*; that is, prayer that is *in the Spirit.* What is especially significant for our consideration is the fact that Boston went so far as to assert that this last kind of praying is *the only acceptable prayer to God.* In other words, praying *in the Spirit* isn’t merely important. In reality, it is the only kind of praying which we can be confident is truly reaching God’s ear. *God will certainly hear and accept that kind of praying, though there be nothing but groaning in it.*<sup>2</sup>

Praying persons, satisfy not yourselves without this kind of praying. Stand not still in the outer court of prayer, with hypocrites and formalists; come in to the inner court, with God’s own children. Look for the help of the Spirit, employ the Spirit in all your duties, and particularly your prayers. Remember that all the prayers are lost that are not done in the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The second person that I want to give voice to on this matter is Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He called praying *in the Spirit. . . the secret of true prayer.* Like Boston, he differentiated this from its counterfeit.

This is the real essence, the very life and spirit of prayer. . . . I remember once hearing a man describe how he had been visiting a certain city. He told us that he suddenly saw a cathedral, “and I went in” he said, “and said a prayer.” Then he went on looking at the sights of the city. “Saying a prayer”! That seems to me to be the exact opposite of “praying in the Spirit.”

Later in the same sermon he noted,

You can pray with your mind a very correct prayer, a very “beautiful” prayer and yet never truly pray “in the Spirit.” . . . To be perfectly composed and doctrinally correct does not make it true prayer. You may also pray for the right things and still it is not true prayer.<sup>4</sup>

How do we feel about this issue? Do we ever think about it? When is the last time that we preached or taught anything about it to our people? But even as I have been studying and thinking about these things, it has occurred to me that there is a clarification that it is necessary lest we jump to a mistaken conclusion about the generality of our present praying.

## CLARIFYING WHAT WE SHOULD NOT CONCLUDE FROM THESE CONFIRMATIONS

In light of what we've seen, we may be prone to conclude that evidently Christian people are doing very little actual praying. But I doubt that this generalization would be correct—simply because our praying may very well be of a Spiritual character, even though we may be unaware of it, let alone consciously seeking it. This is why I noted at the beginning that my title, “Our Praying Can Be *in the Spirit*, Consciously,” is not proposing that we *must* be conscious that we are doing this. In fact, what I want to clarify now is that we should assume that much (perhaps, most) of our praying is indeed of this nature, even though we may not be seeking it consciously. I'd like to give three telling reasons for this assumption.

First, take, for example, the praying that an entirely new Christian does. Hundreds of millions of people have been taught to pray the Lord's Prayer, beginning with, *Our Father which art in Heaven*. They know this address so well that in public religious services they can readily join in reciting it. But contrast that with what they do in private. There they evidence no filial feelings toward God whatsoever, and if by an emergency they are constrained to cry out, they seem almost always to begin blindly, *Oh God!*

But what of a new convert? Again and again you will observe that when a new Christian is told that God is now truly his heavenly Father, he not only accepts this, but in light of it changes the way he prays almost immediately. With a refreshingly childlike confidence, he unhesitatingly begins to address God as his *Father*.

What explains this? Well, what we're told is that this change is due to a new, internal child-prompting done by the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15–16).

Of course, most new Christians know almost nothing at all about the Holy Spirit, let alone about His influence on their praying. And yet right from the beginning they are praying to God as taught by the Spirit. Does not such “baby” praying meet the standard of being *in the Spirit*? Yet this new child of God is not consciously and actively seeking it.

Second, the fact that much of our everyday praying is almost certainly of this character, albeit unconsciously, seems to be an entirely warranted inference from what is conspicuously absent from our Lord's earliest instructions about praying (Matt. 6:5–15; 7:7–11). These include His correcting certain kinds of praying (6:5–8), His warning that prayers for forgiveness might not be answered (6:14–15), and His promises to everyone who prays (7:8). Yet we don't find that He explicitly links any of these to the Holy Spirit's influences. In light of our study thus far, we might have anticipated that in

correcting any sort of praying that is merely repetitive lip service (6:7), our Lord would challenge us to pray, instead, *in the Spirit*. But He makes no mention of this. Similarly, we might assume that it would be stated clearly that receiving and finding and opening of doors due to prayer would be conditioned upon our asking and seeking and knocking *in the Spirit*. But there is no such statement.

It doesn't follow from this, of course, that praying in the Spirit isn't, in fact, the one, great indispensable condition to all acceptable praying. But what does seem to follow is this clarification that we're considering; that the condition of *in the Spirit* may be met, even though we are not seeking it intentionally, nor even thinking about it at all.

I think a third valid, though perhaps less direct, proof of this emerges from paralleling our ministering alongside our praying (which, of course, is also a kind of ministry). Gifts for ministry are given to us by the Spirit, and unless He makes use of them in some effectual way, our exercise of them is largely fruitless. But throughout the epistles there is no constant reminder of our responsibility to seek the Spirit's direction or His enabling whenever we serve, even in contexts admonishing us about the proper uses of our spiritual giftedness (such as Romans 12:4–8 and 1 Peter 4:10–11). This fact leads me to think that prayer, like ministry in general, may go on unquestionably *in the Spirit*, even though we have not made conscious effort to ensure it.

My reason for clarifying this issue isn't to de-emphasize in any way the emphatic point of Ephesians 6:18. In fact, what I want to do in the next column is to proceed to my third and fourth objectives, both of which deal with the matter of how to be certain that we actually are praying according to this standard. And I want to encourage our giving more conscious attention to this both privately and publicly.

**Mark Minnick** pastors Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina. His sermons are available at [mountcalvarybaptist.org/sermons](http://mountcalvarybaptist.org/sermons) and on your favorite podcast app: search for “Mount Calvary Baptist Church” and subscribe.

<sup>1</sup> D. D. F. MacDonald, quoted by A. T. B. McGowan in *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston*, and referenced by Joel Beeke in *Taking Hold of God* (Reformation Heritage, 2011), 161.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, ed. Samuel M'Millan (Aberdeen: George & Robert King, 1852), 11:80.

<sup>3</sup> Boston, 11:70.

<sup>4</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian Soldier: An Exposition of Ephesians 6:10–20* (Baker, 1977), 344–47.

## BRING...THE BOOKS

“... when thou comest, bring with thee  
... the books” (2 Tim. 4:13)

### More Books for a Deserted Island

*If you were marooned on a remote island with only three books on it (a Bible, a hymn book, and Pilgrim's Progress), what other five books would you want to have with you?*

When I mentioned the premise of this article to my wife, she suggested I include a book on *How to Survive on a Deserted Island*. She knows my survival skills are limited, and I might not live long enough to enjoy any other books. My twelve-year-old son, overhearing, suggested *To the Golden Shore*, one of my favorite missionary biographies. The title certainly makes one think of an island; I can see why he suggested it. But enough of that nonsense.

First, I need my Greek and Hebrew Testaments. To stay within my five-book limit, I will take *A Reader's Hebrew and Greek Bible*, efficiently combining in one volume the Hebrew Old Testament, the Greek New Testament, footnoted vocabulary, and mini lexicons. I would hope that with the linguistic help given there (and vast quantities of time at my disposal), I could read profitably from the originals.

Second, I want at least one commentator to encourage me in the Word, and I would have to choose *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (the unabridged one-volume edition). Some commentators dig deeper and are more concise than Henry, but none surpass him for pithiness, sensibility, and using Scripture to explain Scripture. One of my favorite Henry-isms is his comment at 1 Kings 22:34 on the randomly shot arrow that ended Ahab's life: “No armour is of proof against the darts of divine vengeance. Case the criminal in steel, and it is all one, *he that made him can make his sword to approach him.*”<sup>1</sup>

Third, I would then choose my two-volume *Works of Jonathan Edwards*. This borders on cheating—in two ways. First, I am counting two books as only one; second, in addition to getting fine thoughts on theology, I am also getting a missionary biography (*The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*). I would be tempted to include other missionary biographies in my five, but fanning into flame my missionary impulse on a deserted island might be frustrating anyway.

Fourth, I would probably choose William Gurnall's *The Christian in Complete Armour*. I spent the better part of a year (after starting it some years earlier) reading an average of two to three pages a day. Finishing it was such a monument that I recorded the date: December 18, 2019. In many ways, Gurnall was my pastor that year. In his 1189-page exposition of the armor of God in Ephesians 6:10–20, Gurnall manages to bring in almost the entirety of the rest of Scripture. My copy also includes a biographical sketch of him by J. C. Ryle. Gurnall's explanations are winsome, his illustrations numerous, and his applications timeless. To give you a taste, here is one of my favorites: “Though your life be evil with troubles, yet it is short—a few steps, and we are out of the rain.”<sup>2</sup> He also has

some very long sentences. The following 171-word specimen (not the longest I found) offers an ample sample:

They who now think it matters not much what language drivels from them, what company they walk in, what they busy their time about, how they comport with God in his worship, and with man in their dealings, but live at large, and care not much which end goes foremost, yea, wonder at the niceness and zeal of others, as if there were no pace would carry them to heaven but the gallop; when once death comes so near as to be known by its own grim face, and not by report of others, when these poor creatures see they must in earnest go into another world without any delay, and their naked souls must return to ‘God that gave them,’ to hear what interpretation he will put upon the course and tenor of their walking, and, accordingly, to pass an irrevocable sentence of life or death upon them; now their thoughts will begin to change, and take up other notions of a righteous and holy life than ever they had before.<sup>3</sup>

Fifth, for my last book I would choose something *long* that I have not fully read yet. Ideal would be the seven-volume *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century*. I have only completed through volume four. However, I would think the seven-volume size would tax the limit imposed by my marooners, as would the sixteen-volume *Works of John Owen*, the twelve-volume *Works of Thomas Boston*, or even the four volumes of John Newton's *Works*. So, I would probably take John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, not because I am a Calvinist nor because I expect to agree with Calvin on everything, but because I have felt for a long time that I need to read the first evangelical systematic theology but have never taken the time to read it “from lid to lid.” I might finish reading it and then decide that I should have chosen a different book to be one of my five, but such is life on a deserted island. At least I have for companionship the Scriptures (in English, Hebrew, and Greek), a commentator (Henry), a thinker (Edwards), a missionary (Brainerd), a pastor (Gurnall), and a systematic theologian (Calvin). Come to think of it, all these men were pastors in one way or another! I should be well shepherded until I leave my lonely island and head *To the Golden Shore!*

**Timothy Berrey** was a professor at Bob Jones Memorial Bible College in Quezon City, Philippines, for eighteen years under Gospel Fellowship Association and is now GFA's Director of Missionary Recruitment.

<sup>1</sup> *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Hendrickson, 1994), 519.

<sup>2</sup> William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour* (repr., Banner of Truth, 1995), 1:243.

<sup>3</sup> Gurnall, 1:454.

## Was Josiah’s Death a Failed Prophecy?

Though God announced that He would bring unprecedented desolation upon Judah because of their rebellion (2 Kings 22:16–17), He promised the young and godly King Josiah that he would go to his grave “in peace” (22:20). But Josiah died in battle at the hand of Pharaoh Necho of Egypt (23:29–30). According to OT scholar Robert Chisholm, “dying a bloody death on a battlefield can hardly be viewed as dying ‘in peace.’ However, if we view the prophecy as implicitly conditional to begin with and make room for human freedom in the equation, we can conclude that Josiah’s decision to become embroiled in international politics compromised God’s intention for him to die in peace.”<sup>1</sup>

Is that the best explanation of the apparent discrepancy? Wouldn’t God have known that Josiah would become politically “embroiled” when He foretold his death? And wouldn’t that foreknowledge have impacted how God chose to express Himself prophetically? Two points need to be addressed here.

First, God explained exactly what He meant in the prophecy. When God promised that Josiah would “be gathered into [his] grave in peace,” He explained what He meant in the very next phrase: “and thine eyes shall not see all the evil which I will bring upon this place” (22:20). In other words, Judah was doomed to disaster, but Josiah would die while the kingdom was still at peace. And he did. Within just four years of Josiah’s battlefield death at the age of thirty-nine (22:1), the calamity that God promised had commenced. For Josiah to die prior to God’s promised judgment on Judah is what God meant when He said that Josiah would die “in peace.” In fact, if Josiah *had* died a natural death—“in peace” in the way we usually use that expression—then the prophecy *could not* have been fulfilled. Chisholm plays both sides of the argument. On the one hand he denies that Josiah went to his grave “in peace.” But on the other hand he concedes, “Even so, the promise was fulfilled in its essence for Josiah still went to the grave without having to see Jerusalem’s downfall, which was the main point made by Huldah.”<sup>2</sup> It was not “the main point” of the prophecy; it was the *whole* point. If 22:20b has anything to do with the accuracy of the prophecy’s fulfillment, it has everything to do with it.

Second, the passage gives no clear indication that Josiah’s action was inappropriate. When Pharaoh Necho II set out to aid the flagging Assyrians in their stand against the Babylonians at Carchemish, Josiah—for unexplained reasons—set out to intercept him (23:29), leading to the Battle of Megiddo and Josiah’s death (609). This is what Chisholm faults as “Josiah’s decision to become embroiled in international politics.” But that’s what kings do! Especially when their nation is an international power

that sits (as Judah did) at the intersection between other international powers.

Moreover, if Josiah’s decision was the reason for his untimely demise and the loss of God’s intended blessing of a peaceful death, that leads to a larger problem for Chisholm’s view that the prophecy was intentionally conditional and open-ended. God’s explanation of prophetic contingency indicates that a divine pronouncement of intended blessing may be forfeited by disobedience (Jer. 18). The record in Chronicles includes a subtle hint that this may, in fact, have happened. When Josiah challenged Pharaoh Necho’s passage, the Egyptian king tried to warn him off: “I have not come against you this day, but against the house with which I have war; **for God commanded me to make haste.** Refrain from meddling with God, who is with me, lest He destroy you.’ Nevertheless, Josiah would not turn his face from him, but disguised himself so that he might fight with him, and **did not heed the words of Necho from the mouth of God.** So he came to fight in the Valley of Megiddo.” (2 Chr. 35:21–22, NKJV).

Perhaps we are surprised, even suspicious, to hear God’s words coming from an Egyptian king. Perhaps Josiah was as well. Nothing in the text leads us to conclude, however, that it was disingenuous. I would have to concede that 2 Chronicles 35:21–22 opens the door to the possibility that Josiah’s action was an act of disobedience that might have forfeited God’s protection. Chisholm never makes that argument, though in my view it is the only piece of evidence that can possibly salvage his interpretation that the prophecy was conditional.

In any case, God promised Josiah that he would die “in peace.” Did he? Absolutely. How can we say he died “in peace” if he died in battle? Because God explained what He meant by “in peace”; He meant that Josiah would die amid an era of peace—while Judah was still at peace—before seeing the commencement of God’s judgment on Judah that would eventuate in the captivity of the people and the destruction of Jerusalem. Sure enough, four years after Josiah’s death, God shattered the peace of Judah with the rod of Babylon. It’s really not that complicated if you let the text define the details of the prophetic promise.

**Layton Talbert** is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.

<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Israel According to the Prophets,” in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Kregel, 2014), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Chisholm, 61.

## Salt and Light

Jesus is the master teacher! All students of the Word are at times overwhelmed by the profound truth and intricate detail of some of His sermon texts. At times we are baffled by the meaning and application of some truths. He then takes the most common and simple objects and teaches truths that are simple yet profound and interconnected. All worshipers who hear His sermons are astonished at His doctrine and impacted by His authority.

In His great Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5–7, He introduces us to the blessings of His Kingdom and how they are reflected in the heart and life of a believer. He then uses two common objects to turn the listener’s focus to the innermost part of their being with the application that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees if we are to enter His Kingdom: salt and light—something every culture would be familiar with.

While driving home late one night I was confronted with these two objects and the text of this great sermon. I live five miles south of the Great Salt Lake in the heart of Utah. That evening the light of the moon was illuminating the surface of the lake with an unusual shimmer of light. Out toward the edge of the lake was a large facility surrounded by bright lights, which were reflected in the water. The facility was the state prison. My mind was drawn to Jesus’ words about our being salt and light in a corrupt and dark world. The prison’s bright lights enveloped some of the darkest of human hearts, and the prison itself was set against the backdrop of some of the saltiest water in the world. Jesus’ words apply themselves to every generation in every culture and speak truth to those who have ears to hear.

### THE SALT OF THE EARTH

“Ye are the salt of the earth.” Primarily the savor of the salt is in view. Salt is the commonest of spices that grace our kitchens and tables. Without it, food is bland. It is a necessary nutrient in our diet. Paul says in Colossians 4:6 that our speech is to be “always with grace, seasoned with salt.” Salt has other beneficial attributes as well. It is a preservative for foods and creates a thirst when eaten.

Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. When sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is sodium chloride—common table salt, the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor. Love and truth can be like sodium and chlorine. Love without truth is flighty,

sometimes blind, willing to combine with various doctrines. On the other hand, truth by itself can be offensive, sometimes even poisonous. Spoken without love, it can turn people away from the gospel. When truth and love are combined in an individual or a church, however, then we have what Jesus called “the salt of the earth,” and we’re able to preserve and bring out the beauty of our faith. (David H. Johnson)

Here are some interesting facts about the Great Salt Lake. It is the largest saltwater lake in the Western Hemisphere. It is the eighth largest terminal lake in the world, fed by three rivers and smaller tributaries. They deposit about 1.1 million tons of salt and minerals in the lake each year. The salinity of the lake varies but is about five times saltier than the ocean. Only small brine shrimp can live in this water. Several salt and mineral companies harvest from this lake.

Terminal lakes form where there is intake but no outflow. Evaporation is the only way that water can leave the lake, but in the process it leaves behind all the minerals and salts. These elements continue to accumulate until the lake is no longer able to sustain life due to the high salt content. God calls us to give out and share what we have been given by Him. When we do not intentionally give out what we have received we soon become stagnant and can’t sustain spiritual life and vitality, and are, thus, terminal.

“People don’t enjoy salt. They enjoy what is salted. We are the salt of the earth. We do not exist for ourselves.” (John Piper)

“The church must seek to be biblical rather than relevant. We are not going to leave a mark upon our culture because we have studied its ways and adapted ourselves to it. We are relevant when we reject the world outright and are its polar opposite! This present darkness provides a great opportunity for the church to be the salt of the earth, but if we mix with the very impurities we are supposed to expose . . . we are as useless as our culture already believes us to be.” (Paul Washer)

“And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt.” (Lev. 2:13)

“Ought ye not to know that the LORD God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David for ever, even to him and to his sons by a covenant of salt?” (2 Chron. 13:5)

“Worth your weight in salt” is a phrase that comes from historical lore where ancient Roman soldiers were supposedly paid in

salt or given an allowance to purchase it because of the value of the commodity. It had the meaning of being worthy of the salary you were being paid. Our modern word *salary* was influenced by this practice.

### THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Jesus then calls His followers to be light in a dark world. Two times in John's Gospel, he records Jesus declaring that He is the light of the world (8:12; 9:5). Jesus declares that as long as He is in the world, He is the light of the world. He indeed is the light of the world, for He is the Creator God who commands in His first act of creation, "Let there be light." Then, in His sermon early in His ministry, He calls His disciples to be true reflectors of His light in a dark and needy world. John, in his introduction of Christ in the first chapter of his Gospel declares that in Jesus was life and this life was the light of men. As the light dispelled the darkness, the darkness had no power to suppress or overcome it. Jesus' invitation is for us to boldly reflect that light in such a way that God the Father is glorified, even as the Son brought glory to the Father. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4 that this treasure of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ is housed in a clay pot so that the excellency of the power is recognized as being from God.

History is full of accounts of men and women who reflected the glory of God through sacrificial living and sometimes martyrdom. One example is in an article written by Randy Alcorn entitled "Bert Elliot: A Faithful Star, Rising Night after Night for Christ." Bert Elliot is the brother of martyred missionary Jim Elliot. On the 50th anniversary of the martyrdom of the five missionaries in Ecuador, Randy Alcorn interviewed Bert and his wife Colleen. Randy writes,

In 1949, when Bert and Colleen were students at Multnomah Bible College, they were invited to Peru by a missionary. They became missionaries to Peru years before Jim went to Ecuador. When we discussed their ministry, Bert smiled and said, "I can't wait to get back from furlough." At that time, they were in their eighties and in their sixtieth year as missionaries, still joyfully reaching people for Christ. Until that weekend I didn't know anything about them. They may have served Christ faithfully under the radar of the church at large, but not under God's. . . . Bert said something to me that day I met him that I'll never forget: "Jim and I both served Christ, but differently. Jim was a great meteor, streaking through the sky." Bert didn't go on to describe himself, but I will. Unlike his brother Jim, the shooting star, Bert was a faint star that rose night after night, faithfully crossing the same path in the sky, to God's glory. In missions work, suffering sometimes results in a short life culminating in martyrdom, sometimes in a long life of daily dying to self and living for Christ. I believe Jim Elliot's reward is considerable, but it wouldn't surprise me to discover that Bert and Colleen's will be greater still. . . . After a visit to see Bert and Colleen in Peru a few years ago, Lars Gren, Elisabeth Elliot's

husband, wrote, "They are available for any who call or that ring the doorbell whether expected or unexpected. Along with open doors there are the Bible Studies, their involvement in the Christian School. . . . Plus an exceptional drug program leading addicts into a new life based on Scripture. . . . All this after 56 years on the field with no thought of the rocking chair or hanging out a shingle saying, 'busy, please call again.' What a life of service." Lars goes on to write, "On our last day, Bert said that if he had been given paper and pencil and told to draw out the perfect wish and plan for his life, it would not have been half as good as what the Lord opened for them. He quoted from Psalm 16, 'the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.'" Bert and Colleen Elliot have lived a long obedience in the same direction. Whether we follow God to leave our country or to stay here, all of us are likewise called to a life of faithful endurance, empowered by Christ. (<https://www.epm.org/resources/2012/Feb/19/bert-elliott-faithful-starrying-night-after-night/>)

Benjamin Franklin wanted to interest the people in Philadelphia in street lighting. He did not call a town meeting nor try to persuade the people by talking about it. He acted upon what he considered a good idea. He hung a beautiful lantern on a long bracket in front of his house. He kept the glass polished and carefully trimmed and lit the wick every evening at the approach of dusk. The lamp helped the people see the pavement ahead and made them feel more secure at night. Others began placing lights in front of their houses. Soon Philadelphia recognized the need for streetlights. Be the one today to light up your neighborhood with the light of life. Let it shine. Let your light shine TODAY! (From Darren Rogers's Sermon "Keep the Light Burning")

"We are told to let our light shine, and if it does, we won't need to tell anybody it does. Lighthouses don't fire cannons to call attention to the shining—they just shine." (Dwight L. Moody)

"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." (Isa. 9:2)

**Ron Ehmann** pastors Mountain View Baptist Church in Grantsville, Utah, and is Director of Northwest Baptist Missions.



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## On the Home Front

### 2025

#### September 9, 2025

##### New York City Regional Fellowship

Bethel Baptist Fellowship  
2304 Voorhies Ave  
Brooklyn, NY 11235  
Coordinator: Matt Recker

#### October 10, 2025

##### New Mexico Regional Fellowship

Manzano Baptist Church  
12411 Linn Ave NE  
Albuquerque, NM 87123  
Coordinator: Dan Mauldin

#### October 20-22, 2025

##### Central Regional Fellowship

Midland Baptist Church  
4200 N Church Circle  
Wichita, KS 67205  
Coordinator: Marcus Heffernan

#### October 25, 2025

##### New England Regional Fellowship

Heritage Baptist Church  
186 Dover Point Rd  
Dover, NH 03820  
Coordinator: Taigen Joos

### 2026

#### January 27, 2026

##### Rocky Mountain (Colorado) Regional Fellowship

Westside Baptist Church  
6260 West 4th Street  
Greeley, CO 80634  
Coordinator: Dan Unruh

#### March 9-11, 2026

##### South Regional Fellowship

The Wilds of North Carolina  
1000 Wilds Ridge Road  
Brevard, NC 28712  
Coordinator: Tony Facenda

#### March 16-17, 2026

##### Northwest Regional Fellowship

Grace Baptist Church  
114 4th Ave NW  
Puyallup, WA 98371  
Host pastor: Andy Oliver  
Coordinator: Greg Kaminski

#### March 23-24, 2026

##### California Regional Fellowship

Calvary Baptist Church  
1768 N Newcomb St  
Porterville, CA 93257  
Coordinator: Dan Pelletier



## BEST OF PROCLAIM & DEFEND

### APRIL 15, 2025 TO JUNE 15, 2025

- 22,244 visitors (up 1,664 over previous quarter)
- 32,120 views (up 3,671 over previous quarter)

### FEATURED FROM OUR MOST POPULAR ARTICLES:

**Some Brief Thoughts on Gossip and Godly Speech**, by David Huffstutler

Out of curiosity, I looked up “gossip” in my Bible, looked up its roots in Greek, and chased down similar words in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). Since the verb “gossip” could literally mean “to whisper,” I looked up “whisper” in Proverbs to add some thoughts. Then I added some further thoughts from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the New Testament. So, here are some word-study-guided reminders from the Bible about our speech.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/05/16/some-brief-thoughts-on-gossip-and-godly-speech/>

**The Sorrow of Saying Goodbye**, by David Huffstutler

Imagine trying to give a posthumous goodbye to someone you deeply loved after that person died from murder, an accident, or an overdose from illegal drugs. Imagine slowly saying goodbye to a loved one who is dying from an incurable disease. Imagine trying to formulate a goodbye to a spouse who suddenly ends your marriage by divorce. Imagine saying goodbye to a pastor who is coming to the end of a life-long ministry.

As a Christian, pastor, and police chaplain, I have directly or indirectly observed the goodbyes just described. From what I have seen, whatever the circumstances may be, there is sometimes great sorrow in saying goodbye. Thankfully, the Bible speaks to these moments to provide some salve for the sorrowing soul.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/05/23/the-sorrow-of-saying-goodbye/>

**Fake Worship Is a Problem Everywhere**, by Kevin Schaal

One of the enduring legacies of “market-church” Christianity is “entertainment worship.” Gen Z and many millennials are turning away from popular churches because they feel the worship is fake. Often it is. Overly rehearsed performances—to the point of rehearsing what is intended to look like spontaneity—produce a worship similar to the multitudes of fake foods that occupy our grocery stores. In many cases these young people are abandoning the contemporary evangelical service for the mystical liturgy of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Leaving one false form for another is not the solution, and all churches need to take a long, hard look at what they do and why.

<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/05/11/fake-worship-is-a-problem-everywhere/>

### MORE AI-GENERATED ARTICLES FROM FBFI PREACHERS: SERMONS PUT INTO ARTICLE FORMAT BY AI TOOLS

- Matt Recker: “Triggered: How to Overcome Destructive Obsessions” (<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/06/11/triggered-how-to-overcome-destructive-obsessions/>)
- Ken Casillas: “You Are the Temple of God: Understanding Our Sacred Identity” (<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/06/10/you-are-the-temple-of-god-understanding-our-sacred-identity/>)
- Don Johnson: “Make Disciples of All Nations” (<https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2025/06/16/make-disciples-of-all-nations/>)

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## Regional Reports

### MID-AMERICA FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Dave Huffstutler, Regional Coordinator

The Mid-America Regional Fellowship met at First Baptist Church in Rockford, Illinois, on May 19, 2025. Pastor Dave Huffstutler reports: “We had a wonderful conference this year with approximately 50 pastors from the Midwest in attendance. Our theme was simply, ‘The Church for God’s Glory.’ Several pastors spoke: David Stertz (North Branch, MN), Randy Hockema (Rockford, IL), Michael Riley (Wakefield, MI), Andy Hudson (Janesville, WI), and Steve Thomas (Flat Rock, MI). Topics included the church, pastoral ministry, serving our missionaries, a biblical look at cremation, and the gospel. It was a special day, and the fellowship was tremendous!” Sermons are available at [ccgrockford.org](http://ccgrockford.org).



### ROCKY MOUNTAIN (WYOMING) FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Pastor Jay Sprecher, Friendship Baptist Church

The Wyoming Regional FBFI Fellowship met May 12–13 at Friendship Baptist Church in Thayne, Wyoming. Members of Northwest Baptist Missions joined the fellowship for a total of fifty attendees, including the members of the local church serving and attending. The states of Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, and Idaho were represented. This year’s conference theme was “The Primacy of the Visible, Local Church.” There were four preaching sessions in support of this theme. Pastor Kevin Smith opened on Monday evening with “That They Might



*Please consider attending a fellowship in your region! These meetings are times of biblical encouragement, growth, and blessing for both men and women.*

See,” followed by Pastor Jonathan Edwards presenting “The Primacy of the Local Church Contingent on the Supremacy of Christ.” Tuesday morning Pastor Ted York reminded us that “It Is About Jesus,” and Pastor Tony Newhouse closed with “What Is a Great Church?”

On Tuesday morning we had split sessions with Charissa Edwards and Virginia Hartman ministering to the ladies, while the men participated in a church planters session, examining two active internship programs.

Many opportunities were provided for fellowship, highlighted by breakfast and lunch being served by the members of Friendship Baptist Church. Next year’s fellowship is tentatively scheduled for May 18–19 as we seek to encourage prospective church planters to fellowship and get a vision of the Intermountain West.

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-Dr. Jim Tillotson

### 2025 ANNUAL FELLOWSHIP

What a blessing to attend the 104<sup>th</sup> Annual Fellowship of Foundations Baptist Fellowship International on June 9–11 at Maranatha Baptist University and Calvary Baptist Church in Watertown, Wisconsin! This year the fellowship was held in conjunction with the New Testament Association of Independent Baptist Churches conference, and the fellowship was even sweeter. Our theme, “The World at Our Doorstep: International Ministry in the Local Church,” emphasized the importance of cross-cultural evangelism at home.

During the general sessions, the Heritage Singers (MBU) and the Calvary Baptist Church choir provided beautiful, soul-stirring music. The speakers

delivered excellent, culturally relevant messages centered around the “World at Our Doorstep” theme.

- Dr. Kevin Schaal: “The Alpha and Omega Church”
- Ch. Brig. Gen. Mike Sproul: “Ministry in the Military and Community: Its History and Application”
- Dr. Bob Loggans: “Love People”
- Dr. Matt Morrell: “Don’t Talk to Strangers”
- Dr. Jeremiah Cochran, “The Call for Prayer and Evangelism: The Heart and Hands of the Great Commission”

- Dr. Chuck Phelps, “From Your Doorstep to the World”
- Dr. Dave Anderson, “What Was I, That I Could Withstand God?”

Monday included training for our FBFI chaplains during the day, and the fellowship kicked off with dinner at MBU and the first session held at Calvary Baptist. Calvary provided special treats after every evening service and additional fellowship for everyone attending.

Participants selected two breakout sessions to attend on Tuesday. Presented by various speakers, these workshops were well-attended and provided information and tools to effectively present the gospel in today’s world.

Continued on page 26



# FROM the CALL TO THE FIELD

BWM connects local churches with God-called church planters and enables them to fulfill the Great Commission together.



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MBU provided a final special dinner on Wednesday with music from Watertown's own 1st Brigade Band. Performing on antique instruments and attired in Civil War-era uniforms and gowns, the band played period music and entertained diners with their stories.

CH (COL) Joe Willis was honored with this year's Torchbearer Award for his faithfulness in ministry. He has served as the FBFI Chaplain Endorser since May 2017 and continues to recruit, train, and mentor our FBFI chaplains. Tavis Long received the John C. Vaughn Award for Outstanding Military Chaplain, and Don Karnes was presented with the John C. Vaughn Award for Outstanding Community Chaplain. Joe Willis presented David Oliver with a retirement watch for his 28 years of chaplain service to township fire departments in the Belding, Michigan, area.

Of course, an annual fellowship meeting is nothing without fellowship. Pastor Don Johnson writes, "What a blessing to once again fellowship with the NTA! On an individual level, there were many



happy reunions of fellowship with long-time friends (and new ones) at the meal tables, in the meetings, at the conference tables, and around cups of coffee. One could wish for more of this, as I realized that I couldn't see everyone I set out to see. This kind of interaction surely is a taste of the grand fellowship of the saints to come and serves as a spur to faithfully continue to minister the gospel in these present days."

Plan to be with us in 2026 at Faith Baptist Church in Taylors, South Carolina, on October 5–7 for our next annual fellowship. For more pictures of the 2025 Annual Fellowship, visit [www.fbfiannualfellowship.org](http://www.fbfiannualfellowship.org).



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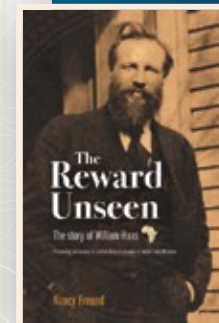
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## Heart to Heart

Rachel Mayes Allen

# Hidden in My Heart

On my kindergarten teacher's wall hung a bulletin board bearing rows of red construction paper hearts and the legend "Psalm 119:11: Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee." Each week, we kindergarteners dutifully recited our memory verse and tucked a slip of paper printed with the verse into our heart, a tangible token of our learning. All through my Christian school Bible classes, Awana, Vacation Bible School, and Bible quizzing, I continued memorizing Scripture. And then, once I reached adulthood . . . I stopped. With no prizes to earn or academic requirements to meet, the external expectation of Scripture memory simply vanished.

Those who, like me, grew up in Christian environments may see Scripture memory as a childhood practice we've outgrown, like wearing Mary Janes for Sunday school, while those who came to faith in adulthood may never have picked up the habit. In a society of immediately accessible information, memorization seems quaintly obsolete. But whether we have fallen away from Scripture memory, never practiced it, or question its value, it can be one of believers' most beneficial tools.

Of course, biblical literacy is ultimately a matter of understanding and applying the Bible, not parroting it. Bible verses are not multiplication tables or state capitals to be "drilled and killed." Indeed, some may argue that rote memory is never explicitly commanded in Scripture, only that we keep God's Word in our hearts and minds, that is, meditate on it. If we are too concerned with listing all the fruits of the Spirit in order, we may bypass the text's actual meaning and application. Meditation and memorization are not co-dependent.

While Scripture memory is not the only means of meditating on the Bible, it is nevertheless a practice believers should embrace. On a practical level, memorization makes information automatic, freeing our minds to focus on more advanced analysis, but on a

more personal level, memorization can actually help us engage deeply with God's Word. When the Hebrew Scriptures instruct us to *hāgā* on the book of the law (Josh. 1:8), to *hāgā* to answer (Prov. 15:28), and to *hāgā* of the Lord's righteousness (Ps. 71:24), this word is alternately translated as "meditate," "study," and "speak"—exactly what we should do in memorization. Included in Israel's final instructions before entering the Promised Land is the command to keep God's words before their eyes and in their hearts so they can teach their children throughout everyday life (Deut. 6:6–9). In the New Testament, Paul exhorts believers, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom" (Col. 3:17). If God's Word is to live within our hearts in such a way that it overflows into wise, biblical communication, it seems logical to memorize it—after all, there is a reason we often refer to memorizing a text as "knowing it by heart." We consider the passage's meaning carefully, study it thoroughly to commit it to memory, and then call

it to mind when needed, whether to share with an audience or draw comfort for ourselves.

Through this process, the text becomes part of how we understand the world. If, when I venture out into the chill of a December morning, I recall "the blue-black cold," a scrap of memorized poetry from Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays," how much more should I remember "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof" when I see the confetti of crabapple blossoms or catch a few bars of cardinal song. The Scripture I have memorized gives me language to worship, pray, and simply talk about how God has revealed Himself.

If you recognize the value of integrating Scripture memory into your spiritual disciplines as an adult, you may feel unsure where to start.

My own memorization hiatus ended after a conversation with a dear woman at my church. She mentioned offhand her practice of

**THROUGH THIS PROCESS, THE TEXT BECOMES PART OF HOW WE UNDERSTAND THE WORLD.**

more

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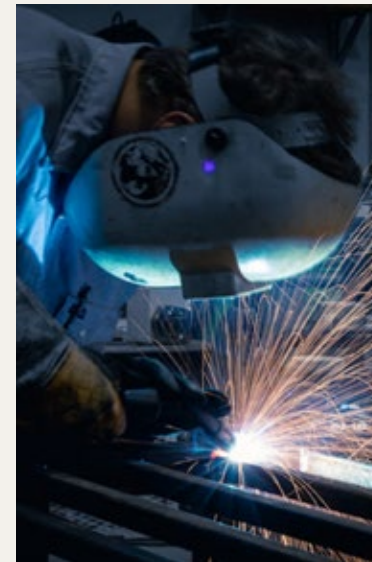
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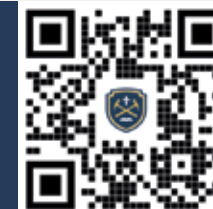
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# The Church's View of Israel: A Historical-Theological Overview (Part 2)

Historically there have been two major views regarding the relationship between Israel and the church. The previous column covered the view that has been predominant throughout most of church history: the replacement view, which sees the church as, in some form or other, to one degree or another, replacing Israel and consequently inheriting the OT promises made to Israel. On this view, Israel may experience a future national conversion but is not expected to be restored to the land God promised to Abraham and his seed.

This column will cover the alternative position: the restoration view, which sees the church primarily in discontinuity/distinction from Israel. One of the fundamental principles of dispensational theology is a distinct eschatological identity for Israel that includes not only a future conversion of Israel but also the fulfillment of the new covenant promise of the physical restoration of “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” to the land God promised to Abraham. This view, however, is not limited to dispensationalists and has been far more broadly held historically than many suppose.

## HISTORICAL REPRESENTATIVES OF RESTORATIONISM

In *The New Christian Zionism*, editor Gerald McDermott has assembled a surprisingly eclectic collection of authors from a wide variety of theological and denominational backgrounds. Many of them do not espouse dispensational theology but nevertheless argue for the restoration of Israel. In his historical overview, McDermott (not a dispensationalist) cites as advocates for a restorationist theology 17th-century Reformed theologians such as Thomas Draxe, Thomas Brightman (who wrote an influential commentary on Revelation), Patrick Forbes (Bishop of Aberdeen), Thomas Cooper (Anglican bishop), Henry Finch, Cambridge scholar Joseph Mede, Massachusetts Bay Colony minister and theologian John Cotton, Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford, John Milton, Increase Mather, Dutch Reformed theologian Wilhelmus a Brakel, and last but not least, John Owen. Owen's earlier writings defend supersessionism, but historian Crawford Gribben notes that over time those views changed. “Like many other Puritans, he took an interest in the future of the Jews” and “became convinced that Christ would begin his work to advance his kingdom around the world by converting Jews in massive numbers.”

Owen did not expect this restoration of the Jews to be merely spiritual. . . . Owen suggested that the eventual conversion of the Jews to Protestant Christianity would be accompanied by their return to the promised land. . . . He made the point explicitly in his commentary on Hebrews, predicting that Jewish people would experience restoration unto their own land, . . . a conclusion that he claimed was “acknowledged . . . by all the world that have any acquaintance with these things.” (*An Introduction to John Owen*, 125–27)

Restorationist theologians from the 18th–19th centuries, many of them also Reformed, include Jonathan Edwards, Anglican bishops Thomas Newton and J. C. Ryle, postmillennial commentator David Brown, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, and, yes, C. H. Spurgeon. This litany of names representing a broad array of historical evangelicals does not, of course, validate the restoration of Israel to their land; that view rests on solid exegetical data. The brief survey of significant names simply makes the point that belief in Israel's restoration is by no means recent nor limited to dispensational theologians.

## NT EVIDENCE OF RESTORATIONISM

If the new covenant anticipates a future restoration of Israel to their land, is there NT confirmation of this? The clarity of repeated OT restoration promises should not require NT confirmation; nevertheless, the NT actually *does* confirm the restoration of Israel to the land, though that confirmation is muted for several reasons. (1) The priority is the conversion of the nation; national internal transformation is an essential component and prerequisite to national restoration. (2) In inaugurating the new covenant, God also prioritized the salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 15:14). (3) Relatedly, Israel's blindness will prevail “until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in” (Rom. 11:25). How long that will take is anyone's guess but God's. Nevertheless, running through the NT is a subtle but steady undercurrent of expectation that Israel's new covenant promise of restoration is still in the cards.

### LUKE 1

Inseparably attached to the angelic announcement of the fact of Christ's coming is the angelic explanation of why He was coming: “he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Luke 1:33; cf. Jer. 33:25–26). There is no exegetical basis for interpreting “house of Jacob” as anything other than national, ethnic Israel. For the Messiah to fulfill this angelic proclamation assumes their presence in the land God promised He would give to them forever. Nevertheless, some interpreters manage to look straight through the text and see the exact opposite. Christ's reign, says Geldenhuys, will be “not over an earthly people, but over the spiritual Israel.” The only text that identifies “the house of Jacob” as the church (“spiritual Israel”) is a systematic theology text, not a biblical text. In contrast, J. C. Ryle comments on this passage, “The Jews are yet to be restored to their own land and to look to him whom they once pierced as their King and their God. Though the accomplishment of this prediction tarries, we may confidently wait for it.”

### LUKE 22; MATTHEW 19

The night before His sacrificial death that would inaugurate the new covenant, Jesus granted to His disciples a kingdom, “that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29–30). In Matthew's

parallel, Jesus specifies that this will be “in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of his glory” (Matt. 19:28). The word *regeneration* (*paliggenesia*) occurs only here and Titus 3:5 in the entire Greek Bible. The ancient writer Philo used it to describe the *renewal of the earth* following the Flood (*The Life of Moses*, 2.65). Josephus used it to refer to the “*rebuilding and restoration*” of Judah after the return from the Babylonian captivity (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 11.3.9). In what Jesus refers to as *the regeneration*, not only will He be sitting upon His throne, but His disciples “also shall sit on twelve thrones, *judging the twelve tribes of Israel*.” Judging? But there will be nothing to adjudicate in a sinless new earth. Some have suggested that *judging* simply refers here to leadership, citing the verb's use in the LXX (Judg. 3:10; 10:1–2; 12:7). However, (1) this OT use always involved specifically military leadership in battle against Israel's enemies, (2) nothing in these OT verses precludes the additional sense of adjudication, (3) we know that Israel's judges were often involved in adjudication (e.g., Judg. 4:4–5), and (4) this verb never demonstrably conveys the idea of *governing* in the NT, but always adjudication. Significantly, according to BDAG, the *only* passages where this word “could have the broader sense of *rule*” are Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30—the very passages under interpretational dispute. If that were the intended sense in these passages, however, the more natural word would have been *archō* or (in view of the mention of thrones) *basileuō*. Moreover, Jesus' disciples took this promise quite literally (Matt. 20:20–21)—an understanding that Jesus plainly confirmed (20:23).

### ACTS 1

Only a month or so later, after His resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus, “Will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6, NKJV). Their question displays their perception and expectation of the kingdom as divinely instituted (*Will You*), imminent (*at this time*), and both national and geopolitical (*restore the kingdom to Israel*). Jesus' answer leaves all their assumptions intact and addresses only the issue of timing (1:7–8). The difference between the reaction of Jesus and the reaction of many commentators to the disciples' question is both astonishing and amusing. Calvin is aghast at the disciples' ignorance in even asking such a question. David Williams regrets that the disciples “had not progressed very far from their earlier hope of occupying the seats of power in such a kingdom”—to which one is tempted to reply, “You mean like the thrones Jesus had promised them just a few weeks before in Luke 22?” I. Howard Marshall likens the disciples to “those of Luke's readers who had not yet realized that Jesus had transformed the Jewish hope of the kingdom of God by purging it of its nationalistic political elements”—in which case it is remarkable that Luke did nothing to correct that notion in Jesus' answer. John Stott laments, “Their question must have filled Jesus with dismay.” If so, it is odd that nothing in the text suggests that Jesus shared Stott's dismay. Stott continues, “Were they still so lacking

in perception?”—a question Jesus often asked His disciples; but not this time. In contrast, Darrell Bock notes that their question is “a natural one for Jews who have embraced the messianic hope” and Christ's response “does not reject the premise of the question that the kingdom will one day be restored to Israel” (*Acts*, 61–62). Jesus does not appear to be upset or disappointed with the disciples at all (unlike many interpreters), and leaves their expectation of a divinely instituted, potentially imminent, national and geopolitical kingdom completely intact.

### ACTS 3

Ten days after the disciples asked Jesus about restoring the kingdom to Israel, Peter used the noun form of the same verb to declare that Christ would return, “whom heaven must receive until the time for the restoring of all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago” (Acts 3:19–21, ESV). The term *restore* signifies a *return to a former state or condition*. It is used of Jesus' restoring of limbs (Matt. 12:13; Mark 3:5; Luke 6:10) and sight (Mark 8:25); He did not replace bad limbs with bionic ones, nor grant x-ray vision to the blind. It was a healing return to a previous condition. This restoration of all things that Peter preaches was predicted by the prophets in the new covenant passages of the OT. If you want to know what that restoration looks like, read their prophecies (e.g., Isa. 60–62; Jer. 31–33; Ezek. 36–37). This restoration of all things, Peter says, *awaits the return of Christ*. Far from claiming that the final kingdom had arrived in Christ, Peter declared that the restoration described by the prophets was still future—“heaven must receive” Christ “until the time” of restoration foretold by the prophets. Peter's language in Acts 3 indicates that the Israel-oriented kingdom restoration that the disciples anticipated in Acts 1 awaits the return and personal presence of Christ.

### ROMANS 11

Paul's burden for his fellow Jews (9:1ff) becomes a prayer to God that they would be saved (10:1); the answer to that prayer is predicted and affirmed in 11:26: “all Israel shall be saved.”

To back up that statement, Paul cites Isaiah 59:20–21 (a new covenant passage), capping off an extended discussion (Rom. 9–11) that maintains a persistent distinction between Israel and Gentile believers (church) throughout. Indeed, the entire argument rests on that distinction. Equally importantly, Paul follows the promise of Israel's nationwide salvation in 11:26 with an axiomatic assurance: “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29, ESV). Paul describes those gifts and calling back in 9:4. One of those “gifts” affirmed to Israel throughout the OT, and in the new covenant particularly, is their restoration to the land which He had sworn to their fathers.

Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.



Jim Tillotson

# A Praying Church and a Changed Youth Group

One of the blessings of being a college president is getting the opportunity to visit and speak where our alumni are serving. I was asked to speak at a youth retreat in a small town in Texas earlier this year by one of our alumni, Tyler. It started on Friday night and ended with the Sunday morning service. Tyler picked me up from the airport, and on our drive to the service, I asked how he came to Faith from Texas. He said he was a runner and wanted to run cross country in college, so he searched online for Christian colleges with cross-country programs and emailed the coaches. Our coach reached out to him and, based on his running times, assured him that he would make the team. That was the only research Tyler did before coming to campus. He did not realize that he would need to wear collared shirts to class, so he did not have any. Our dean of students helped him get some. He also didn't have a Bible, so he went out and bought one. His first week in class a professor asked someone to read a passage of Scripture, so Tyler volunteered. After he read the passage, the professor asked what version he was using. Tyler said he didn't know there were versions, and he asked the professor how to see what version his was. The professor told him that the version is usually on the inside cover. Tyler opened the cover and said, "It's *The Message*." After class the professor offered to buy him a new Bible, and he did. Tyler then told me that he got saved at Faith that year.

When we arrived at the church, sixty teens from his youth group and another youth group in town were there to greet us. The teens spent Friday and Saturday night at people's homes in the church. One home had junior high boys, another had junior high girls, and so forth. The church had completely bought in to this retreat, as it was designed to reach unsaved teens.

The church was predominately senior citizens, but they made and served every meal. Saturday morning, I preached on salvation and gave an invitation. I told the teens that if they were not sure they were going to heaven but would like to be sure, to look up at me. Over twenty kids looked up. Then I asked whether they wanted to talk to someone right then and told them to give me a nod, either yes or no. I started with the right side and all the kids in the front shook their heads no until I got to the back row. Three football players were shaking their heads yes, and a junior high boy next to them looked like a bobblehead, he was nodding yes so hard. I told them to go to the back. I checked the left side and ten teens from there went to the back. It was an all-hands-on-deck time for the counselors.

After a long, full day, we finished about 9:30 p.m., and Tyler said we needed to go visit the homes. We had to go to the store to get ice cream and pop for the winning team before the store closed. We finished visiting the last house at 1:00 a.m.. Then Tyler said we had to go to the church because he forgot to do the PowerPoint slides for Sunday morning. We got to his house at 2:15 a.m. and were up at 6:30 a.m. because we had to get the breakfast food to the church before everyone showed up for breakfast.

The pastor told me to close in prayer once I was done preaching the morning service, after which they would sing a song and give announcements. They had all the teens sit in the front rows, and the rest of the church sat behind them. I finished preaching and went behind the teens and we all stood up to sing. There was no invitation, no "bow your head and close your eyes"; we were all just looking at the screen and singing, as they always did. However, we hadn't finished singing the first line

when those same three football players walked to the front and began praying. Tyler went to join them and within thirty seconds, fifty of the sixty teens were all across the front crying and praying. No one had seen anything like it. The musicians didn't know what to do, so they stopped playing. The senior pastor got up and asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes and pray for the teens. After quite a while, there were still teens praying, so the pastor asked everyone to just walk out the back quietly and let them finish.

After everything was done, I was standing with Tyler in the back, and an elderly gentleman came up to us and said gruffly, "Tyler, tell me about this girl!" He pointed to a paper bracelet with a girl's name on it, the sort of bracelet you would get at the entrance to a fair. He said, "This paper bracelet has been bugging me. It catches on my clothes and irritates me. But every time it did, I stopped and prayed for her." Tyler looked at the name and said, "Oh, that girl came this weekend telling us she was an atheist, but she got saved on Saturday morning, and she just came forward and asked for a Bible." Both the older man and I teared up. Tyler had asked the people of his church to pray for these teens by name. It was one of the most moving works of God I have seen in a while. Oh, that we all would get the privilege to see what only God can do. Tyler made some rookie youth pastor mistakes, but he loved God, loved his teens, and got his church to buy in with prayer and service. This seems like a winning recipe to see God work. May we all be motivated to follow Tyler's example.



Jim Tillotson has served as the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, since June 2015.

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## STEWARDSHIP MATTERS

Corey A. Pfaffe

# Financial Stewardship by the Christian Family—Thou Shalt Not Steal

Artist Norman Rockwell famously drew a cover photo for the October 1936 edition of *The Saturday Evening Post*. I would love to show you, but I would be stealing—copyright infringement, that is.

Rockwell depicted a butcher peering up at his scale weighing a chicken—with his finger covertly pressing down on the scale. More weight, more money. On the other side of the meat counter stood an innocent-looking grandma—with her finger pressing up on the scale. Less weight, less money. Both stealing.

As Christians, few accusations are as mortifying as stealing. We want to demonstrate financial integrity, but there are subtle ways we tip the scales in our favor. This false balance enables us to steal from the very people God would have us serve, wronging them by cheating the system, using other people's money, and not paying for our mistakes.

### CHEATING THE SYSTEM

Christian business owners face their own unique temptations to *cheat the system* by applying a false balance. The Old Testament prophet Amos received God's words of judgment on His people. Allow me to paraphrase: "Listen to Me, you who swallow up the needy as you ask, 'When will market day come so we can make the ephah small, the shekel great and cheat the scales?'" (8:5).

If these deceivers had been selling milk today, they could have underfilled the

container, charged whole milk prices for 1%, and manipulated the cash register to add sales tax when none was due. If they were fixing cars, they would have installed rebuilt parts and billed them as new. The stereotypical cleaning lady of their day who charged for her services by the hour would have padded them when the homeowner wasn't paying attention.

Christian business owner, God demands your integrity in using fair balances. It is "an abomination to the LORD your God" if you "have in your bag differing weights, a heavy and a light" (Deut. 25:13–16, NKJV). As "merchants" we (I, too, am a business owner) must hate financial trickery (Hos. 12:7).

Individuals and ministry leaders can also be tempted to *cheat the system*. I'd love to insert Norman Rockwell's picture here, but there is a copyright *system* in place to reward the artist financially for his creativity. We are not innocent when we use the church copier to run off extra copies of sheet music—unless it is in the public domain. But we may need to wait ninety-five years!

### USING OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY

Hopefully, our "innocent-looking grandma" took time to balance her checkbook lately. Bouncing checks and having debit or credit card transactions rejected is not only embarrassing but a not-so-subtle way of using other people's money—fees and frustrations in wasted time hit shopkeepers. Perhaps our fail-

ures result in only temporary inconveniences. But our carelessness is not wise: "Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it" (Prov. 3:27).

Christian business owners, God demands our integrity in paying laborers promptly. Jeremiah pronounced "woe to him . . . who uses his neighbor's services without wages and gives him nothing for his work" (22:13, NKJV).

Some unscrupulous middlemen have used their overpowering positions in the distribution channel to delay payments beyond agreed-upon due dates. They may even brag: "We're using other people's money."

Let's address bankruptcy for a moment. In the US, our society has decided that there are circumstances when one has no option but to declare bankruptcy (or to be declared bankrupt). There are at least two purposes for such laws—one of mercy and one of equity.

A *merciful* "fresh start" opportunity is granted debtors, with conditions. After three to five years of partial payments directed by a court, the remainder may be forgiven (Chapter 13 bankruptcy). Chapter 7 is another type of bankruptcy, but the debtor will be required to lose assets.

Creditors receive what can be paid or repossessed under rules that provide a degree of *equity* among them.

I do not say that bankruptcy is never right for a Christian family or business

owner, but it *is* using other people's money. It is a consequence scorned in the biblical account and is not an easy path out of financial trouble. In fact, I believe that a Christian who is forgiven by the court for amounts due to those whose labors have gone unpaid has a duty to reinstate and honor his debts as soon as he is able.

### NOT PAYING FOR OUR MISTAKES

Rockwell's buyer and seller were not making innocent mistakes. But when true mistakes occur, we must take responsibility for the financial damage they cause to others. There are preventative measures to pay for our mistakes (e.g., insurance coverage). But most mistakes are not covered by insurance. We must not make others pay for our mistakes. If an Israelite's cattle got loose and ate his neighbor's corn, he made restitution. If his campfire spread and destroyed his neighbor's storage bin, he made restitution (Exod. 22:5–6).

Jesus taught that our heavenly Father knows and meets our needs (Matt. 6:32). We must not tip the scales to meet our own.

Corey Pfaffe serves as the CEO of MinistryCPA, a certified public accounting firm based in Watertown, Wisconsin. The firm works with ministry clients in virtually every US state and every continent. He and his wife Laurie have served in various lay capacities as members of Calvary Baptist Church of Watertown for more than thirty-five years.



## Hidden in My Heart

Continued from page 28

reading her birthday psalm throughout the year, that is, the psalm corresponding to her age (a 23-year-old would therefore read the beloved Shepherd's Psalm, and the 117-year-old would enjoy the comparatively easy year while gearing up to turn 119). "By the end of the year, I practically have the chapter memorized!" she said, beaming. That conversation inspired me to return to Scripture memory by memorizing my birthday psalm, a practice I have kept up for five years now. I give myself the entire year to memorize and use a variety of strategies to do so: reading it both quietly and aloud, writing it out, then reciting it. I keep the psalm on an index card by my desk to pray it before I teach; I whisper it on daily walks and in doctor's office exam rooms. The psalmist's words weave themselves into my prayers. After spending a year together, the psalm and I become dear friends.

I cannot quote word-for-word every single verse I've memorized, whether in childhood or adulthood, but snatches of them come back to me in worship, writing, and daily conversation. They are hidden in my heart, not only so I will not sin, but so I will know the God who speaks through them to reveal Himself.

Rachel Mayes Allen is a believer, wife, educator, and thinker based in Wisconsin. She writes to be an ambassador for the beauty that is found in knowing God's truth and goodness. She loves reading, making and eating food, taking walks with her dogs, and connecting with loved ones over a good cup of tea.



\* More technically, *hāgā* can be defined this way: "to ponder, give serious thought and consideration to selected information, with a possible implication of speaking in low tones reviewing the material." James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (Old Testament)* (Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

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## Teaching the Word with Words

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and beauty. This is insufficient. His words, above all, must grow out of personal authenticity. “Authentic” has become an unfortunate buzzword. People use it to mean something like this: “Don’t expect me to conform to anything; I am what I am—I am *authentic*.” As used here, *authentic* means something quite different. The one who speaks for God must engage a scriptural text and pour it through his own soul. Instead of something static, authenticity describes an ongoing process of real transformation. To use Perkins’ categories, the preacher works to understand the text, identify the doctrine of the text, and apply the text to his own life. In short, he lives what he preaches. Thus, the author of Hebrews called his readers to “remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation [way of life]” (Heb. 13:7).

Authentic men carry at least two identifying marks into the pulpit. First, they speak with humble reverence. They shun hilarity and despise their natural bent toward arrogance. They refuse to become the heroes of their own stories. Instead, an air of holiness is in the room when they speak because the Holy One is always on their lips. Second, they speak with an almost overwhelming sense of wonder. Week by week, they work to maintain

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awareness that they “speak unto God.” They contemplate the seriousness of God’s commission to use spoken words as “a sweet savour of Christ.” They strive to remember that their words have eternal significance “in them that are saved, and in them that perish.” With Paul, they pray week in and week out, “Who is sufficient for these things?” And they believe with confident assurance Paul’s answer to that question: “Our sufficiency is of God” (2 Cor. 2:15–16; 3:5).

### CONCLUSION

If this article issued a call to church congregations to listen well to what their pastors say, every preacher who reads it would say “Amen” enthusiastically. But before congregations can listen well, preachers must speak well. They must proclaim accurate words (faithful to the text). They must employ clear words (making the text understandable). They must craft attractive words (using the text to shape the affections of others). They must speak authentic words (speaking out of personal transformation wrought by the text). The Lord will hold all who hear God’s Word accountable for what they do with God’s message. Let us pray that we who preach will consider the account we must give for the way we speak God’s Word.

Steve Thomas, DMin, is the pastor of Huron Baptist Church in Flat Rock, Michigan.



<sup>1</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (P&R, 2010), 261.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Mohler, “Expository Preaching: Center of Christian Worship,” in *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III (P&R, 2003), 116.

<sup>3</sup> William Perkins, *The Art of Prophesying* (Banner of Truth Trust, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Ferry, “Martin Luther on Preaching,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 54.4 (1990): 274.

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## Meet the Newest FBFI Chaplains

**Alan Ashley** was interviewed and accepted as a local community chaplain on May 1, 2025. Alan is serving with Scouting America, formerly known as Boy Scouts of America. Alan and his wife Dorothy (Dotty) are members of People's Baptist Church in Frederick, Maryland. Their pastor is Kent Ramler, who is also one of our FBFI members. Alan's service with Scouting America began in 2006 and has involved a variety of leadership roles serving youth from 1st grade through age 20. He recently completed a 30-hour chaplaincy training course from the International Alliance of Community Chaplains. His previous volunteer service includes six years promoting the Religious Emblems program and providing chaplaincy services to the district (the scouting community in Frederick County, Maryland), and eleven years conducting Baptist Religious Emblems courses. Alan and his wife have two grown children, Erin and Andrew. We are so glad to have them on board with us in this very unique chaplaincy role.



**John Schaaf** joined us on May 15, 2025, and is the younger brother of current FBFI chaplain Caleb Schaaf. John and his wife Anna reside in Spring Creek, Nevada, and have a son named Jesse. John recently graduated from Bob Jones Seminary with a Master of Divinity degree and is seeking to become a chaplain in the Air National Guard. He currently serves as the assistant pastor at Ruby Mountain Bible Church, pastored by Jeff South.

John met Chaplain Joe Willis over a decade ago when CH Willis preached in his home church in Winnemucca, Nevada. It is a great pleasure to have another member of the Schaaf family serving with us.

**Daniel Toweh III** is currently a graduate student at Bob Jones Seminary. He is also a member of Victory Baptist Church in Simpsonville, South Carolina, pastored by John Heffernan. Daniel was interviewed and accepted as a FBFI chaplain candidate on April 15, 2025. Daniel is currently serving as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the US Army Reserves. After graduation, Daniel desires to go active duty in the US Army. Welcome, Daniel!



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