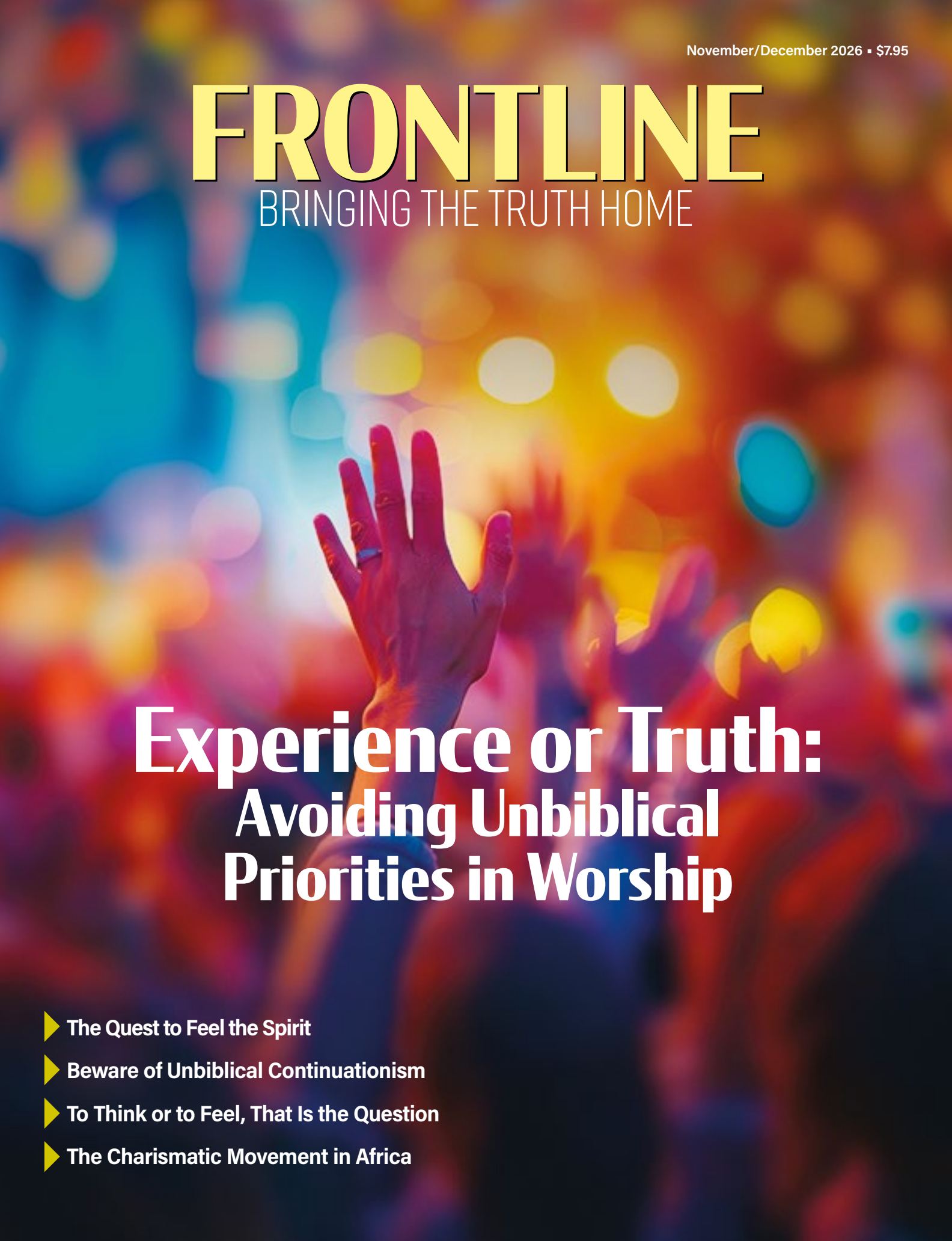
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FRONTLINE

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME



Experience or Truth: Avoiding Unbiblical Priorities in Worship

- The Quest to Feel the Spirit
- Beware of Unbiblical Continuationism
- To Think or to Feel, That Is the Question
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Experience or Truth

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Our sincere thanks to David Anderson for coordinating this issue of *FrontLine* magazine.

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Experience or Truth: Avoiding Unbiblical Priorities in Worship

So, why do you go to church? A casual survey of church websites among evangelical churches would seem to point the needle closer to experiencing God than knowing God. Most assuredly, God desires that each of us have an intimate relationship with Him, and that relationship, like any relationship, includes emotion, even deep emotion. But the Scriptures clearly teach that the foundation of our relationship with God, both individually and corporately, is not first experience and feelings, but knowledge. Paul unequivocally states, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the *knowledge* of Christ Jesus my Lord . . . that I may *know* him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Phil. 3:8, 10). In addressing out-of-bounds corporate worship at Corinth, Paul patiently directs the congregation back to the purpose of gathering together: "Let all things be done unto edifying" (1 Cor.

14:26). Yes, they were praying and singing with their heart (spirit), but that was not the best for corporate worship with fellow believers and before unbelievers. They needed to pray and sing with understanding, engaging their mind, communicating the truth about God to the gathered assembly (1 Cor. 14:13–17). Paul proclaims, "Brethren, be not children in understanding . . . be men" (1 Cor. 14:20). Peter states to the scattered pilgrims of Asia Minor that we have all that we need for life and for godliness in the *knowledge* (not experience) of Christ (2 Pet. 1:3).

So then, why do we find so many churches emphasizing experiencing God? Welcome to this issue of *FrontLine*! Join me in exploring the influence and avoiding the dangers of charismatic theology on the worship practice of so many churches today. Our primary distinctive as Baptists is *the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice*—we are people of the Book! I trust that as you read these articles you will be stirred to a faithful practice of biblical worship both personally and corporately, thinking carefully about why we do what we do in our worship services. May God, the primary Observer and Object of our worship, be pleased with our worship of Him. And may even our Christmas worship bring honor to our Savior!

May the Lord give you a wonderful Thanksgiving and a Merry Christmas!

David Anderson,
Associate Editor

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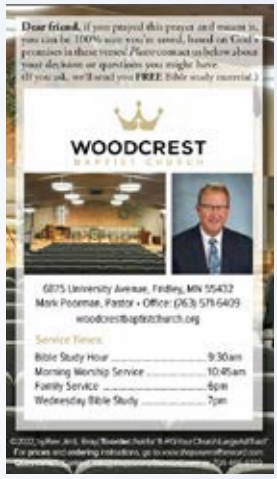
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David Saxon

The Quest to Feel the Spirit

Corporate worship engages the whole person. Confronted by eternal truths that God intends to transform believers into the image of Christ, true worshippers find their affections affected—renewed thinking changes their loves and, thereby, their choices. Genuine worship reinforces and reinvigorates the sanctification trajectory of conformity to Christ's image. It therefore leaves the sanctuary with the worshipper and is carried on throughout the week. God forbid that worship take place only during stated times of corporate gathering. But God knows believers need corporate

worship. Joining their hearts in fellowship, their voices in song, and their minds in submissive listening to the Word strengthens believers in a way they cannot find in isolation.

When the whole person is impacted in these ways in a corporate setting, he can also find his emotions stirred. Which of us has truly worshipped with God's people and has not found a tear forming when we contemplate together Christ's atoning work, or has not felt the pang of remorse when we are confronted with our coldness by a convicting text, or has not thrilled to be lifted up by a powerful poetic and musical rendition of a powerful truth? Such emotions can be a good sign that truth is finding its mark, that we not only are thinking the right things but are loving the right things, having our affections renovated by truth.

Emotions, though, are fickle, difficult to control, and almost impossible to command. People are also wired in a multitude of ways when it comes to emotional response. Some folks wear their emotions very near the surface, finding tears easy with very little provocation. Others, with perhaps equally deep affections, are more placid and appear stoic by nature. Judging a person's loves by their feelings—or, at least, expressions of feeling—is a hazardous venture.

Nevertheless, the history of Protestant worship has often involved outbreaks of visible emotion. During

periods of revival, in particular, people sometimes came under deep conviction and expressed emotions of fear and self-loathing. The reports of worshippers in Enfield, Connecticut, crying out and clutching the pews during Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* are a famous case in point. At times, conversion produced convulsions of joy, physical manifestations that made some observers uncomfortable, but which seemed to be spontaneous and genuine (judging by their lasting fruit).

In the early twentieth century, Pentecostalism swept the Western world. It revolved around many themes, but one of its primary goals was to revolutionize worship. Pentecostals believed mainstream churches were quenching the Spirit by not expecting Him to be powerfully present when they gathered to worship. For individuals, Pentecostals developed a theology of experiencing the Spirit in a second work of grace, a Spirit baptism that would unleash new spiritual vitality (often signaled by speaking in tongues, an undeniably physical act). The corporate analog to this sanctification theology was worship designed to enhance the experience of the Spirit's presence.

Protestants had always emphasized that God is present among His people when the Word is preached (and, for those in high-church traditions,

when the sacraments are celebrated). Now, however, Pentecostals added several new elements. First, they emphasized the presence of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Spirit. To be fair, Pentecostals typically stress the Spirit's witness to Jesus, and Pentecostal worship talks about Jesus a great deal. Nevertheless, the aim of the worship is to *feel* the Spirit's witness to Jesus, so that the Spirit is viewed as the active member of the Godhead in the service. And, importantly, one doesn't know that He is active unless one feels Him.

Second, part of the verification of the Spirit's activity was physical worship. Developing themes already present in early Methodist and holiness worship, Pentecostals used references to hand-raising and dance in the Psalter to argue that worshippers will respond physically if they genuinely experience the Spirit's presence in worship. The 19th-century camp meetings, of course, had been the scenes of various bizarre physical manifestations (reading Barton Stone's description of the camp meeting "exercises" is entertaining and somewhat disturbing), but mainstream churches continued to look askance on such uncontrolled emotion (it was often pointed out that a great many stimuli can cause a person to jerk about, not just the Holy Spirit). Pentecostals now sought to rehabilitate physical manifestations, encouraging them and interpreting them in the best possible light.

Pentecostals, third, also highlighted "intensity as a liturgical value."[1] Excitement was interpreted as authentic engagement with the supernatural, and worship services were intentionally designed to usher people into God's presence emotionally. Presumably, to go slumbering and lethargically into God's presence would dishonor him—a sentiment most Christians would endorse, I think. Focusing on emotion, however, rather than the deeper traditional focus on affections (the redirection and increase of our loves) put no ceiling on this impulse. If high emotion honors God, then surely higher emotion would honor Him even more. Pentecostals began designing services to create atmospheres of high emotion, thus



unleashing the Spirit to bring God into contact with the worshippers.

A fourth effect of these developments was a democratization of worship. Throughout church history, the entire corporate service, including the singing of hymns, had generally been thought to be under the aegis of the ministers. This correlated well with the idea that every part of the service is worship and is intended to communicate the Word, mediating God's presence through His revealed truth. Pentecostalism, through its emphasis on experience, elevated ordinary Christians. They could feel and express the Spirit—through tongues and, perhaps, prophecy—just as the ministers could. "The result that has shaped much of contemporary worship has been in making musicians the main worship leaders, not pastors."[2] Musician and pastor can be overlapping categories, of course, but a non-pastoral musician runs the risk at least of valuing things about the music—its intensity, its motive power, its beauty—more than the text, which is the primary vehicle for truth.

Finally, "Pentecostals especially have valued extemporaneity, spontaneity, and flexibility as essential for being able to respond to the Spirit's leading in worship."[3] Belief in tongues and prophecy entails, obviously, an open view of divine revelation, and ces-

sationists have always believed that this openness is at the expense of the final authority of the written Word. Pentecostals, to the contrary, believe a closed view of revelation muzzles the Spirit and prevents Him from exercising His prerogative of intervening in a church's worship and directing the leaders to adjust their plans to His desires. Something suddenly happening in a church's worship that was unplanned is viewed as evidence that the Spirit is present and has exerted His power to bring about His will—and that's the goal of worship: encounter with God that one feels.

These Pentecostal emphases—Spirit-focus, physicality, intensity, democratization, and extemporaneity—invaded the mainline churches in the 1960s, resulting in the charismatic movement. Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, and even Roman Catholics embraced a continuationist interpretation of spiritual gifts, and churches across the Western world erupted in tongues, prophecies, and contemporary worship (these have now been exported around the globe). This major development coincided with the rock-and-roll takeover of popular music, and the ingredients were all present for contemporary Christian music as is known today (this is not to suggest that all present-day CCM has direct ties to rock-and-roll). Most of the Pentecostal emphases found ready expression in

loud, driving music that stirs passions, excites the body, focuses on musical performers, and—at least initially—emphasized spontaneity (ironically, by the 2000s, the careful crafting of "music sets" in order to create the desired atmosphere had almost entirely displaced the Pentecostal emphasis on extempore worship).

One final development is worth noting.

In the 1980s, the Seeker-Sensitive Movement sought to redirect churches from inward-looking institutions to evangelism centers focused on the needs of their communities. Finding out what communities want and then providing it in order to get people through the doors became a dominant ministry philosophy (granted, this is a somewhat crude and simplistic way of expressing it). A major cog in this new machine was a carefully crafted worship experience. The language now changed, however. Pentecostals and earlier charismatics most often spoke of creating an environment in which worshippers could be ushered into God's presence so that they would feel the Spirit and thereby love Jesus more. Now, seeker churches sought to bring God to people in whatever way best suited the person. One could say that the Pentecostal approach indirectly focused on the worshippers by emphasizing emotion, physicality, and intensity rather than the centrality of truth. The seeker-sensitive model made this focus direct and unvarnished: the message that seekers

were given is that God is ultimately about you and your happiness, a Copernican revolution in worship. Again, though, the prior emphasis on feelings had already tilted the scale in that direction for decades.

Worship will sometimes stir our emotions. Praise God it does! But genuine worship will always shape our affections, determining what we love and what we hate by aligning us with God's revealed truth. A focus on feelings will inevitably diminish the centrality of God's Word and, if we're not careful, will end in our worshipping ourselves rather than God.

David Saxon teaches church history, Baptist history, Bible, and theology at Maranatha Baptist University. He loves expository preaching and enjoys participating in the chapel book series.



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[1] Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Abingdon, 2017), 18. This book, written by authors sympathetic to contemporary worship, informs many aspects of the present article.

[2] Ruth and Hong, 18.

[3] Ruth and Hong, 38.

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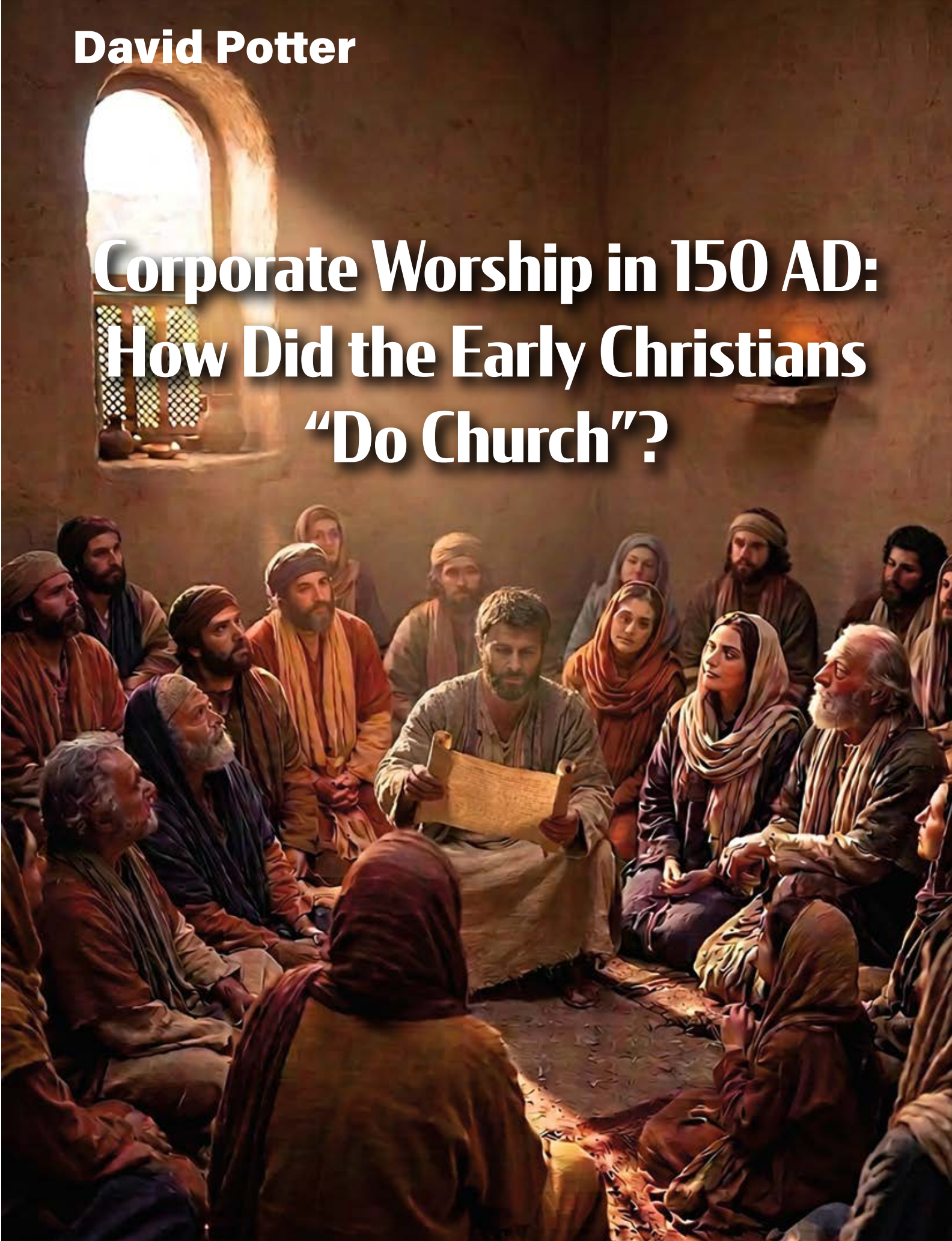
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David Potter

Corporate Worship in 150 AD: How Did the Early Christians "Do Church"?



How did the early church worship together in the first century? Because livestream was not available at that time, we must learn from what material is available.

AN EARLY "ORDER OF SERVICE"

Fortunately, we have a sort of "order of service" from the middle of the second century that generalizes how Christians "did church." Our source is Justin Martyr. Born in Judea to Gentile parents (about 100 AD), he was beheaded in Rome for refusing to offer sacrifices to idols, sometime in the 160s. He was in a position to know Christian practice both because of his wide travels and because his life overlapped with men who knew the apostles. In his *First Apology*, addressed to the Roman emperor, he wrote the following:

> And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner

> offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.[1]

From this excerpt, we glean the following: (1) Christians gathered for worship on Sunday. (2) They read from either the Old Testament ("prophets") or the New Testament ("apostles").[2] (3) They listened to preaching, applying the Scripture to everyday living. The "president" is the pastor. (4) They prayed. (5) They observed the Lord's Supper.[3] (6) They took an

offering (cf. 1 Cor. 16:2). About the only part that this worship service that would seem strange to the congregation of which I am a member is distributing the elements of the Lord's Supper to shut-ins.

WHAT IS LEFT OUT

We would not expect Justin to include every detail of worship services. For instance, he does not mention singing. Nevertheless, conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the sign gifts, like healing and speaking in tongues. We search in vain for mention of the sign gifts in other early Christian writings such as The Shepherd of Hermas (ca. 135), the Epistles of Ignatius (ca. 107), the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (first half of the second century), the Didache (end of the first century) and 1 Clement (ca. 95).

The last place for positive evidence of speaking in tongues, or any other miraculous gift, in church services in the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 12–14, dated 55–57. Does the New Testament offer evidence that miraculous gifts had ceased after that date? I believe that the answer is yes. Look at Hebrews 2:3–4, written about a decade later: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and

wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?"

Note that the purpose of the signs, wonders, and miracles was to authenticate the apostles and their message. After the apostles passed off the scene, their teaching having been preserved, this reason for miraculous manifestations ceased. The purpose of Hebrews was to persuade Jewish Christians to resist the pressure to lapse back into Judaism. Verse 4 would have been the perfect place to add, "and of course these signs, wonders, and miracles continue to this very day in our churches."

As the saying goes, "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Arguments from silence are inherently weak and seldom decisive, but I think that in that in the case of sign gifts in the early church, the absence of evidence speaks strongly.

If the sign gifts remained, why did they leave no trace at all in the records of the early church? Justin was arguing for the validity of Christianity in his *Apology*. If the sign gifts had continued into his day, why would he not have mentioned them? Similarly, if the sign gifts were common in the church in the latter half of the AD 60s, the writer of Hebrews would have had a strong reason to say so. No one performed miracles in the synagogue.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

I believe that Justin, in reflecting the practice of second-century churches, can teach us much about worship. For those early Christians, every Sunday was a day to remember the resurrection of the Lord. Corporate prayer was a priority, as was remembrance of the Savior's sacrifice for our sins. Sunday was a day to be generous and to care for church members who were in need as an act of brotherly love. The reading and application of Scripture were central. The worship of these believers was both simple and orderly (cf. 1 Cor. 14:33, 40).

Succeeding centuries have added accretions, like barnacles impeding the movement of a ship. We should reject anything in our church services that distracts from our focus on Christ, the Word of God, and the love of the brethren.

David Potter teaches New Testament and Greek at Maranatha Baptist Seminary. He and his wife Jean are active members of Heritage Baptist Church, Roscoe, Illinois.



[1] *First Apology* 67, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-firstapology.html, accessed 6/17/2026.

[2] Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13; Rev. 1:3. Scholars generally agree that these verses refer to the public reading of Scripture.

[3] 1 Cor. 11:17–34. Note the number of times the phrase "when ye come together" occurs in this passage.



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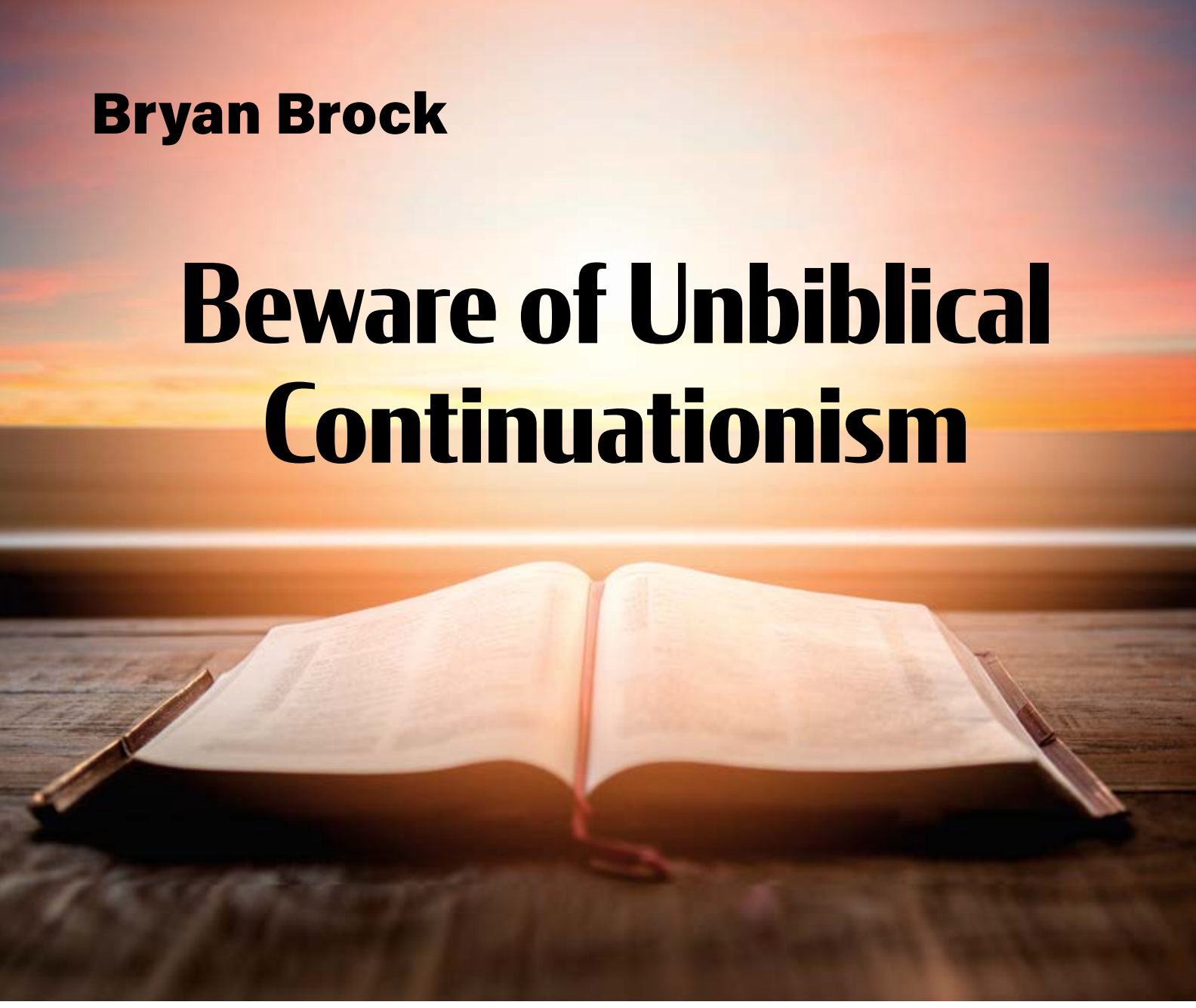
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Bryan Brock

Beware of Unbiblical Continuationism



One distinction unites all charismatic worship: continuationism. The term *charismatic* comes from the Greek word *charis* ("gift"), used five times in 1 Corinthians 12 to describe spiritual gifts. From early-20th-century Pentecostalism to the cross-denominational charismatic renewal beginning in the mid20th century, all forms of charismatic

Christianity affirm the continuation of every spiritual gift—including the miraculous.

Some churches within the movement include miracles and healings in worship, but those gifts are not consistently practiced corporately, whereas the revelatory gifts—tongues, prophecy, and words of knowledge—are widely practiced across the movement. This openness to continuing divine revelation functions as the tip of the spear as charismatic continuationism presses progressively deeper into conservative evangelical and doctrinally fundamental churches.

On the most conservative edge of this advance, authors and theologians like Wayne Grudem and Sam Storms argue for the continuing corporate practice of prophecy. Storms adopts Grudem's definition of prophecy as "the human report of a divine revelation," thus nuancing the distinction between God's infallible revelation and the prophet's fallible communication "in merely human words." Storms affirms, however, that prophecy is always rooted in revelation from the Holy Spirit—"not the same as enlightenment or illumination," but a supernatural disclosure of "information, facts, or insights not otherwise available by natural avenues of knowledge."[1]

As a council member of The Gospel Coalition and the Executive Director of the Convergence Church Network, Storms holds a platform of influence among more conservative churches and future church leaders. The Convergence Church Network describes itself as "a collaboration of like-minded church leaders that promote, encourage, instruct, and support local churches committed to the convergence of *Word and Spirit*." This commitment becomes explicit in the organization's shared convictions, which require prospective partners to pursue prophecy in worship: "Churches opposed to the public/platform ministry of prophecy must, at minimum, be willing to learn and eventually embrace this exercise of that spiritual gift."[2]

The doctrine of cessationism opposes continuationism. Cessationists believe that Scripture affirms that the miraculous gifts of the 1st century AD have ceased until the end of the church age. Miraculous gifts in the early church—described primarily in Acts and 1 Corinthians—were expressed during a time of great transition. The church was being founded, Old Testament believers were being converted to Christianity, and the New Testament Scriptures were being written. None of these transitional features exist today. The church is mature, there are no

Old Testament believers, and the canon of the New Testament is complete. Throughout the timeline of redemptive history, God has given His revelation in limited windows, and within those windows He has authenticated His messengers (e.g., Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles) with signs and wonders. However, the bestowal of divine revelation and miracles are the exceptions, not the rule, throughout the timeline of history (1 Sam. 3:1; Heb. 1:1–2). While these realities do not prove that miracles and revelation have ceased, they give a more complete context that undercuts the dogmatic assumption that what God did then, He must be doing today.

If charismatic continuationism is wrong, and miracles and revelation have ceased until the end of the age, then Jesus' warning is especially relevant for today: "Beware of false prophets" (Matt. 7:15).[3] The test of this must be Scripture. The following are biblical reasons to hold to cessationism and oppose a continuationist view of divine revelation.

THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

Scripture affirms its own sufficiency in 2 Timothy 3:16–17. When Paul writes, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God," he establishes that God is the source of every word. Because Scripture is breathed out

by God, its words are inerrant and its message infallible. Paul then elaborates on the areas where Scripture is authoritative and effective: "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

But does this passage teach sufficiency? Sufficiency means that God has communicated all the truth and direction necessary for a right and thriving relationship with Him. Some have argued that "profitable" does not necessarily mean "complete," and therefore this text does not require sufficiency. This is a linguistic dodge. Paul does not stop at "profitable." He continues: "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." The comprehensive terms—complete, thorough, every—unmistakably establish Scripture's full sufficiency for the spiritual life of the believer.

If Scripture is sufficient, what purpose would continuing revelation serve? If additional revelation is needed, then Scripture is not sufficient. Does God still have more to tell His people beyond His Word? Even the most conservative charismatics define prophecy as a human report of direct divine revelation. But if God is giving new revelation, then there must be a deficiency in the revelation we currently possess.

THE CESSATION OF THE APOSTOLIC OFFICE

Paul included "apostles" among the gifts Christ gave to the church for the building up of His body (Eph. 4:11). Since charismatics argue that every gift Christ gives must remain available today, demonstrating that even one gift has ceased undermines the case for continuationism.

While some religious traditions teach a continuing apostolic office, the New Testament characteristics and requirements for apostles argue for its temporary and completed nature. This cumulative case includes the fact that apostles were directly chosen by Christ (Gal. 1:1; Eph. 4:11) and were required to be eyewitnesses of the resurrected Lord (Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:7–8). The transitional uniqueness of this office is further supported by the fact after Judas' demise, the apostles were guided by Scripture to "let another take his office," and they chose Matthias, who was then "numbered with the eleven apostles" (Acts 1:15–26). Even though other apostles died in the early decades when Scripture was still being written, there is no biblical record of further replacements. Additionally, the twelve foundation stones of the New Jerusalem point to the fixed number of Jewish apostles (Rev. 21:14), and Paul describes his unique minis-

try as an "apostle to the Gentiles" as being "*one* born out of due time" (Rom. 11:13; 1 Cor. 15:8).

Indeed, within the first generation of the church, authority was transitioning from apostles to local church elders (Acts 11:30; 14:23). Note the progressive transition: apostles initially exercised primary earthly authority over the churches (1 Cor. 14:29–33; Jude 17); then elders and apostles co-existed as leaders (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23); and finally, elders replaced apostles as the ongoing leaders of the church (Acts 20:17; 21:18).

THE CORRELATION OF THE SIGNS WITH THE APOSTLES

In 2 Corinthians 12:12, Paul hitches miraculous gifts to the office of apostle when he writes, "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you." Since, as has been demonstrated, the office of apostle was intended by Christ to be temporary and transitional, it follows that these signs would correspond. Although charismatics treat all spiritual gifts as permanent, Paul singles out "signs and wonders and mighty deeds" as belonging to the temporary, foundational era of the apostles.

THE FOUNDATIONAL ROLE OF PROPHETS

The foundation of a building is constructed first, and upon its completion, the rest of the structure is

erected. The biblical evidence indicates that apostles belong to this initial phase, and Paul further certifies that prophets belong to the same limited stage when he affirms that the church has been built "on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). The ministry of apostles and prophets continues today—much like a foundation continues to support the building—through their writings in Scripture (2 Pet. 3:2; Jude 17).

THE BIBLICAL PREDICTION OF CESSATION

Admittedly, even among cessationists 1 Corinthians 13 is a debated text. What is clear, however, is that it requires a belief in cessation: "whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away" (v. 8). The only question is *when*. Verse 10 enigmatically answers that question: "when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."

Although the Greek word *teleios* ("perfect," "complete") has a semantic range, the context necessitates a parallel contrast with "that which is in part." Paul is communicating that when the completed or whole (*teleios*) comes, that which is partial or fragment-

ed (*meros*) will cease. The next question, then, is the nature of the completed and partial. Again, the context supplies the key: "we know in part (*meros*) and we prophesy in part (*meros*)" (v. 9). Because both prophecy and the word of knowledge are supernatural revelatory gifts identified as "in part," it follows that the nature of "that which is complete" would also be revelation. Thus, when the completed revelation comes, the revelation which is partial will be done away.

If the completed revelation is the finished Scriptures, this correlates with the sufficiency of Scripture argument, and with the timeline of the apostles. As John, the last living apostle, wrote his final inspired words, he concludes with a warning not to add to or take away from "the words of the prophecy of this book" (Rev. 22:18–19). At this point Scripture was completed, and prophecy was closed, awaiting its end-time fulfillment.

THE UNITY OF PROPHECY ACROSS TESTAMENTS

While some continuationists argue that prophecy today is unchanged from the Old Testament era, this would place it under the test of Deuteronomy 18, which demands a 100% accuracy rate—a standard unattainable today (see 18:18–22). Other, more

cautious continuationists argue that Old Testament prophecy involved a two-stage miracle—both reception and delivery—whereas in New Testament prophecy, only the reception is miraculous and the delivery may be botched by the prophet.

The New Testament, however, never draws this distinction. For example, in the book of Acts, identical terms are used of Old Testament prophets (Acts 2:16; 3:24–25; 10:43; 13:27, 40; 15:15; 24:14; 26:22, 27; 28:23) as for New Testament prophets (Acts 2:17–18; 7:37; 11:27–28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:9–11) without any linguistic differentiation.[4] Additionally, Jesus used identical wording—"false prophets"—to describe the same category of prophetic deceivers in the Old Testament era (Luke 6:26), the church age (Matt. 7:15), and the tribulation (Matt. 24:24).

THE SERIOUS WARNINGS AGAINST FALSE REVELATION

The great fear among continuationists today is the possibility of limiting the Holy Spirit, whereas the primary warning in Scripture is the opposite. God warns those who claim to speak "the oracle [burden or prophecy] of the LORD" when it is actually the man's own word and a perversion of the "the words of the living God" (Jer. 23:34–40). The sin of presuming to speak a word in

God's name that He has not authorized was punishable by death in the Old Testament (Deut. 18:20). And today, for those who prophecy from their own imaginations, Jesus offers a severe warning: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (Matt. 7:22–23).

Mystical experiences and supernatural claims are identified by Christ as fruits of false conversion that deceitfully place feelings above faith. Certainly not all continuationists have bypassed the gospel for ecstatic experiences, but Jesus warns that "many" have been deceived. Why, then, is this not the primary fear among continuationists today? It is the fear that Jesus himself emphasizes, and it is biblically warranted.

CONCLUSION

Both continuationists and cessationists affirm Scripture as their final authority. If this affirmation is to be taken seriously, however, it must be applied to the question of miraculous spiritual gifts, including divine revelation. Scripture affirms that such gifts existed and mandates orderliness for their use during

the transitional period from Pentecost to the end of the foundational era.

Today, believers have every resource needed for life and godliness. We call these resources the ordinary means of grace—God's Word, the church, the indwelling Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, Christ's mission, and many others enumerated throughout the New Testament. Scripture also gives ample evidence that God did not intend for the miraculous to continue unabated, and because of this, we must beware and warn against unbiblical continuationism.

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[1] Sam Storms, *Practicing the Power: Welcoming the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Your Life* (Zondervan, 2017), 92, 96.

[2] Convergence Church Network, accessed July 24, 2026. The first quotation is found at https://www.convergencechurchnetwork.com, and the second at

https://www.convergencechurchnetwork.com/shared-convictions.

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

[4] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Thomas Nelson, 2013), 119.



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Douglas Bachorik



To Think or to Feel, That Is the Question

Throughout the history of Christianity, churches have felt free to "borrow" songs from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Baptists sing songs by Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and vice versa. Frequently, there is sufficient theological congruence to allow for cross-fertilization and shared benefit among Christian groups with similar fundamental theologies, even when separated by other distinctives. That being so, shouldn't Baptist churches today exercise the same liberty and incorporate Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) from charismatic ministries?[1]

This is a question that churches have been wrestling with since the advent of the contemporary worship movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At first, the answer should seem very obvi-

ous: Yes! Just as churches in the past have crossed theological divides to adopt songs, we can do the same today with music that originates within charismatic worship.

However, there is a unique challenge in this scenario. While some of the basic tenets of charismatic theology are the same as or very similar to those of conservative evangelicals and Baptists in particular, there are significant theological differences regarding worship and the purpose of music in worship.

Generally speaking, charismatic views of worship draw on two Old Testament models: the Mosaic tabernacle and the Davidic order of worship. George Warnock, influential Latter Rain author, notes that "the present work of the Holy Spirit in re-establishing the Temple of God and its spiritual order of worship has really just started."[2] This has led to a view of musicians as mediating priests between God and worshippers, a view that is contrary to Baptist beliefs. It also leads to a sense that God is not present in a worship service until the sung praise of Him has drawn Him down. The evidence of God's arrival is accompanied (or evidenced) by strong emotional experiences.

Charismatic thought on worship and the role of music also comes, in part, from an unusual interpretation of Psalm 22:3: "But thou art holy, O thou that

inhabitest the praises of Israel." Ray Lazelle, one of the pastors and worship leaders who pioneered the transition from Pentecostalism to charismatic worship practices, suggested that praise is the key to God's presence. In other words, when God's people gather together and praise through music, God, in a sense, is compelled to come and be a part of the proceedings.[3]

These two doctrines (and several other areas of charismatic theology that are addressed in other articles in this journal) lead to several problems in musical worship for Baptist churches. It should be noted that worship practices and musical styles that charismatic churches have developed or adopted are effective in achieving their stated goals. This begs the question: what is *our* goal for music in worship? And if Baptist churches have a distinct set of goals for the use of music in worship, while adopting musical styles and worship practices that come from very different theological goals, are they creating problems for themselves?

For cessationist churches, especially those that are evangelical, baptistic, and non-liturgical, the charismatic theology of worship and music raises problems of mysticism and sacramentalism. Music and worship are used to create a strong emotive experience, with the belief that the act of praise is

efficacious. Charismatic sacramentalism is relatively new, although the concept has been hinted at since the 1950s.[4]

If charismatic worship employs, to a certain extent, a mystical experience of God and a sacramental perspective in which the act of praising is a means of grace, it is understandable that cognitive engagement with the lyrics would not be prioritized in musical choices. That kind of engagement can take place elsewhere in the service rather than in the musical portion.

This is a significant problem, however, for Baptist churches, which have, historically, found in the Scriptures that music-making in corporate worship is word-centered. For example, Deuteronomy 31:19–22 records instructions about a song intended for the conquering generation of Israelites entering the Promised Land. This is forcibly brought out in the KJV rendering: "And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are befallen them, that this song shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed: for I know their imagination which they go about, even now, before I have brought them into the land which I sware" (Deut. 31:21).

Psalm 78, in a similar fashion, was given to remind people of God's law—for parents to teach their children to follow God faithfully so that they would not become hard-headed and repeat their parents' mistakes. Numerous scriptural examples emphasize a purpose for singing centered on communicating truth and exhorting to follow that truth.

This focus is reiterated and strengthened in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Such a rich dwelling of God's word in His people happens if the people involved in the singing are paying attention to the words, thinking about them, and responding obediently to them. I term this activity thoughtful or cognitive spiritual engagement with the lyrics.

In historic Protestant theology, this has been a primary goal for music in worship. As Glenn Stallsmith notes, "The standard Protestant approach to worship music had been to illuminate an understanding of the scriptures." At the same time, Pentecostal-influenced theological perspectives minimized propositional, thoughtful, or cognitive engagement with the lyrics. In their practice, the meaning of the songs is not "linguistically coded."

The importance of the congregational experience was not in "linguistic mediation." For charismatic churches, singing "draw[s] the worshipper to God" in a visceral, emotional, and physical experience.[5]

What Stallsmith observes is that the experience of congregational singing is not so much about understanding the words and grappling with what those words are saying, then accepting, approving, and applying them. It is instead about bringing God down into the midst of a church in a "cloud" or "pillar of fire" fashion. This brings us into significant conflict with the Old Testament passages I've mentioned, as well as Colossians 3:16 and 1 Corinthians 14, where singing is to be a spiritually strengthening endeavor.

We see two distinct sets of theological goals regarding the role of music in the local church. For a continuationist church, the music and performance styles of CWM (such as Hillsong, Bethel, and many others) are perfectly appropriate to charismatic goals. But what happens when a cessationist church adopts a similar repertoire and worship style? At the very least, such a church is making it more difficult for itself to achieve the goal of teaching and admonishing as portrayed and commanded in Scripture. At worst, such a church may end up leading its own theology toward a continuationist

perspective. The importance of the words—their teaching, their impact, their power—is diminished, and the congregation "learns," through the weekly use of these songs, that the experience and the music are more important than the words.

Monique Ingall documents something of this kind of transformation in her study of the Saint Bartholomew Episcopal Church in West Nashville.[6] She notes that the church adopted charismatic worship practices, and with that shift came changes in all areas of their worship, including speaking in tongues. It should be noted that Saint Bartholomew's was not opposed to a shift in theology and embraced it. But what about a church that does not have that desire?

In our early years of ministry in the Philippines, my wife taught piano lessons to a Filipino assistant pastor's daughter. One day, that pastor asked me to meet with him and his wife. Over coffee along Katipunan Avenue in Quezon City, he told me what was going on in the Baptist church where he served. The senior pastor had sent the youth group leaders to a conference where they were instructed on how to incorporate CWM—such as praise and worship music from the 80s and 90s and more contemporary versions of those songs—into their youth groups. The assistant pastor bemoaned that, within a year of that

adoption and subsequent incorporation into the larger church, everything about the church had changed, including a weakening of the preaching and a lowering of personal standards of holiness.

In my own research of two fundamental Baptist churches, one using more traditional worship and music styles, and another that was contemporary in its worship, I discovered that members of the second church were slowly shifting their thinking about God, the Holy Spirit, the presence of God, and even the definition of worship away from the church's stated doctrines towards a continuationist charismatic perspective.

Such shifts in theology are facilitated by or given affordance through the use of music styles that minimize, or divert attention away from, the lyrics. Charismatic worship practices have frequently gravitated towards the use of rock-related styles of music, in part because a focus on the lyrics is not deemed as important as the powerful, overwhelming impact of the musical experience. Greil Marcus has argued that the meaning of lyrics recedes in rock music.[7] If that is true, then CWM would be more effective for non-teaching and non-admonitional goals, like those in many continuation churches. Simon Reynolds goes so far as to suggest

that a listener can respond to rock's energies without agreeing with or even noticing its lyrical content.[8] Simon Frith also touches on this when he suggests that in rock styles, it is a singer's personal style and vocal effects that shift meaning away from the lyrics themselves. Frith considers rock to be a means of engaging the *listener's* "truths" rather than transmitting objective ones in the lyrics.[9]

Of course, musical communication and influence is wonderfully multifaceted. In addition, congregational singing is a different experience than listening because the participants are saying the words. But CWM seems to mitigate the didactic force of the lyrics. In other words, CWM practices generally either discourage attention to the lyrics or encourage a non-propositional engagement with the lyrics. This may be well-suited to charismatic theological goals but does not seem suitable if the goal is teaching doctrine and encouraging obedience.

In Baptist churches, the commanding priority for music is the facilitation of a worshipper's thoughtful, spiritual engagement with the lyrics. Other priorities are valid, such as communicating in a 21st-century context and encouraging creativity and freshness, but only as they support the teaching and admonishing

of God's people through song. Any style of music that does not encourage such teaching and admonishing becomes an impediment to our goals for music in worship.[10]



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[1] Contemporary Worship Music refers, broadly, to the use of rock music styles (of all types) with Christian lyrics. A more specific use of the term refers to such music that is geared towards congregational singing, such as the music of Hillsong, Bethel Music, Sovereign Grace Music, and many other musically similar ministries. Most of these ministries are either charismatic or noncessationist in their theological orientation.

[2] Quoted by Lester Ruth and Swee Hong Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship: Understanding the Ideas that Reshaped the Protestant*

Church (Baker Academic, 2021), 39.

[3] Ruth and Lim, 11–12, 15, 17, 21–22.

[4] For a more complete discussion of sacramentalism in charismatic worship, listen to Steven Félix-Jäger's discussion here: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/worship-theology/id1620390894?i=1000651996494. In addition, see two works by Lester Ruth and Lim Swee Hong: *A History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*, and *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Abingdon, 2017).

[5] Glenn Stallsmith, "Protestant Congregational Song in the Philippines: Localization through Translation and Hybridization," *Religions* 12/708 (2021): 5.

[6] Monique M. Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 112–13.

[7] Greil Marcus, quoted in Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 14. See also Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Belknap, 2009).

[8] Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Harvard University Press, 1995), xvi.

[9] Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (Pantheon, 1981), and "Why Do Songs Have Words?" in *Lost in Music: Culture, Style and the Musical Event*, ed. Avron Levine White (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 77–106.

[10] Some of the material in this article comes from the author's book: *Congregational Worship and Music-Evoked Affect: Diwa in Song*, Congregational Music Studies Series (Routledge, 2026).

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Ben Sinclair



The Charismatic Movement in Africa

The African view of religion and philosophy is inherently spiritistic and syncretistic. *Spiritistic* means a strong belief in the presence and activity of spirits. *Syncretism* is the integration of other cultures and religious practices into one's own. This blending of beliefs and practices results in a new and unique religious worldview. Consequently, sub-Saharan Africa has proven to be exceptionally receptive to Pentecostalism. The charismatic movement has effectively co-opted many of the historic forms of African worship because charismatic theology

naturally harmonizes with traditional, spiritistic African religion.

THE TRADITIONAL AFRICAN RELIGIOUS MODEL

The traditional African worldview is extremely diverse. There are three thousand distinct tribes or ethnic groups inhabiting the continent. However, for the sake of this article, I have simplified the African worldview to four basic levels.

God
Spirits
Witch Doctor
People

Africans typically believe in the existence of an all-powerful creator God. They believe that the creator is transcendent. He is all-powerful but not an individual with whom one can directly commune. Africans believe there are two distinct barriers between God and themselves. The first domain is the realm of spirits. Good spirits, bad spirits, and ancestor spirits live in this domain. Africans believe that after death, the deceased joins the other spirits and ancestors in this realm. These spirits are very

active in the physical world and constantly interact with humanity. Africans live in constant fear of offended spirits and ancestors.

It is believed that laypeople cannot directly interact or communicate with the spirits. So, to divine, or communicate with the spirits, one must use a human medium who inhabits a second realm between God and people. Historically, this medium was called a witch doctor. Among the thousands of African tribes today, this doctor or diviner has many names. He or she can mediate between the human and spirit realms, discern why a spirit is angry, or ask the spirits why someone is sick or what offering must be given to appease an offended ancestor. Mediums can also be hired to make "medicine." There are herbal and traditional medicines used to treat sicknesses, but there are also spiritual medicines administered in the forms of charms, fetishes, and spells employed to curse one's enemy, protect one's family, or ensure an abundant harvest.

Early in our ministry in Africa, a friend told me that his sister was sick and staying "at the doctor's." He asked if I would visit and pray for her. "Of course," I replied. After driving a couple of miles off-road, I began to process my friend's request and realized my perception of a "doctor" differed greatly from his. That day, I found myself at the compound of the tra-

ditional village “doctor” or medium. A handful of people were there to be treated or to find answers from the ancestors. There were multiple altars for sacrifices and oblations. My friend introduced me to the doctor as his pastor and asked if the doctor would give us a tour of his compound. The doctor stiffened and hesitantly replied, “I will have to ask my spirit.” This was my first encounter with a medium whose occupation is to bridge the gap between the physical human world and the active, mysterious spirit realm.

So, what are charms, fetishes, spells, and incantations? A charm is an object created by the witch doctor and used to channel good or bad luck from the spirit realm. Many African homes hang a charm above the front door to protect the house from bad spirits. A bracelet charm might be worn around the wrist to provide physical healing or spiritual protection. A charm is commonly secured to a post near a farm or a stack of firewood to deter theft.

A fetish is an object believed to be inhabited by a living spirit. Fetishes are often carved images of wood or stone that resemble humans or animals. A spell is a supernatural “medicine” that may be used for good or evil. By hiring a witch doctor, one can place a protective spell around their family or produce an evil spell that may kill or cause sickness to an enemy. An

incantation is typically a spoken phrase or word that is designed to trigger good or bad medicine.

THE CHARISMATIC AFRICAN RELIGIOUS MODEL

The charismatic movement in Africa can be traced back to the Anglican Church of Nigeria in 1918. (See my book, *Pentecostalism: A Different Gospel*, available in English and French.) By the middle of the twentieth century, this false gospel was quickly spreading across sub-Saharan Africa simply by "Christianizing" the indigenous worldview. Compare the current charismatic African religious model with the traditional African model above.

God
Spirits
Man of God
People

Charismatics have co-opted and recycled the realms of the indigenous African religious model. Charismatic theology teaches the transcendence of the almighty creator God of the Bible. Within the spirit realm, they have renamed good spirits angels

and bad spirits demons. The Holy Spirit and the spirits of ancestors also dwell in this realm.

Charismatics in Africa often maintain the African view of ancestors through doctrines like "generational curses," "family bloodlines," and "spirit spouses." African charismatic "men of God" have replaced the witch doctor and maintain the fear and inaccessibility of laypeople in regard to the spirit realm. (Zambian Pastor Conrad Ebewe has also written about this replacement phenomenon: tinyurl.com/mtv9prmt.) Titles like Bishop, Apostle, and Prophet distinguish the "men of God" from the laity.

In order for a charismatic church member to experience signs, wonders, "breakthrough," or "baptism of the Holy Spirit," they must loyally follow and support a powerful "man of God." I have known Africans to travel thousands of miles and give large sums of money to a powerful prophet or evangelist in order to get that man of God to pray for their healing, prosperity, or breakthrough.

All over Africa, the traditional charms over front doors have been replaced with photo stickers and posters of powerful men of God affixed to front doors and car bumpers. Traditional charms for one's body, family, and farm have been replaced with sprinkled "holy water" and "anointing oil" purchased from the

local man of God. Some charismatics have gone so far as to persuade people to exchange their carved fetishes, which once contained traditional spirits, with an ornamental Bible on a prominent shelf, which the people now believe contains the Holy Spirit. Many charismatic television personalities claim that power, healing, and protection from forces such as "the demon of poverty," can be received just by laying one's hand on the television screen—much like the traditional fetishes and charms. Even spells and incantations have been traded for "powerful" Christian words and phrases.

A charismatic evangelist once set up his medium "ministry" in a Presbyterian church near our home in Cameroon. For months, all-night services were blared over loudspeakers. We would hear the man of God chanting his Christianized spells and incantations while trying to heal someone. To cast a healing, a deliverance, or a baptism of the Spirit over the church, the prophet would instruct the audience to repeat the words "power" and "fire" over and over. Louder and louder the hypnotic incantations were repeated. At other times, holy spells are supposed to be triggered by the magical phrase "in the name of Jesus" being repeated again and again with as much fervor and emotion as possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Paul warned that as time goes on, "seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). I believe that many Pentecostals are not intentionally fooling others into following their false doctrines. Most Pentecostals are simply self-deceived.

During His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described one of the saddest accounts in the Bible. "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:22–23). The descriptions of the people in these verses, who prophesy, cast out devils, and do wonderful works, but have never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, perfectly describe many of the preachers in the charismatic movement today.

Any Pentecostal who has believed the prosperity gospel, the full gospel, or any other gospel that teaches salvation is earned and maintained by faith plus works has been deceived. Christians should know that Pentecostalism is a manmade religion invented at the beginning of the twentieth century. They should know that Pentecostalism preaches a different gospel than the Bible, and obedient Christians will flee from

the charismatic movement, its doctrines, and its gospel (1 Tim. 6:5).



Ben Sinclair, DMin, was a church-planting missionary with Baptist World Mission in West Africa for twenty-two years before becoming the executive director of the mission in 2023. He is an author, professor, and conference speaker.

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David Anderson

Should I Get Excited for Christmas?

Scriptural Clues to Worshipping our Savior at Christmas

From my earliest childhood memories, Christmas in our home was and still is a big deal. The gathering of extended family, the special programs at both church and school, the special church services, the reading of the Christmas story multiple times, the singing and playing of the Christmas hymns, and the giving and receiving of gifts (a most significant part as a kid) all added up to one of the most exciting seasons of each

year. But am I simply a product of my Western and American culture? Is this just a religious tradition that I've gained from my forefathers that needs to be discarded or reconsidered? Considering the theme of this issue of *FrontLine*, am I allowing the world and errant worship philosophy and practice to have sway over my Christmas worship? I hope the answer is "no" to all these questions, yet as a "people of the Book" do we have any biblical support and guidance for our celebration of the birth of Christ? Is God pleased with our worship at Christmas?

I believe several clues to our answers can be found in the cherished Lukan narrative of the birth of Christ. I suspect many of you could quote much if not all of Luke 2:1–20. What did God say and do the night of the birth of His Son, our Savior? By His angel He announced that this was a night of "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people" (2:10). This was a specific occasion for all the people of the world to rejoice exceedingly because of the good news that our Savior was born! "Great joy" is used to describe several celebratory occasions in the Old Testament. It describes King David's rejoicing at the willing offering of the nation's leaders for the building materials of Solomon's temple (1 Chron. 29:9). It describes the celebration as Solomon came from

Gihon to Jerusalem following his coronation (1 Kings 1:40). It describes one of the greatest celebrations of the Passover during the first year of the reign of good king Hezekiah where the nation prepared their hearts to seek the Lord and feasted, the Levitical choir sang to the accompaniment of loud instruments, and the people decided to extend the celebration for an extra week (2 Chron. 30:26)! It describes the celebration that took place at the dedication of the rebuilt walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership. There were antiphonal choirs and players of trumpets marching around the walls opposite each other, and all the people, including the women and children, rejoiced with great joy (Neh. 12:43). God Himself prodded the shepherds to celebrate the birth of His Son. It seems then most appropriate for us believers, though many generations hence, to continue this divinely initiated pattern to celebrate the birth of our Savior. And why should we not? For all of us who have repented of our sins and trusted Jesus alone as our Savior should never get over the gift of eternal life given to us through the Babe who came and died for our sins and rose again, conquering our great enemy Death. His birth is worthy of our annual remembrance and joy.

But how? Does this narrative give us clues as to how we should celebrate Christ's birth? What did God

record for us to see, understand, and then imitate in our celebration of the birth of Christ?

It seems most significant that God had His angel declare the truth about His Son, inviting the listeners to find Him. These truths, the "good tidings," were the reason for the "great joy." Considering that Gabriel was described by Luke as the "angel of the Lord" in Luke 1:11–19, it is reasonable to assume that Gabriel was again the Lord's messenger here to declare the birth of Jesus. Following Gabriel's declaration, the angelic mass choir joined him to praise God's work and offer of salvation in tones that, for us earthlings, only hint at its beauty. So, what were the truths declared by the angel about our Savior? The Child was born *for us*. He is of the royal line of David (remember that His parents had come to Bethlehem, their family town, because of the tax). He is the Savior, the Anointed One (Christ). He is God (Lord) (Luke 2:11). What a power-packed, efficiently worded verse! God called for great joy because of the truth concerning His Son—Who He is and what He would do. May our Christmas celebrations be founded on the truth of Christ and the joy that truth brings and not on selfish desires and good feelings. You may want to think again about the "why" of your celebration and align it more closely with Christ rather than

with Santa, football, or putting on the most spectacular party or pageant.

Following the declaration of truth about His Son, God then enlisted a massive choir of angels to sing about that truth in a beautiful, poetic, and powerful form. In trying to catch the sense and power of the song in English, I will use underlining to point out the emphasis:

> Glory, in the highest heaven to God,
> And upon earth, peace,
> Among men, favor.*

The coming of the Son of God to earth brought glory to God, the offer of peace to mankind, and the blessings of God's grace to those among men who would receive the Son as their Savior. The words for "praising God, and saying" can indicate either singing praise or speaking praise, but it seems reasonable to expect that the angels were singing. We know that they sang at creation (Job 38:7). In the opening scene of the Lamb's judgment on the world during the tribulation, the angelic mass choir follows the singing of praise by the four beasts and twenty-four elders with loud tones (Greek: *phōnē*) exalting the Lamb (Rev. 5:8–12). Singing is an integral part of times of joy and God's intervention (2 Sam. 22:50; Ps. 126:2; Isa. 14:7; 44:23; 48:20; 49:13; 51:11; 54:1; 55:12). God Himself

will sing with joy at the beginning of the millennial kingdom (Zeph. 3:17). Paul, in speaking of the salvation of the Gentiles (Rom. 15:9), quotes 2 Samuel 22:50 where David desires to "sing . . . unto thy name" before the Gentiles. I suspect the angels were gloriously singing this poem that reiterated the truths declared about Christ in testimony to the shepherds the night of our Savior's incarnation. So, when we consider our salvation, the reality that God in Christ took on human flesh to redeem us from our sins, it seems most appropriate to lift our voices in song to praise our good God and His amazing work on our behalf. Whether like the angels you sing to the Lord or like the shepherds you listen to the singing of praise to God, God-glorifying music is an appropriate part of our Christmas celebration.

The story is not yet done. The declaration and praise from God by the angels at the birth of our Savior brought a response from the listeners. We do well to contemplate their responses and then consider whether our Christmas worship is eliciting the same. What did the declaration of truth about the Christ and the praising of the Savior by the angel choir prod the shepherds to do? The story unfolds in quick succession. After a brief discussion among themselves and a determined decision to discover the reality of

what had been revealed to them, they demonstrated their faith by pursuing Christ. They "came with haste, and found . . . the babe" (Luke 2:16). Their faith was affirmed in seeing what they had been told by the angel. As a result, the shepherds unhesitatingly began to publish not simply what they had seen, but what had been told to them by the angels about what they had seen. The declaration and praise of Christ by the angels sent from God provided the shepherds the correct interpretation of the unfolding events of Christ's nativity, and the shepherds gladly told any and all who would hear (Luke 2:17–18). When the shepherds returned to their normal affairs of life, they did not return unchanged. Our last glimpse of them in the Scriptures finds them imitating the angelic choir as they continued to glorify and praise God for His Son and their Savior (Luke 2:20). Now, that's a choir I would have liked to hear! Humble, humanly despised shepherds, lifting their voices together in hearty and possibly harmonious praise to God! Does your Christmas celebration draw your family, your church, and your friends to pursue Christ, publish the glad tidings, and praise God for the Savior? It just might be appropriate for each of us to emulate Mary (Luke 2:19) and ponder the glory of the incarnation and preserve the treasure of its truth, adjusting our

Christmas joy and celebrations to bring glory to our dear Savior and Lord.



David Anderson has the privilege of serving the Lord as president of Maranatha Baptist University. God has graciously given him a wonderful help-meet in Abi, six supportive children, and seven grandchildren. Of course, Dave listens to Christmas music year-round.

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* This translation follows the Majority Text reading and is emphasizing the nominative form of each of the underlined nouns. For further reading see R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel* (Augsburg, 1946), 134–37.

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Grace Baptist Church of Victoria, Canada, celebrated its fortieth anniversary on August 9, 2026. Pastor Kevin Schaal and his wife Sandy from Northwest Valley Baptist Church in Glendale, Arizona, joined the congregation for the day as special guests to help with the celebration. Pastor Schaal spoke on Matthew 16, "How to Change the World," and Matthew 28, "What Now?," emphasizing the mission of the church and the responsibility of individual Christians to push that mission forward.

Pastor Don Johnson and his wife Debbi have served in this church from the beginning. When the church started, they would set up ten chairs in a rented hall. Today, Grace Baptist has its own building and a growing congregation with people from all over the world. Pastor Johnson likes to say, "We have people from

every continent but Australia and Antarctica." Through the years, they have seen many come to the Lord, and many of those believers have since gone on to heaven. In recent years, the church body has been reshaped with new converts and transfers into the area from all over and from all walks of life.

The once "mostly older" congregation now enjoys worshipping with people of all ages. They are busy with ongoing outreach and discipleship ministries. Something new seems to happen every week. Pastor Johnson says, "Praise the Lord for all that has happened in our forty years. It is all His doing; we've just been along for the ride."

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INSPIRATION FOR THE PASTOR'S STUDY

SOUND WORDS

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

FIRST PARTAKER

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

Intimate Communion with Individual Members of the Godhead

Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?
William Cowper

My sophomore year in college is one of my most wonderful memories, largely because it was when the relationship with my future wife, Linda, began to blossom out like Isaiah's rose, beautifying my desert. But it was also when I began to attempt to really study the Bible for myself.

My dormitory had a first-floor room called "the study lounge." Scores of sleepy, tousle-haired guys in

smelly bathrobes shuffled in early each morning to cram for quizzes and tests. The air was disagreeably pungent, close, and suffocatingly still, especially in the winter when the radiators seemed always to emit too much heat and were without fans to move the air. Yet that fall I started looking forward to getting up and stumbling into that room myself to squeeze out a spot at one of the tables in order to study my Bible.

For whatever reason, I decided to try to understand Romans. These were the days long before the virtual explosion of commentaries on Romans. At BJU there were pretty much two primary recommendations: Robert Haldane and Charles Hodge. Banner of Truth had reprinted Hodge the year before in what it called its Geneva Series. It was a sturdily bound hardback of over 450 pages with a handsome dustcover for just five dollars through the catalog companies. I contact-papered the dustcover in clear plastic, typed my name and address on a bookplate claiming in large, aqua-blue letters that this volume was *Ex Libris* of . . . and excitedly carried it down to the study lounge morning by morning.

I hadn't yet begun to use colored highlighters. Instead, I underlined on the top edge of a laminated card with a Rapidograph drawing pen that someone (I can't remember who) had recommended to me for making fine, neat notes in the margins of my Bible.

Looking again at Hodge this morning, I find that I must have had several of these pens, because there are three colors to my underlining—black, red, and green.

Sometimes I wrote brief comments in the margin. One of the first seems to have been the definition of a word that I can't imagine I'd ever seen until then, and which I can scarcely think I've ever encountered since: *concatenation*. I must have looked it up because in a margin is the definition, *A linked series or order of things depending on each other*. What a blessing! Really? *Concatenation?*

Well, all right, I concede overloading the word *blessing*, at least by a little bit. But my memories are that it was actually the way I felt about almost everything that I learned. It was all so satisfying to study for myself how a book of the Bible was put together and what it meant line by line. The particular sentence in Hodges that used this ungainly word was, *There is almost always a regular concatenation in his* [Paul's] *discourses, evincing the spontaneous exercise of a disciplined mind.* Insights like that, admittedly not warm or applicational all by themselves, nevertheless fed my hunger to know and to understand my Bible. And when that happened, it really did feel like I had drawn closer to God.

I was, of course, right about this in the sense that in many ways our relationship to our Bible is our relationship to God; trusting it is trusting Him, obeying it is obeying Him, learning of it is learning of Him, and so on. But over time I began to understand something additional that I've been attempting to share and to magnify in the last few columns. I realize now what it is to have gradually moved beyond studying the Bible merely in order *to know*, to progressing into studying in order *to do* (James 1:22), to beginning to study in order to have things *to teach and to preach*, to maturing into studying in order *to be transformed* (2 Cor. 3:18), and then finally, to reading and studying because of really thirsting for fellowship with God. Of course, this final, ultimate pursuit encompasses the previous ones, makes use of them, and can't occur without them. But the burden I'm trying to explain in these columns is that if these (knowing, obeying, preaching, and living the Bible) do nothing more than terminate in themselves, we are missing their divinely intentioned end and suffering a great personal loss. Andrew Murray warned,

> You are so occupied and filled with other things, religious things, preaching and praying, studying and working, so occupied with your religion, that

you do not give God the time to make Himself known. (*The Master's Indwelling*, 45)

This is the third column having to do with a believer's (especially a pastor's) daily, devotional communion with God. For the sake of continuity, I should at least list the major topics the first two articles have addressed.

- **Old Testament expressions** (for communion with God)
- **The most revealing New Testament expression** (*koinōnia*, *fellowship*)
- **Understanding *communion* with God** (particularly the ways in which it surpasses the experiences of Old Testament believers)
- **The intimate possibilities** (of communion with each person of the Godhead *individually*)

INTIMATE POSSIBILITIES

The fourth topic, "intimate possibilities," is what I want now to continue discussing. Those possible intimacies are disclosed to us in all six of the New Testament passages using the word *koinōnia* of our fellowship with God. I'm going to **bold** what suggests specific intimacy.

. . . ye were called unto the fellowship (*koinōnia*) **of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord**. (1 Cor. 1:9)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion (*koinōnia*) **of the Holy Ghost** be with you all. Amen. (2 Cor. 13:14)

If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship (*koinōnia*) **of the Spirit** . . . . (Phil. 2:1)

. . . truly our fellowship (*koinōnia*) is **with the Father**, and **with his Son Jesus Christ**. (1 John 1:3, and referred back to by *God* and *Him* in vv. 5 and 6)

What emerges from these references is something I could barely begin to discuss in the last column. I'll repeat just my first statements.

These references put beyond all doubt that our fellowship extends to all three members of the Godhead *individually*: Father (1 John 1:3), Son (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:3), and Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil, 2:1). These passages—the only ones in Scripture to use the word *koinōnia* of the intimate communion we have with God—do not speak of it in any way other than with individual members of the Godhead. . . . Evidently what the New Testament wants us to understand is

that when we *meet* with God, and while we're attempting to remain in *fellowship* with Him, it's with individual members of the Godhead that we actually have to do.

How puzzling this can be at first. How can it remain anything but always a great mystery? The members of the Godhead are inseparably one. It would not be possible to engage with a single member in isolation from the others. And yet they themselves often direct us to one or the other of themselves. The Father directs us to hear the Son. The Son teaches us to pray to the Father. The Son tells us that we will be taught by the Spirit. The Spirit encourages us that we will receive grace, mercy, and peace from the Father and from the Son. Look again at 2 Corinthians 13:14: "The grace **of the Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love **of God**, and the communion (*koinōnia*) **of the Holy Ghost** be with you all." Each divine communication (*grace, love, communion*) is ascribed to one particular member. Are we actually supposed to seek conscious communion with each in some intentional way that is in keeping with His distinctive roles and ministries to us?

Perhaps *supposed* is too strong a word. Untold hundreds of thousands of theologically unsophisticated Christians surely must have lived and died in sat-

isfying fellowship with God without ever once giving any thought whatsoever to this issue. Is there, then, any further attainment actually being suggested to us from the way in which these references specify individual members of the Godhead?

JOHN OWEN'S HELP

I briefly explained in the last column on this topic that John Owen, the man whom some have called "the prince of the Puritans," argued emphatically that the answer to this question is a definite and scriptural *Yes*. He did so in an extensive work (almost 275 pages) titled, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation* (1657; repr., Banner of Truth, 1965). I've been reading it intermittently for almost thirty years now; the first hundred or so pages numbers of times. But the typeset is dark, small, and closely packed.

Happily, there is today a fine modern reader's edition, an abridgment by R. J. K. Law, complete with a twenty-
seven-page introduction and a thirty-page analytical outline. This edition puts this book's blessings well within the reach of even a first-time reader of Owen. I believe that you would find that nearly every page ministers. You might also find yourself becom-

ing an Owen "fan." There are reasons why Owen has been deeply loved by tens of thousands of earnest Christians over the course of more than three centuries.

But my primary purpose for bringing Owen up isn't to encourage you to read him. It's to use just a little bit of his thinking to help us understand why it is that we're told in the New Testament that our fellowship is with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit *individually* as well as unitedly. Let me use a sufficient number of his explanations to illustrate and enlighten.

Owen explains that communion with each person of the Godhead begins with His communicating Himself to us in some way. This, I've found, is exceedingly important to grasp. Each Person's communion with me begins with His communicating something of *Himself*: some perfection, some impression, some ministration. That's the beginning of fellowship that is Person-to-person—a single, individual member of the Godhead and me.

Owen clarifies, of course, that the New Testament does not attribute any one of these communications to some one member *exclusively*. But he demonstrates that there are certain things that we may conclude are the communications of one or the other of the

Godhead predominantly, since the New Testament repeatedly credits one member as being their primary source.

COMMUNION WITH GOD THE FATHER

For instance, Owen draws our attention to the fact that the New Testament informs us that it is the Father who is the fountainhead of the love that the Godhead has for us (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8–9, 10; 2 Cor. 13:14; Rom. 5:6, etc.). Therefore, Owen urges, a New Testament believer's fellowship with the Father is primarily over His love for him. This, Owen says, is the great *discovery* of the gospel. God the Father is revealed *peculiarly as love, as full of it unto us* (Titus 3:4; John 3:16; 1 John 4:8; Rom. 9:11, 12; Eph. 1:4, 5; 2 Thess. 2:13, 14; John 14:23, etc.). This is very important.

> Christians walk oftentimes with exceedingly troubled hearts, concerning the thoughts of the Father towards them. They are well persuaded of the Lord Christ and his goodwill; the difficulty lies in what is their acceptance with the Father, what is his heart towards them?

Owen's remedy is to change our outlook on the Father. He *ought to be looked on as the fountain from*

whence all other sweetnesses flow. . . . There is love in the person of the Father peculiarly held out unto the saints, as wherein he will and doth hold communion with them. . . . This is the will of God, that he may always be eyed as benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable therein; and that peculiarly as the Father, as the great fountain and spring of all gracious communications and fruits of love. This is that which Christ came to reveal, even God as a Father (John 1:18).

If (hopefully, *when*) you read Owen, you will be deeply imprinted by at least two truths hugely affecting the degree of intimacy you feel with God the Father. **The first** is the absolute necessity of learning to always view Him in this light, of doing what Jude calls keeping yourself *in the love of God*. This doesn't refer to our working hard to keep God loving us, but to our being careful to maintain and nurture this viewpoint and assurance—that He truly always loves us. Owen points out with great perception, *So long as the Father is looked on under any other apprehensions, but only as acting love upon the soul, it breeds in the soul a dread and aversation* (an aversion to Him). . . . *But when he who is the Father is considered* ***as a Father*** (emphasis mine), *acting love on the soul, this raises it to love again. This is,* Owen points out, *in faith, the ground of all acceptable obedience.*

Those last two sentences transition seamlessly into our side of communion with the Father. He, for His part, loves us. This explains and reassuringly warms His every communication to us of everything good that we ever experience. It all comes down from *the Father of lights* (James 1:17), and are His ways of communing with us **about Himself** (not just giving us blessings). He is all over, and all Himself, the very essence of love (1 John 4:8)! How then is He to communicate this to us in ways that we may fellowship with Him as He is in this? Only by communications of that love—what Owen calls *fruits of love* (acceptance, kindness, forbearance, longsuffering, friendship, etc.). He gives our souls (our innermost beings) broad impressions of this love by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). And this *raises it* [our soul] *to love again* (to return that love). And it breeds *acceptable obedience*. Our love and our obedience, and other such complementary returns, are our fellowshipping back with His loving communications (which are nothing less than Himself).

These loving communications back and forth are our communion with one another. He is to us an infinitely great, everlastingly loving *father*. We are His loving *little children* (1 John 2:1, 12). When we begin a day, and walk all through the day with this about

the Father always in view, what a change it works in our hearts towards Him. We find ourselves welling up involuntarily with thanksgivings, praises, affections, and words and feelings of the warmest devotion. This is the "chemistry" of living in perpetual fellowship with the Father. He begins it day by day with fresh impressions of Himself in love. Our hearts are touched, warmed, and stirred to make returns of love to Him. Andrew Bonar seems to have discovered this "secret" early in his ministry. On a cold, cheerless Friday in January 1844, he wrote in his journal,

> I see that to live a life of grace, it is needful that we feel daily that love on the side of God is the only reason why gracious feelings are ever experienced by us. Why is the fire kindled after going out every morning in my room? Just because I like to have its heat. So the Lord daily kindles love to Himself in me just because He never ceases to desire that I should be His. . . . Wondrous, wondrous, wondrous! I hang upon His arm.

The **second** truth that I think you'll be hugely impacted by if you read Owen is the unchangeableness of this love of the Father for you. Even though His Spirit does not always manifest it to us to the same degree and in the same ways, Owen argues (with our unbelief)

that the Father's love is always *equal*. That is, it does not grow, nor is it *diminished at any time*. Owen writes, *It is an eternal love, that had no beginning, that shall have no ending; that cannot be heightened by any act of ours, that cannot be lessened by anything in us.* He may rebuke, He may chasten, He may hide His face, He may fill us with a sense of His indignation, but *those things which seem to be demonstrations of the change of His affections . . . do as clearly proceed from love as those which seem to be the most genuine issues thereof.*

Our love, says Owen, is like ourselves; *unequal, increasing, wanting, growing, declining.* But His, *like the sun,* [is] *always the same in its light, though a cloud may sometimes interpose.*

What an inexplicable slowness there is in our hearts to believe this. The root of it, of course, is our flesh, that terrible, unredeemable fallen nature in us whose enmity to God will never change (Rom. 8:7). But there's more to it than that. We are, as Owen says, *unskillful* when it comes to holding communion with the Father in love. So he challenges his readers, *Put, then, this to the venture: exercise your thoughts upon this very thing, the eternal, free, and fruitful love of the Father, and see if your hearts be not wrought upon to delight in him. I dare boldly say, believers will find it as thriving a course as ever they pitched on in their lives.*

AN END FOR NOW

I want to conclude by raising a problem. As much as anything other than persistent, willful sinning, it must surely be the explanation for why so many otherwise fine Christians experience so little of what these columns are about. This problem is exposed searchingly in a work by the Scottish minister George Halley Knight (1835–1917). It is titled *In the Secret of His Presence*, and in it Knight rightly diagnoses a malady amounting almost to a plague in our midst. Let me present a few lightly edited paragraphs in closing.

> The great difficulty in earlier times used to be to get men to be earnest enough to go into the world. . . . Now the difficulty is to get them to be earnest enough to go away from the world and sanctify themselves. The religious life is identified with public gatherings, united worship, and an incessant round of activities in social Christian work, and it tends, on that very account, to be greatly unfamiliar with secret prayer and private fellowship with God. There is unquestionably a danger in this, for ceaseless activity for others may weaken the spiritual life within ourselves and force from us ere long the sad confession, *I have kept the vineyards of others, but mine own vineyard I have not kept.*

For stirring great enthusiasms we need the inspiration of the crowd. Christ's gospel has always won its noblest triumphs in social revivals. But for the deepening and confirming of holy principles within us we need the seclusion of the *secret place*. What we need above all things in these crowded days is the setting apart of many listening times, times of quiet in which we can hear the heavenly voices that call to us unregarded in the busy day.

The great clockbell of St. Paul's is not heard even a few streets off in the roar of traffic all day long. But it can be heard over half the metropolis in the silence of the night. One reason why God so often spoke to His servants in the night was that all was quiet then. That, too, is one reason why so many of them were sent away into desert solitudes that they might hear what He had to say. It may be one reason why sickness and sorrow are sent so frequently into our careless lives. God has something to say to us which, in the whirl of our earthly ambitions, we cannot hear, and He makes the noises of the outer world to cease that He may speak to the soul.

There are many ways of preparing to receive blessing from on high. But one of the most essential is this, *Commune with your own heart and be still. . . .* Do not ***all*** His best visits to the soul take place only

when, in a true, deep sense the doors are shut? ***We*** need shut doors for our holiest communion with Him. ***He*** needs shut doors for His most comforting messages to us. The *still, small voice* can be heard distinctly only when the noise of the world's voices is shut out.

Mark Minnick is Pastor Emeritus of Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

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BRING . . . THE BOOKS

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

The Ministry of Intercession by Andrew Murray

J. C. Ryle wrote that prayer is as essential to the Christian as breathing is to life. In *The Ministry of Intercession: A Plea for More Prayer*, Andrew Murray is, in essence, exhorting the Christian church in regard to its lack of breathing. In the flyleaf of this volume, I've written in my post-read comments, "This book is a powerful diagnostic of the problem of the lack of Christian prayer. It provides compelling scriptural arguments to convict [readers] of our need of prayer." Its thirteen chapters as well as its appendix at the end, "Pray without Ceasing," operate primarily by expounding specific passages germane to the believer's prayer life, especially in regard to this main theme that Murray maintains: Intercession is the sublimest and most Christlike form of prayer.

The book as a whole is a perusal of passages that both point out a deficiency in prayer and also provide an inescapable challenge to pray more. For instance, Murray uses Luke 11:5–8 and the story of the friend

at midnight to teach about intercession. He points out the love which finally drove the host to welcome his friend: "True love to souls will become in us the spirit of intercession." From passages where men were healed, such as John 5:6–9, lessons are drawn about the reality of our impotence contrasted with the sufficiency of God's grace and power. And the entirety of chapter 11 is devoted to instruction about praying in the name of Christ.

By way of *convicting*, *The Ministry of Intercession* employs a host of diagnostic tools drawn from Scripture. These include exquisite and Spirit-filled expositions and reflections on given passages of Scripture that are accompanied by a keen sense of human tendencies. Murray was a prolific writer as well as a seasoned traveler in his native land of South Africa. His experience would have given him exposure to many problems of the human spiritual condition, and both his book's organization and its argumentation demonstrate Murray's agility in bringing the Bible to bear on people's genuine spiritual needs.

Perhaps the one possible weakness (or maybe I should say "peculiarity") about the book is its occasional emphasis on a "higher life" kind of thought regarding sanctification. Admittedly, Murray's circle of ministry existed within what is known as Keswick theology. Keswick theologians in general have a

tendency toward some greater degree of introspection and perhaps even mysticism, primarily because of their distinctive understanding of the doctrine of sanctification. But in the end, Murray actually avoids these trends in general and sticks primarily to straightforward exposition.

By way of *compelling*, Murray relies largely on firm exhortation. It just so happened that at the same time I read *The Ministry of Intercession*, I was also introduced to *The Hidden Life of Prayer* by David McIntyre. Whereas Murray proved to be a genius of conviction by pinpointing the problem in all its forms, McIntyre proved to be a master of compelling by making the reader fall in love with Christ again. However, this is perhaps no disgrace to Murray's book, as every author has his theme and his times. And Murray does seek to rejuvenate the affections for Christ in his own right with such statements as this: "Do let us believe that God's call to much prayer need not be a burden and cause of continual self-condemnation. He means it to be a joy."

The flames of spiritual desire are kindled in marvelous fashion by sections of Murray's discourse such as the following:

> And what is now the way by which our sense of the lack of prayer can be made the means of

> blessing, the entrance on a path in which the evil may be conquered? How can our intercourse with the Father, in continual prayer and intercession, become what it ought to be, if we and the world around us are to be blessed? As it appears to me, we must begin by going back to God's Word, to study what *the place is God means prayer to have* in the life of His child and His Church. A fresh sight of what prayer is *according to the will of God*, of what our prayers can be, *through the grace of God*, will free us from those feeble defective views, in regard to the absolute necessity of continual prayer, which lie at the root of our failure. [emphasis his]

The big and final takeaway that Murray presses home is the devotional tenet that *intercession* is the most Christlike form of prayer, because this is what Christ is continually doing for the believer right now. In fact, as Murray asserts, such work of the Savior is comforting for the Christian precisely because it is the perpetual representation of Christ's finished work before the Father on our behalf.

Herein lies the tremendous usefulness of this book for the minister. Since it the minister's primary responsibility to proclaim Christ and the salvation He has procured for His beloved (and thus to restore

the throne of God in the hearts of people), Murray sounds forth one of the Bible's indispensable requisites to the doctrine of soteriology. The statement that "he ever liveth to make intercession for them" is the basis for the promise that "he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him" (Heb. 7:25). Any preacher will benefit from that kind of Christ-centered heralding. And Murray effects as much in this treasure of a book, cover to cover.

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The Seer and the Blind (2 Kings 6:8–23)

It's best classified as a comedy.[1] Elisha acts as a divinely empowered spy against Syria, then strikes blind the army sent against him, leading the entire group stumbling into the capital city to be taken without resistance. Besides meriting a good laugh, the account also raises several interpretive questions.

DID ELISHA LIE TO THE SOLDIERS?

This problem rests on the core theme—knowledge and sight. First, God's prophet knows secrets. Syria's raids on Israel relied on subterfuge, and Elisha destroyed the power of intrigue by reporting "the words that you speak in your bedroom" (v. 12).[2] Second, fear is quieted by sight. Elisha's servant fears the army he can see; Elisha asks God to open his eyes to the greater army he should have seen (vv. 15–17). Third, threats turn hapless and helpless. The grand battle of the two armies never comes. Rather, God chooses the more farcical spectacle of a blind army

stumbling after a prophet for fifteen miles deeper into enemy territory until they stand blinking in the center of the capital city!

So did Elisha lie to them by saying "nor is this the city" (v. 19)? Keil explains this as a *ruse de guerre*—a feint or strategic deception ethically used in warfare (Josh. 8:1–22).[3] And by avoiding a full battle, the deception likely preserved their lives. Besides bringing a smile to readers ever since, it was a real act of mercy! What should have been a bloodbath turns into a feast and an embarrassing trip home.

WHO IS ELISHA SUPPORTING ANYWAY?

Is Elisha soft on the king of Syria? Is he supporting the rebellious king of Israel? Standing in front of the hapless enemy force, the king of Israel stumbles over himself with excitement—"shall I kill them? shall I kill them?" (v. 21). Elisha calls him off, commands a feast to be spread (they've just finished a long hike!), and sends them off to their master. Those who intended to kill the prophet and raid Israel now return home freely? Is Elisha going soft on the enemy?

Or is the king of Israel any less confusing? The last time we read of a prophet (Elijah) surrounded by an enemy army, it was soldiers sent by the king of Israel (1:1–16)! The last time Elisha stood

before the king of Israel, he could tolerate it only for Jehoshaphat's sake (3:13–14). And the last time the kings of Syria and Israel interacted, the Gentile king showed more faith in Elisha's power than the king of Israel (2 Kings 5)! Is the king on God's side?

This fits the ambiguity that has extended back to 1 Kings 13. Israel is so compromised that it is now nearly impossible to identify who is righteous and who isn't. The only character we are certain that God will defend is Elisha and our only confidence is that God makes His own plans (cf. Josh. 5:13–14). God is not partisan, allying Himself with our petty causes or even our preferred nations (2 Chron. 15:2).

DID THE SYRIANS STOP ATTACKING ISRAEL (V. 23) OR NOT (V. 24)?

If it was already ambiguous whether the king of Israel was or wasn't righteous, the ensuing account confirms it. The king turns immediately from enjoying Elisha's deliverance to vowing to remove his head (v. 31). And that highlights the seams between the two accounts. Verse 23 concludes that the Syrians stopped their raids; verse 24 describes a siege from Syria's "entire army." Which was it? Resolving the problem is fairly straightforward. The "raids" are

quick, surprise attacks. Syria stops trying raids because ambushes don't work when Elisha knows everyone's plans.

Ironically, that miraculous deliverance only led to a more overt, full attack. God delivered last time. Can the king turn to Him in faith again? Now the king of Israel exposes his full unbelief, turning inexplicably on Elisha, even though the prophet is in no way the proximate cause. Elisha becomes a proxy for his anger against God—"Why should I wait for the LORD any longer?" (v. 33).

CONCLUSION

The entire account holds together as an extended contrast between those who can see and those who are willfully blind. God alone can give sight and He opens people's eyes whenever He chooses. The question to every reader becomes this: Are our own eyes open to God's power and His clear word? Do we recognize that the actual greatest threat is our own unbelief? Furthermore, our God is also always at work and in unexpected places—even in Syria! We are not the gravitational center of what He is doing, and He is not available to be harnessed for our agendas. The cause is entirely His; ours is the privilege to be part of what He is doing if only we remain humbly dependent.

Joel Arnold is the president of Foundation Baptist College in Edmonton, Alberta.

[1] T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings*, WBC 13 (Word, 1985), 74.

[2] Scripture quotations are from the NASB.

[3] C. F. Keil, *The Books of the Kings*, trans. James Martin (Edinburgh, 1877), 326.

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WINDOWS

"To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, 'A window shalt thou make in the ark.'" Charles Spurgeon

Behind the Scenes: God's Providence in America's Struggle for Independence

How often we don't realize, until later, God's working behind the scenes. The Bible is replete with God's behind-the-scenes acts of providence, which "might be described as God's *covert* activity in orchestrating the affairs of men and the events of history."[1]

In the Revolutionary War era the word "providence" was vernacular for the sovereignty of God. In a letter dated August 20, 1778, written to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson Jr., General George Washington wrote, "The Hand of providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations."[2]

In this 250th anniversary year of America's Declaration of Independence, we would do well to remind ourselves, our children, and our churches of

God's "behind-the-scenes" acts, not only in America's past struggle for independence, but presently in the nations of our world and in our lives individually.

PROVIDENTIAL PREPARATIONS BEFORE THE WAR

The preparation of America in general. Puritan influence had waned in the early 18th century due to "imported Enlightenment attitudes" that "had noticeably undermined many of the traditional Christian beliefs and moral values."[3] However, "as a result of the Great Awakening, belief in the Providential nature of the establishment of the American colonies was also revived throughout the land and channeled into the independence movement."[4]

George Whitefield, one of the most influential preachers of the Great Awakening, crossed the Atlantic seven times to minister in America. One might naturally expect that, as an Englishman, he would have shown stronger sympathy toward Britain rather than toward the growing spirit of American independence. However, "it is evident from [his] remarks that in the dispute then brewing between England and America Whitefield's sympathies lay with the Americans."[5] Furthermore,

> in the minds of many people he became a symbol of the fight for liberty and of the righteousness

> of withstanding an unjust and arbitrary authority. His frequent traversing of the land from one end to another served notably toward creating a sense of unity between the previously disunited Colonies, and when the Revolution was accomplished the principles of justice and equality written into the Constitution were principles that had been implanted in the public mind by the Awakening, more than by any other influence.[6]

The preparation of a general in America. In 1748, at age sixteen, George Washington had joined a surveying team in the rugged frontier of Virginia. While he was asleep one night, his straw bedding caught fire and could have engulfed him were it not for one of the other surveyors awakening and putting out the flames.[7]

In 1751, the 19-year-old Washington traveled with his older half-brother, Lawrence, who was seeking to recover from tuberculosis, to the warm climate of the Caribbean. There George contracted the dreaded smallpox—"a scourge that took the life of twenty percent of its sufferers and left legions of survivors blind. . . . George Washington survived with nothing more than a few pockmarks and immunity to smallpox, which would protect him in the future as the disease felled his soldiers by the thousands."[8]

In 1755, at age twenty-three, he was an aide on the command staff of General Edward Braddock when they were ambushed during the French and Indian War. Although Braddock and

> two-thirds of the expedition's officers had been killed or wounded . . . Washington reported that he was the only officer in Braddock's presence who escaped the battle unharmed. Two horses, however, had been shot out from under him, and he later counted four holes where bullets had passed through his clothing. . . . He was convinced then and for the rest of his life that he had been spared by God's sovereign grace. "I now exist and appear in the land of the living," he wrote his brother John, "by the miraculous care of Providence, that protected me beyond all human expectation."[9]

Presbyterian evangelist Samuel Davies, who died in 1761 over a decade before the Revolutionary War, made this prescient statement: "I may point out to the Public that heroic youth Col. Washington, who I cannot but hope Providence has hitherto preserved in so signal a Manner for some important Service to his Country."[10]

PROVIDENTIAL PRESERVATIONS DURING THE WAR

Humanly speaking, there was no chance that the colonies' malnourished, poorly clothed, underfund-

ed, short-term volunteer army would be able to win a war against Great Britain, the world's superpower of the day. Yet multiple incredible events during the war made it evident that no world superpower had a chance against the One to whom the nations of the world "are as a drop of a bucket" (Isa. 40:15). God's numerous behind-the scenes actions caused many contemporaries and later historians to interpret them as signs of divine providence.

Artillery from Fort Ticonderoga. Henry Knox, a "very fat" 25-year-old bookseller from Boston came up with the implausible idea of hauling the recently recaptured munitions from Fort Ticonderoga in New York all the way to Boston. In early December 1775, with Washington's approval, he and his 19-year-old brother used sleds, eighty yoke of oxen, horses, and hundreds of men he enlisted along the way to begin the three-hundred-mile haul to Boston of about sixty tons of critical military equipment and ammunition across steep mountains and lakes. The inconceivable difficulties they encountered, as they faced bitter cold and winds, included one of the largest cannons breaking through the ice on a lake and sinking to the bottom, taking them a day to retrieve. They reached Boston on January 25, 1776, having lost not a single gun. In March 1776 the guns of Ticonderoga were strategi-

cally placed on the Heights of Dorchester overlooking Boston. The Patriots now had the clear advantage, the stalemate at Boston was broken, and the mighty British military, incredibly, had no choice but to retreat. "The story of the expedition would be told and retold for weeks within the army and for years to come."[11]

Escape from Brooklyn. In August 1776, after the Battle of Long Island, George Washington's rain-soaked army was trapped with the East River at their backs—a river that was under mounting threat of coming under the command of the British fleet. As night fell and Washington began the nerve-wracking process of evacuating his troops, an unexpected dense fog rolled in, allowing providential cover for a silent and safe retreat. British forces awoke to an empty battlefield. "In a single night, 9,000 troops, plus equipment and horses, were transported across a mile of turbulent water to New York, without the British ever knowing and without the loss of a single life."[12]

Crossing the Delaware. By December 1776, "Washington recognized that the entire movement for American independence was on the verge of extinction and might very well expire on its own over the winter."[13] The weather having cleared just enough, he made a daring Christmas night crossing of the icy Delaware River and surprised the merce-

nary Hessians whose response reminds us of some of the Old Testament battle accounts of a confused enemy: "The whole place was in an uproar. Some of the enemy made a wild and undirected fire from the windows of their quarters. Others rushed forth in disorder, and attempted to form in the main street, while dragoons hastily mounted, and galloping about, added to the confusion."[14] "Nothing saved [Washington] but the utter panic of the enemy, their want of proper alarm places, and their exaggerated idea of his forces"[15]—they thought him to have anywhere between 6,000 and 15,000 troops when he had just 2,400. The American cause had been revitalized at a critical moment.

Discovery of Benedict Arnold's treason. In September 1780, British Major John André, carrying documents revealing Arnold's plan to surrender West Point, was captured by American militiamen he mistook for Loyalists.

Washington later wrote, "In no instance since the commencement of the War has the interposition of Providence appeared more conspicuous than in the rescue of the Post and Garrison of West Point from Arnold's villainous perfidy. . . . A combination of extraordinary circumstances."[16] He noted elsewhere, "Such an event must have given the American cause a deadly wound if not a fatal stab."[17]

That a significant number of men who served in the patriot forces were taught to believe in the providence of God is reinforced by the comment of Levi Preston, who had served as a "Minute Man" in the Massachusetts militia in 1775 at age 24. In 1842, as a 91-year-old Revolutionary War veteran, he was sought out for an interview. When his interviewer asked him if he had been motivated to join the fight for independence by "reading Harrington or Sidney and Locke about the eternal principles of liberty," he is said to have modestly responded, "Never heard of 'em. We read only the Bible, the Catechism, Watts's Psalms and Hymns, and the Almanack."[18]

Belief in the providence of God does not make one a child of God, any more than Pharaoh's acknowledgment of God's mighty works made him such. Yet, if even unbelievers are oftentimes compelled to recognize the providential hand of God working behind the scenes, how much more should believers respond with hearts overflowing in praise, gratitude, and worship.

Dan Unruh pastors Westside Baptist Church in Greeley, Colorado.

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[1] Layton Talbert, *Not By Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God* (BJU Press, 2001), 36.

[2] https://patriotpost.us/quotes (accessed May 22, 2026).

[3] Bob Gingrich, *The Role of Providence in the Founding of America: Seventy-Six Events that Helped to Shape the United States* (Westwood, 2022), 21.

[4] Gingrich, 20.

[5] Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th-Century Revival* (Banner of Truth, 1980), 497, footnote.

[6] Dallimore, 532–33.

[7] Rod Gragg, *By the Hand of Providence: How Faith Shaped the American Revolution* (Howard, 2011), 20–21.

[8] Gragg, 17.

[9] Gragg, 24.

[10] Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (Vintage, 2004), 23.

[11] David McCullough, *1776* (Simon & Schuster, 2005), 82.

[12] McCullough, illustration note facing p. 53.

[13] Ellis, 97.

[14] Washington Irving, *George Washington* (New York, 1860), 2:453.

[15] Irving, 2:456.

[16] Mark A. Beliles and Stephen K. McDowell, *America's Providential History* (Providence Foundation, 1989), 163–64.

[17] Beliles and McDowell, 164.

[18] Gragg, 3–4.

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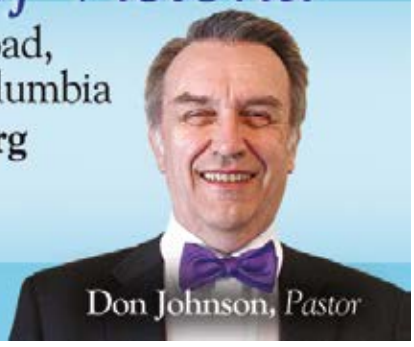
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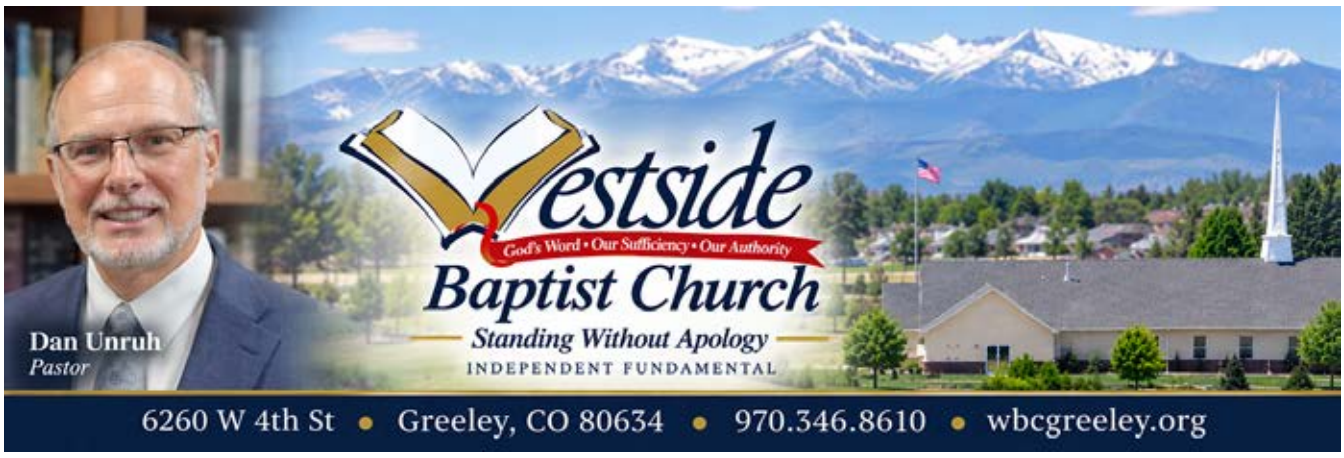
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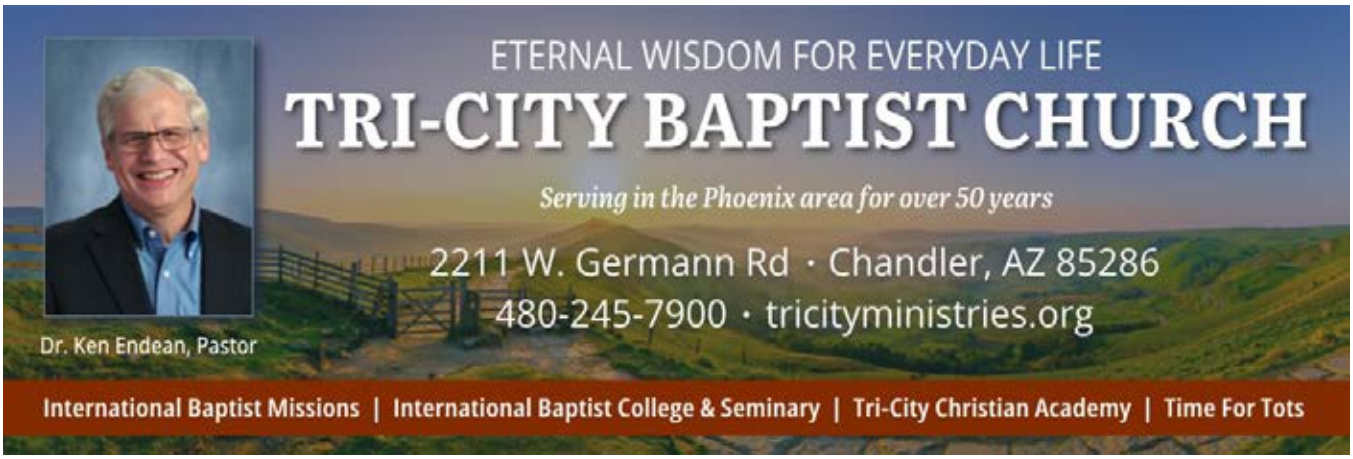
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Westside Baptist Church
6260 W 4th St.
Greeley, CO 80634
Coordinator: Dan Unruh

March 8–9, 2027
Northwest Regional Fellowship
Highland Hills Community Church
901 S. Pearl St.
Tacoma, WA 98465
Host Pastor: Matt Poole
Coordinator: Greg Kaminski

March 15–16, 2027
California Regional Fellowship
First Baptist Church of Pinole
16550 San Pablo Ave.
San Pablo, CA 94806
Host Pastor: Kris Solberg
Coordinator: Dan Pelletier

March 15–17, 2027
South Regional Fellowship
Good News Baptist Church
3252 Taylor Rd.
Chesapeake, VA 23321
Host Pastor: Mike Ascher
Coordinator: Tony Facenda

April 9, 2027
New Mexico Regional Fellowship
Location: TBA
Coordinator: Dan Mauldin

April 26–27, 2027
Mid-West Regional Fellowship
Heartland Baptist Church
13680 Hinton Mill Rd.
Marysville, OH 43040
Coordinator: Bob Condict

May 17–18, 2027
Wyoming Regional Fellowship
Grace Baptist Church
905 Pine Ave.
Kemmerer, WY 83101
Host Pastor: Richard Hartman
Coordinator: Jay Sprecher

September 14, 2027
New York City Regional Fellowship
Bethel Baptist Fellowship
2304 Voorhies Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11235
Host Pastor: Jim Bickel
Coordinator: Matt Recker

October 12–14, 2027
FBFI Annual Fellowship
MBU / Calvary Baptist Church
Watertown, WI 53094
Host: David Anderson

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Mary: Enduring Shame for the Cause of Christ
Kevin Schaal | December 21, 2025

> Pain? Sure. Hardship? Yes. Poverty? OK. Hard work? Count me in. Death? That one is very hard, but yes.
>
> Honor, duty.
>
> We value these things highly. Civil War commanders sent rows of young men to near certain death with the words "What will your family think of you if you run?!" . . .One of the most remarkable statements made by any human being is found in Luke 1:38 [NKJV]:
>
> "Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her."

Link: https://proclaimanddefend.org/2025/12/21/mary-enduring-shame-for-the-cause-of-christ/

A House of Prayer or a Den of Thieves?
Ben Hicks | November 6, 2025

> Jesus was a masterful teacher. One of the ways He demonstrated His skill as a teacher was through His ability to say a whole lot with just a few words. Novice speakers often think that the more they talk the more likely they are to change people's minds. Sometimes that method works, but often saying a little can say a whole lot. No one exemplified this principle better than Jesus.
>
> One example of Jesus' concise yet powerful preaching occurred when Jesus overthrew the tables in the temple.

Link: https://proclaimanddefend.org/2025/11/06/a-house-of-prayer-or-a-den-of-thieves/

The Law of the Firstborn: Failure
Don Johnson | December 19, 2023

> In the Ancient Near East, the law of primogeniture (the rights of the firstborn) was a stabilizing influence in society. Usually firstborn sons

> received the larger portion of the inheritance, and if a throne was involved, became the next king. Not all ancient societies operated this way—the Romans famously did not automatically follow family lines in inheritance, which often resulted in civil wars when an emperor passed from the scene. But in Israel, and ancient lands of the near east, primogeniture contributed to stability. . . .
>
> Genesis 5 is the genealogy of Adam. It generally lists (we assume) firstborn sons as we go from father to son, all the way from Adam to Noah. Yet the list begins with a surprising aberration. Who is listed as Adam's firstborn?
>
> Seth.

Link: https://proclaimanddefend.org/2023/12/19/the-law-of-the-firstborn-failure/

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Regional Reports

MID-ATLANTIC REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Kent Ramler,
Regional Coordinator

We enjoyed a great time of teaching and fellowship at the 2026 Westminster Fellowship in Westminster, Maryland, on August 7. Guest speaker Dr. Billy Gotcher spoke on church revitalization and building a discipleship culture. About twenty pastors and teachers from the local area came and participated in the event. There was an additional discussion on church planting in the state of Maryland with the pastors present at the meeting. Other pastors in the state of Maryland are encouraged to reach out to the church to be invited to future meetings of this fellowship.



NEW YORK CITY REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Matt Recker, Regional Coordinator

We had a wonderful day of fellowship and encouragement with pastors, their wives, and members of their churches on Tuesday, September 15, as we gathered with Pastor Jim and Nancy Bickel at Bethel Baptist Fellowship. Jim and Nancy were gracious hosts, welcoming everyone and providing a delicious continental breakfast. We were especially thankful to have had our best attendance ever!

Our guest speakers were Dr. Chuck and Linda Phelps, and we were extremely grateful that they were able to come. Dr. Phelps spoke to the combined group from 2 Corinthians 4 on "Motivations to Ministers." His message challenged and encouraged us to keep our focus on three powerful truths from this great Pauline passage: the truth that compels us, the treasure within us, and the triumph that awaits



us. It was a timely reminder of why we serve the Lord and why we must remain faithful in ministry, even in difficult days. During the second workshop session, During the second workshop session, Dr. Phelps gave an extremely timely and helpful presentation on the important subject of replacement theology. He clearly explained its definition, origins, various positions, and, most importantly, how to refute this false approach to interpreting God's Word.

Linda Phelps ministered to the ladies in a special women's workshop entitled "I Didn't Expect Things to Turn Out This Way." Her session was a blessing and encouragement to the ladies as she shared biblical truth for navigating the unexpected circumstances of life.

We were also blessed by a testimony from Missionary Scott Whiting, who is currently on







deputation to Rwanda through BIMI. Those involved in full-time ministry had an opportunity to share about what God is doing in their local churches, providing another meaningful time of encouragement and fellowship. Everyone in attendance also received a free copy of *FrontLine* magazine.

Following the preaching and workshops, Heritage Baptist Church of NYC provided and served a delicious Italian lunch. Around the tables, pastors, wives, missionaries, and church members enjoyed wonderful fellowship and shared words of encouragement with one another. It was a special day of Bible teaching, ministry encouragement, and Christian fellowship. We are grateful to the Lord for bringing so many together and for the opportunity to encourage one another to remain faithful in serving Christ.

NEW MEXICO REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Dan Mauldin, Regional Coordinator

The fall meeting of the New Mexico Regional Fellowship met on Friday, September 18, at Manzano Baptist Church. We endured unusually heavy rains and flooding to meet centrally in Albuquerque. I drove 180 miles to be at the meeting, and others drove just as far or farther. A real blessing was having a new pastor to our area from Las Cruces attend the meeting and bring two of his deacons. Our numbers were small with eight men in attendance, but the fellowship was sweet. The July/August *FrontLine* magazine issue, "Built to Grow: Understanding and Advancing the Mission of the Church," directed our discussion. Several of the pastors expressed their appreciation for the meeting. We will meet again on April 9, 2027.

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

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Heart to Heart

Rachel Mayes Allen

Your Suffering Is Not an Escape Room

Once the door locks, the ticking countdown begins. You search frantically for any clues, any resources to unravel the puzzle surrounding you. You have one objective: to get out as quickly as you can. If you've ever faced an escape room, you remember how even a manufactured crisis can bring about a very real surge of adrenaline, a primal drive for self-preservation that roars to life whenever you feel threatened. However trivial or substantial your suffering may be, those same thoughts you had in that escape room flood your mind the moment you find yourself in distress: Get out. Now. This impulse may be innate, but it is not always helpful, especially when your power to ease your own suffering is limit-

ed. Rather than viewing suffering as an escape room from which to break free, Christians can draw understanding and comfort from the Bible's symbol of suffering: the wilderness.

It's only natural to desire a way out of suffering and to expend great effort toward that goal. In some instances, this may be the wise and right approach. Proverbs warns readers that a prudent person avoids danger; only the simple heads toward it (Prov. 27:12). Though some dangers are unavoidable, that does not make them unconquerable. Amidst a difficult situation that is within your power to change (for example, an unpleasant employment condition or negative relationship dynamic), it is appropriate to take steps toward alleviating the difficulty. You do not need to be a victim of circumstance when circumstances can be improved through your God-given wisdom and agency.

There are plenty of situations in life, however, when no amount of gumption can get you out—the loss, the attack, the diagnosis, the betrayal, the fill-in-the-blank of the worst thing that has ever happened to you and that you are powerless to stop. In these moments when you most desperately desire escape, relief often proves most elusive. Perhaps you turn then to God, asking Him to make it stop. Here, too,

your longing to escape may manifest, though in more subtle ways you might never vocalize. Maybe if I say the right thing when a bad situation starts, it won't last as long. Maybe if I identify some hidden sin contributing to my suffering, it will stop. Maybe if I learn some lesson and minister to somebody else, then my own pain will end. But when the difficulty drags on, a sense of disappointment with God only compounds the existing hurt. Your own virtue, cleverness, and effort may be useful in solving puzzles, but they are futile in evading suffering.

In Scripture, we see a different portrayal of suffering—it is the wilderness beyond Eden. There, the Israelites wander forty years, David hides from Saul, and Jesus faces temptation. Suffering is a natural feature of the landscape within a fallen world, and we can be certain of experiencing it (John 16:33). We may end up in the wilderness as a consequence of either our own sin or the sins of others, or it may simply be the next stop along life's wending path. It is a place we will wander, a place we may not soon leave. Above all, it is a place where God meets us, no matter the reason we find ourselves there. For Jesus, the wilderness tested His messianic identity; for the Israelites, their failure to follow God's leading trapped them in it. David, chased there by Saul,

spent his wilderness years maturing into the kingly role to which God had called him, deepening his walk with God, and penning many beautiful psalms that reflect God's tender care within this place of suffering. One such composition, Psalm 63, describes the wilderness as "a dry and thirsty land where there is no water" (v. 1, NKJV) where David has been driven by enemies who seek his destruction (v. 9). Yet he focuses not on these adversities but on God's presence within them. Just as David seeks water to quench his physical thirst, he seeks God to satisfy his spiritual thirst (vv. 1, 5). There in the wilderness he rejoices in God's power, glory, steadfast love, and guidance, which surpass the gift of life itself (vv. 2–3, 7). Though circumstances are dire, he does not despair. God has not abandoned him.

God's own testimony elsewhere confirms this truth. He tells Israel He knows their wilderness wanderings and has been with them in each moment—forty years' worth of moments (Deut. 2:7)! His understanding of our suffering, though layered with divine insight that is often denied to us in this life, is as personal and experiential as our own because He has chosen to be present with us in the midst of it. Even in the wilderness His goodness is manifest: in the streams of water that nourish us, in the fire and

cloud that guide us, in the daily bread that sustains us, in the burning bushes that speak to our souls of who God is.

None of us escapes suffering. We will each wander a wilderness of our own, whether for a season or for a lifetime. But even in these desert places, we can take heart. The God who is with us in the wilderness is leading us through it, all the way to the end of the journey: the house of God, in which we will dwell forever.



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, going on walks with her dogs, and sharing a good cup of tea with loved ones. Find more of her writing at https://mrsallenmakes.wixsite.com/mrsallenmakes.

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At A Glance

Layton Talbert

Divine Glory in Human Flesh

Because God created us in His own image, we get *some* idea of what God is like by looking at ourselves. But we are physical, finite, and fallen beings. God is (as the Westminster Shorter Catechism captures it) "a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." That statement, however, is designed to answer a very specific question: *What* is God? A related but slightly different question is, What is God *like*? The Westminster statement begins to answer that toward the end; it is a good statement, but not exactly a targeted answer to my second question, and certainly not a comprehensive one. What would God *look* and *act* and *be* like if He could, by some miraculous transformation, actually become a human—like us, so that we could see Him, watch Him, listen to Him, eat with Him, and even touch Him? That question is answered in the incarnation. Before I go there, though, I want to explore the previous question a bit more directly. What is God *like*?

EXODUS 34: THE PREMIER EXPRESSION OF GOD'S GLORY

Exodus 34 is a standout passage for defining the character of God for three reasons: (1) It is a condensed catalog of multiple aspects of God's character. (2) It is perhaps the single most defining passage for describing what God is like, since it is echoed over and over throughout the Old Testament in a surprising number of passages and situations. (3) It comes directly from the mouth of God Himself, not merely in the sense that it is in the Bible and therefore God's Word, but because God Himself is telling Moses what He is like—just because Moses asked.

The incident itself is mesmerizing, but it's the context that makes it so startlingly unexpected. God had already miraculously provided water for the nation (Exod. 17), and was delivering manna for them six days a week (Exod. 16). Once they arrived at Sinai (Exod. 19), God manifested His presence with smoke and fire and rumbling thunder and blaring angelic trumpets. Terrified by this display of God's holy presence, Israel swears—three times!—that they will do *whatever* the Lord commands them (Exod. 19:8; 24:3, 7). God then calls Moses up onto the mount to receive more of His laws. Less than six weeks later (Exod. 32), Moses descends to find the laws God had

already given being shattered with abandon by the very people who had sworn that they would do everything God said. When God threatens to destroy the entire nation, Moses intercedes for them and God withdraws His threat.

That's the setting for Moses' astonishing request: "I pray you, show me Your **glory**" (Exod. 33:18, NASB). Wouldn't you say he had already seen a good bit of God's glory—the plagues in Egypt, the Red Sea, the smoke and fire and thunder and trumpets, the law, and six weeks alone with God on the mountain? The only thing more astonishing than Moses' request is God's reply: "I Myself will make all my **goodness** pass before you." Moses asks to see God's **glory** and God agrees to show Moses His **goodness**. Not *instead*. God is not proposing a substitute for Moses' request; He is fulfilling it. In the wake of all that has happened over the previous few months, God wants to make this point: His **glory** is His *goodness*; His **goodness** is His *glory*. But what, exactly, does that look like? Moses will not see it, "for no man can see Me and live" (Exod. 32:20–23, NASB); but he will hear it.

The next morning (Exod. 34:2) God "descended" on Mount Sinai "and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD" (v. 5). "Then the LORD passed by

in front of him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, **compassionate** and **gracious, slow to anger,** and **abounding in lovingkindness** and **truth, who keeps lovingkindness** for thousands, **who forgives** iniquity, transgression and sin . . ." (vv. 6–7, NASB).

Yes, God is holy and just, and "will by no means clear the guilty" (34:7). But when He proclaims His **glory** to Moses, listen to what God Himself puts first and emphasizes most: He is *compassionate*, *gracious*, *slow to anger*. He is not just lovingly loyal [*chesed*], but *abounding in loving loyalty*. He is not just trustworthy, but *abounding in truth* and therefore infinitely trustworthy. He *maintains His loyalty* to His covenant people, and He *forgives* iniquity and transgression and sin.

These are the divine character qualities that God forestages and displays most prominently as His glory. Again, His glory is His *goodness*; His goodness is His *glory*. These aspects of God's character become the bedrock confidence of those who know Him. This divine self-revelation is the fount from which His people will drink for centuries.

MAKING USE OF NUMBERS 34

Turn from Exodus 34 to Numbers 14, and you jump ahead about a year. Once again, Israel rebels, God threatens annihilation, Moses intercedes, and God relents. What's most intriguing, however, is that

Moses roots his intercession in what God revealed about Himself in Exodus 34:

> But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, "**The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.**" Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. (Num. 14:17–19, NASB)

The **psalmists** constantly fell back on God's self-revelation of His character in Exodus 34. I will cite only the verses where the psalmists clearly draw directly from Exodus 34; but if you examine the surrounding contexts you will see that they used this passage both to bolster the confidence of their petitions (Pss. 86:5, 15; 116:5) and to fuel their praises (Pss. 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 145:7–8).

Hezekiah relied on Exodus 34 when he appealed to the Assyrian-battered remnants of the northern kingdom to return to the Lord in Jerusalem and observe the Passover (2 Chr. 30:9). **Joel** called God's people to repentance by anchoring his appeal in

Exodus 34 (Joel 2:12–13). Its strangest echo comes from the mouth of **Jonah**, who actually complained that God would be the way He says He is in Exodus 34 even towards the pagans of Nineveh (Jon. 4:1–2).

Daniel appealed to Exodus 34 as the basis of his prayer for God to fulfill His prophetic promises through Jeremiah by bringing Judah back from their well-deserved captivity (Dan. 9:9). Finally, when Daniel's prayer was answered and Judah was back in the land, **Nehemiah** quoted Exodus 34 in rehearsing Judah's history of unfaithfulness and God's goodness in bringing them back from captivity in answer to Daniel's prayer:

> They refused to listen, and did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them; so they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt [*a direct reference to Numbers 14, when Moses interceded for Israel based on Exodus 34*]. But You are a God of **forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness**; and . . . You, in **Your great compassion**, did not forsake them in the wilderness . . . . However, You bore with them for many years, and admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, yet they would not give

ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in **Your great compassion** You did not make an end of them or forsake them, for **You are a gracious and compassionate God**. (Neh. 9:17–19, 30–31, NASB)

From the beginning of Israel's history in Exodus to Nehemiah at the other end of the Old Testament's chronological timeline, no other passage so distills the glory of God within the span of so short a space of direct divine speech as the consummate revelation of His goodness in Exodus 34:6–7. No other passage became such a mine of treasure from which God's people fueled their praise and worship, and extracted confidence in their darkest moments.

JOHN 1: THE INCARNATION OF GOD'S GLORY

To return to my earlier question, what *would* God look and act and be like if He could actually become a human like us, so that we could see Him, watch Him, listen to Him, eat with Him, and even touch Him. Probably the premier passage that answers that question is John 1. The opening of John's Gospel, of course, draws heavily on Genesis 1–2. Isolated parallels between John 1 and Genesis 1–2 may not seem

individually significant, but the aggregate of multiple parallels is impressive.

More surprising, however, are the links between John 1:14–18 and Exodus 33–34. Moses shows up in both Exodus (33:18; 34:1, 4, 8) and John (1:17). And inseparable from Moses is the law in both Exodus (34:1) and John (1:17).

Both passages are all about *seeing God*. The Exodus account highlights the importance of sight. Moses' request, "show me" (lit., *cause me to see*, Exod. 33:18) is answered, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live" (Exod. 33:20, 23, NASB); nevertheless, God continues, "you shall *see* My back, but My face shall *not be seen*" (Exod. 33:23, NASB). John, likewise, juxtaposes both the idea that "no man hath *seen* God at any time" (John 1:18) with the insistence that they "*saw*" the glory of God manifest in flesh (John 1:14).

More specifically, both passages are all about *seeing* God's **glory**. Moses requests, "Cause me to *see* your **glory**" (Exod. 33:18, literal), and God promises that Moses will *see* His **glory** from behind (33:22–23). John specifies that when the Word became flesh, "we *saw* His **glory**, **glory** as of the only begotten from the Father" (John 1:14, NASB).

What was the nature of the divine glory manifested to Moses? Among those attributes God forestaged as a manifestation of His glory, He included these: *gracious* and *abounding in truth* (Exod. 34:6). John likewise highlights that the Incarnate Word was "*full of grace* and *truth*" (John 1:14; cf. v. 17).

Having seen God's glory, Moses' immediate request was for His personal presence to be among His people: "O Lord, let my Lord, I pray thee, *go among us*" (Exod. 34:9). Similarly, writes John, the Word became flesh "and *dwelt among us*" (John 1:14).

John 1 identifies the Word with and as the Yahweh of Exodus 34. The Gospels go on to display in the life and ministry of Jesus every aspect of the divine character revealed to Moses. The incarnation of Jesus the Christ was a thirty-year demonstration in the flesh of the character of God revealed in Exodus 34:6–7. As Emmanuel (God with us) Jesus was—and is—"the Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin." And He, too, will by no means clear the guilty (John 5, 12; Rev. 20:12, 13).

In Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9). As "very God of very God," Jesus literally *embodies* every facet of God's glorious goodness displayed to Moses fourteen centuries earlier. That is worth celebrating this Christmas.

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



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Jim Tillotson

God Is Still at Work

It has been a very fruitful time of seeing people come to Christ. It began back in May during the week of graduation when I received a call from a man I had helped with a home maintenance issue. He called and said, "You're a religious guy, aren't you?" I told him, "I guess you could say that." He let me know that one of his military buddies had committed suicide. He had done a tour in Iraq. I asked if he wanted to get together, and he said yes.

We met at Culver's, and he said he had heard that if you kill someone you can't go to heaven. I took him to Romans 13:4, which states, "For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." After I got done explaining the passage to him and helping him see that the lawful use of lethal force in the military is not a sin, he proceeded to tell me about all the sins he had committed. I agreed with him that those things were

indeed sin. I asked if I could go through the plan of salvation with him, and he agreed.

Meanwhile, college students from Faith kept stopping by to greet me. After the third group, the man asked what I did at the college. I told him I was the president, and he was shocked. I asked what he thought I did, and he said he thought I was the maintenance guy. We both had a good laugh about that. After I got done explaining the plan of salvation, I asked if he wanted to do what he was being invited to do. He said yes. We went out to my truck, and he took off his hat, bowed his head, and prayed the sinner's prayer. After he got done praying, he looked up at me and said, "I feel so clean now." The changes taking place in his life are exciting to both of us.

I then had the privilege of speaking at three different teen camps throughout the summer. At all three camps, when the gospel was preached, there was an amazing response. Over thirty-five teenagers from all three camps said they got saved. And when I preached on moral purity, there was another huge response. Teens just came and talked to me non-stop during their free time. At one camp, a teen knocked on my cabin door at night and asked if he could talk to me. I asked how old he was, and he told me he was fourteen. He then proceeded to tell me he had

been having sex since he was thirteen, but he wanted to get right with God. I asked if he and his parents went to church regularly, and he said yes. I told him he would need to tell his parents and his girlfriend's parents, and he agreed to do that. As I talked to other teen camp speakers, I found that they had been seeing similar things as well.

God is definitely doing a work among young people. I have worked with them for years, and it seems to me that they have a genuine hunger for the things of God more now than in the past. It is an exciting time. I would encourage the reader to do something intentional with a teenager or college-age student. You might be surprised at how much they will open up.

I just got home from our church's Men's Steak and Corn Feed. It is an Iowa thing where the goal is to invite your unsaved coworkers and neighbors, eat corn on the cob and steak, and then have a speaker share the gospel. I asked my neighbor two doors down to go with me, and he agreed. Afterward, we had a long conversation in his driveway. He had always thought that if he were a good person, he would get to go to heaven. I went through the plan of salvation, and he agreed with it. He understands it now, and he told me he wants to become a Christian,

but he wants to do it with his wife. I really think that by the time I write my next article, I will be able to share that he has also trusted in Christ as his Savior.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that God still loves to seek and to save those who are lost. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. May we continue to take the Word to the World. It's the only chance a lost person will have.

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

Bald Tires In Church Parking Lots

After church one Sunday, you walk across the parking lot and notice a sedan with the front tires worn nearly smooth. You wonder who drove it. A young family? A widow? Someone choosing between groceries and car repairs? Most of us have walked past situations like that without realizing someone in our own church family may be carrying a burden we could help bear.

Generous, benevolent Christian families notice things like this. As you approach the end of 2026, you will have opportunities to give that are planned (for example, *Giving Tuesday*, December 1; your church Christmas or year-end collections). You may also have unforeseen calls to help others. And 2027 will offer countless openings to respond to the needs of

ministries and people—maybe a fellow church member desperately needing two new tires.

Giving doesn't happen by accident. Preachers and teachers communicate the commands of Scripture. Church leaders encourage and facilitate donations. Generous families list contributions first on their budgets. These factors prepare your church congregation and your family to identify and meet needs.

The emergencies and hardships of life don't take Thanksgiving or Christmas breaks. You and your church will see and hear accounts of financial setbacks: job layoffs, storm damage, and emergency travel. God gives His children hearts of compassion to respond. Both your church and your own family must prepare to give, be alert to opportunities to bless others, and give with wisdom.

PREPARE BEFORE THE NEED APPEARS

You prepare to give by first making generosity a priority. You can prepare to give both as a member of your church and as a family unit.

Local church benevolence. Paul commanded the Corinthians "upon the first day of the week [to] let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him" (1 Cor. 16:2). This instruction is properly applied to the public gatherings of the

local church. A New Testament church benevolently meets the financial needs of families in the body and in the community. Some churches call this their Others' Fund. Prayerfully contribute to this collective endeavor.

Family benevolence. But have you considered establishing your own *family* Others' Fund? Paul knew that some of the individual members in churches under Timothy's leadership would be "rich in this world." The young preacher was charged to warn them not to "trust in uncertain riches." They were to "be rich in good works, ready to distribute" (1 Tim. 6:17–18). They could not turn a blind eye to the financial needs of others by offering sympathy but no real help (James 2:15–16).

Start small, maybe with only a few dollars in your monthly budget. Notice small needs—the family bringing a ten-dollar bill into the gas station and asking that it be applied to the pump where they parked. Or the young person declining to go bowling with your church youth group, perhaps because of money. Be discreet. Be respectful. But do it.

In time, you will desire to do more, perhaps setting aside a percent or two of your paychecks. Over a year this could lead to a thousand dollars or more in joyful generosity. Consider setting up a dedicated

envelope or account for this fund—even twenty dollars a month adds up, and having it already set aside means you're ready the moment a need appears. Soon you'll discover that even a modest reserve allows you to meet real needs—groceries for a struggling family, an overdue utility bill, a broken appliance, or perhaps even a set of tires.

BE ALERT TO NEEDS

Your family's giving matters, but it works alongside your church's giving, not in place of it. Family benevolence should not divert support from funds your local church needs. Paul *commanded* the Corinthians to give so that God's servants could be liberally compensated for their spiritual service: "Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14). He advised Timothy that those who rule well laboring "in the word and doctrine" were "worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17).

But giving toward benevolence was not compulsory. Addressing the benevolent collection for Christians in Jerusalem, Paul *challenged* the believers to "sow bountifully" but he also gave this guidance: "Every man according as he purposeth in his

heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:6–7).

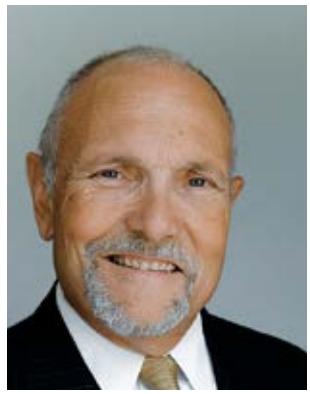
The Scriptures *command* every believer to give to God's work and His workers. But sharing in the needs of others seems to be a matter of *opportunity*. The rich were particularly challenged, but we all must be alert to give in accordance with our ability.

Jesus told the story of the King who commended the alert giver who noticed a stranger, hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, and enslaved: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). That widow with the worn tires in the parking lot may be exactly the "least of these" Jesus had in mind.

GIVE WITH WISDOM

Give with humility and gratitude for God's provision that enables you to do so. Understand that sometimes a need is not for money, but for Christian love and encouragement.

The next time you leave church, slow down before you drive away. Look around the parking lot. The greatest needs in your community may not be across the world—they may be parked only a few spaces away. God often answers someone's prayer by guiding another believer to prepare, to notice, and to give.



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.



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Chaplain's Report

DO YOU KNOW OUR FBFI CHAPLAINS?

The FBFI chaplaincy is a very diverse group of individuals. Some are active-duty military chaplains serving in the uniformed services: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and Civil Air Patrol. Some serve in various components of these services: Army National Guard/Reserves, Navy Reserves, Air Force Reserves/Air National Guard, Coast Guard Auxiliary, and some in state militias or the state guard. Several FBFI Chaplains minister to the policemen and firemen in their cities and local communities. Some serve in hospitals, in hospices, in PTSD counseling ministries, in scouting organizations, and even in the Secret Service.

Your prayers can make a difference in their ministry! Please pray for our chaplains who are serving around the world in our military and local community.

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CH (MAJ) Daniel Roland, Camp Darby, Italy
CH (CPT) Chad Fitts, Fort Benning, GA
CH (CPT) Seth Weaver, Joint Base, Lewis-McCord, WA
CH (CPT) Jonathan Yarbrough, Fort Bragg, NC

Navy

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LCDR Anthony Pelc, CHC, transitioning to SC
LT Chris Wagner, CHC, San Antonio, TX

Air Force

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Ch, Capt Chris Pitts, RAF Mildenhall, England
Ch, Capt Jeffrey Rybold, Kadena AFB, Japan

RESERVE

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CH (MAJ) Matthew Myers, Fort Sheridan, IL
CH (MAJ) Matt Sanders, Fort Jackson, SC
CH (MAJ) Christian Torres, transitioning to PR
CH (CPT) Jeremy Fisher, (deployed)
CH (CPT) Vincent Lieb, Camp Shelby, MS

Navy

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LT Brent Baughman, CHC, Chattanooga, TN

Air Force

Ch, Maj Daniel Llorente, Luke AFB, AZ

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CH (MAJ) Mark Hanson, Watertown, WI
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CH (MAJ) Drew Paul, Fort Stewart, GA
CH (CPT) Casey Stephens, Indiana Guard Reserve
CH (CPT) Trent Wilson, Lincoln, NE
CH (1LT) Collin Bond, Muncie, IN
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1LT K.C. Hansen, Buckeye, AZ (transitioning)
1LT Daniel Toweh, Greenville, SC
1LT Adam Yates, Clio, MI

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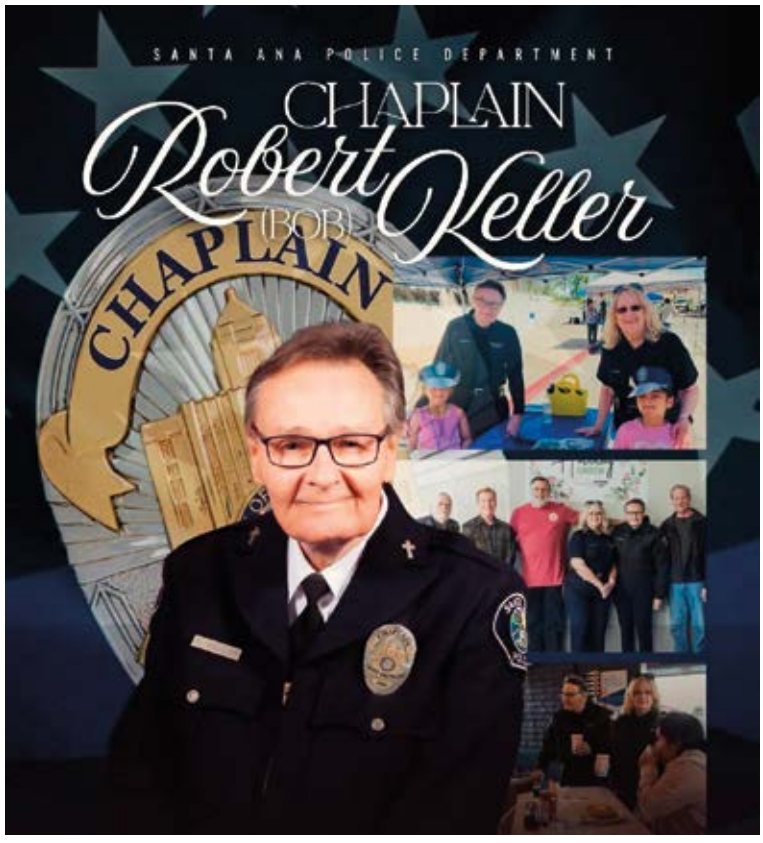
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A TRIBUTE TO CHAPLAIN ROBERT KELLER

The FBFI family and friends would like to extend a word of gratitude and tribute to one of our devoted local community chaplains who passed away September 22, 2026. Robert (Bob) Eugene Keller was born August 4, 1950. He was saved at the age of 17 and later went to Bible college to pursue the ministry. Bob and his wife Jane married in July 1971 and served



together in various ministries since that time. Of specific note, he and Jane ministered as police chaplains together in Pomona, California, beginning in 2002 and later moved to the Santa Ana Police Department in 2019. Bob was active and ministering to the department up until his passing. Bob and Jane have been representatives for "Freedom Flyer" ministries and later started "IN PURSUIT! Ministries" in 2004. CH Joe Willis recalls, "I had the opportunity to visit Bob and Jane back in March of 2023. They were both so excited to give me the grand tour of the Santa Ana Police Department where they serve. The personnel in every department that we visited, including the chief of police himself, had nothing but the highest praise for the work Bob and Jane faithfully did in the police department." Bob was a faithful husband, father, Air Force veteran, chaplain, and mostly a Servant of God for many decades. Bob will be greatly missed. "Pro Deo et Patria—For God and Country."

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