

Theology for Life

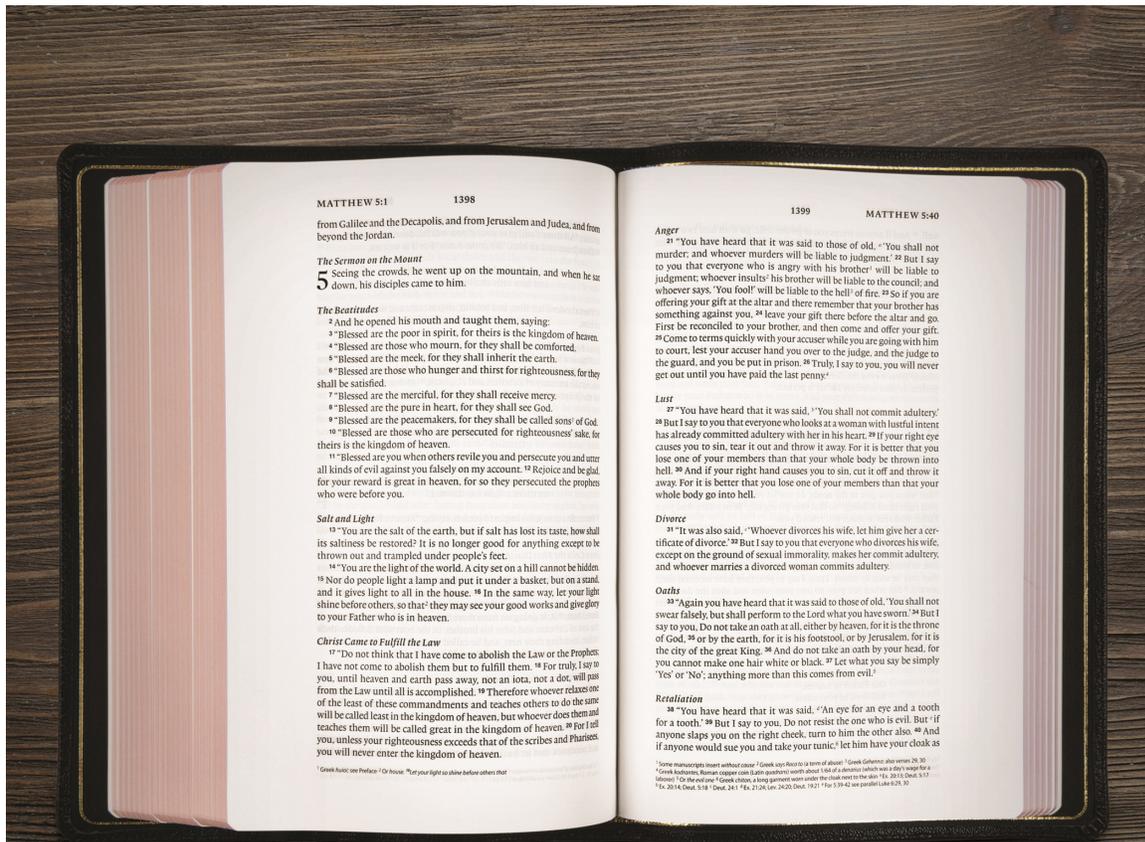
Volume 8 | Issue 4 | Winter 2021

KNOWING JESUS

The
HOPE
Of the Ages

Inside this Issue...

- **Nasty Nazareth: How Jesus' Hometown Had a Bad Rap**
- **Why Jesus Cannot Be One Truth Among Many**
- **Does God Forget Our Sins?**

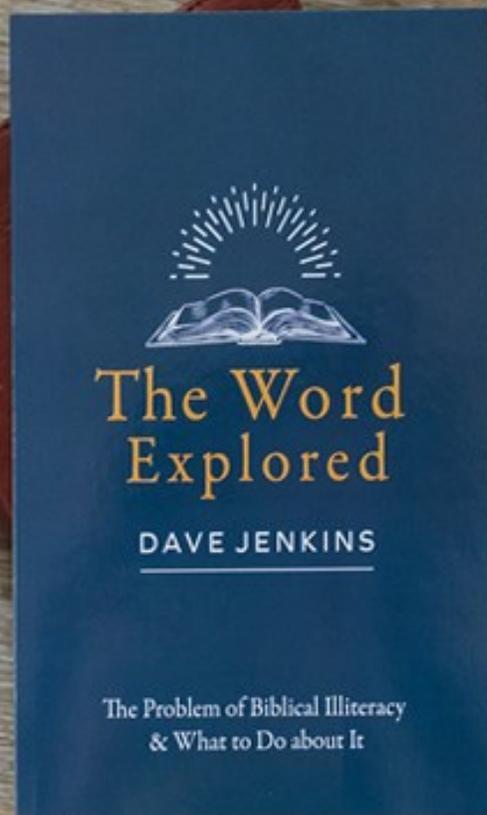


ESV Preaching Bible

A Bible for preachers
created with input from preachers.

The *ESV Preaching Bible* features highly readable 10-point type in a single-column format, enlarged and bolded verse numbers, extra-wide margins, high-quality paper, and a durable Smyth-sewn binding—befitting a preacher's most valuable tool.

Grow in your relationship with God!



*The Word Explored:
The Problem of
Biblical Illiteracy &
What to Do about It*
is an easy-to-read,
biblically-based work
for lay-people and
pastors alike.



hesedandemet.com

Table of Contents

Editor's Corner By Dave Jenkins	Page 6
Setting the Stage for the First Millennium By R.C. Sproul	Page 8
Does Scripture Teach That Jesus is Fully God? By Greg Lanier	Page 12
Truly God, Truly Man: The Council of Chalcedon By Nicholas Needham	Page 18
Saint Nicholas and the Origins of Santa Claus By Stephen Nichols	Page 24
Why Jesus Cannot Be One Among Many By Rebecca McLaughlin	Page 28
Three Questions About Christ's Sinlessness By Robert Letham	Page 32
What the Atonement Means for You By Stephen Wellum	Page 36

Table of Contents (Continued)

10 Things You Should Know About Justification by Faith By Kevin McFadden	Page 42
Do the Narratives of Jesus' Birth Contradict Each Other? By Dave Jenkins	Page 50
How Was There Peace on Earth at Jesus' Birth? By Dave Jenkins	Page 56
Nasty Nazareth: Why Jesus' Hometown Had a Bad Rap By Dave Jenkins	Page 61
Does God Forget Our Sins? By Dave Jenkins	Page 66
Recommended Reading on the Person and Work of Jesus By Dave Jenkins	Page 71
About the Authors	Page 74

Editor's Corner

EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Dave Jenkins

CONTENT EDITOR

Sarah Jenkins

DESIGN DIRECTOR

Sarah Jenkins

ADVERTISING

To advertise in Theology for Life Magazine, email dave@servantsofgrace.org.

COPYRIGHT ©

Theology for Life Magazine grants permission for any original article to be quoted, provided Theology for Life is cited as the source. For use of an entire article, permission must be granted.

Please contact dave@servantsofgrace.org.

Questions and discussions about the person and work of the Lord Jesus abound today, along with the variety of views about who the Lord Jesus is and what He has done in His finished and sufficient work. One example of this comes from the State of Theology conducted by Ligonier Ministries in conjunction with Life-way Research. In their research, they asked people about who Jesus is and what He has done, and what's unique about the person and work of Jesus. Two statistics stood out as I recently reread this study from 2020 on the issue of whether Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God. Thirty percent disagree with the statement, and sixty-six percent agree. Another issue was raised whether God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Forty-two percent agree with this statement, and the rest reject it.

These two statistics reveal that Christians have real questions about who Jesus is and what He has done. The mixing of religions with Christianity is called syncretism, and Jesus rejects it in John 14:6 when He states He is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life". Jesus is not one among many options, paths, or avenues. He is the *only* way to God. Theologians call this the exclusivist restricted view, meaning that salvation is restricted and exclusive for those who repent and believe in Christ alone. The opposing view is inclusivism, which states that everyone can be saved no matter what our religious beliefs. Biblical Christianity rejects inclusivism because Jesus teaches that He is the *only way* to God, and it is only by believing and trusting Him can one be saved.

Over the past ten years, we've continued to see issues along the lines of the person and work of Jesus. Some prominent teachers teach that Jesus' death in

our place and for our sin is cosmic child abuse (or worse). The statistics show us doctrinal and theological slide away from biblical orthodoxy. The rate of rejection of orthodoxy is continuing. Rather than grounding themselves in the Word of God, many people are sliding away into a feelings-based faith. So, they feel Jesus isn't truly real or isn't the Truth and didn't come to do what He did. Even so, the truth still stands that Jesus is the centerpiece of all of history and creation.

Jesus Himself claimed deity, not only in His performing miracles, but directly saying, "*I Am*" seven times in John's Gospel. For Jesus to say, "I Am" takes Bible readers back to Exodus 3:14, where the Lord tells Moses, "I AM." We have one Lord, who is eternally self-existing and sufficient in and of Himself. We need to understand this because, without it, we have no Lord. With no Lord, we have no Savior, who came under the sentence of death to pay for our sins in our place and rise again.

What's most unique and what sets Jesus apart from the world's religious leaders (Buddha, Mohammad, Joseph Smith, etc.) is that they are all dead and gone—still in the grave. None of the world's religious leaders rose again from the dead after claiming to be God and doing the work of God. Consider with me for a moment: if the Jewish religious leaders or Roman government officials could find the body of Jesus, wouldn't they have done so? Don't you think they were searching for the body to silence the early Christians? They couldn't find Jesus' body because He wasn't there in the tomb (or anywhere else on earth). He was resurrected on the third day and ascended to the Father's Right hand, where He is our Mediator, Intercessor, and Priest. That is why they couldn't find the body of Jesus. But this also demonstrates that Jesus is who He says He is, and why—over and over again, as people have grappled with Jesus' teaching and the history surrounding His life, death, and resurrection from Scripture and other historical sources—they have put their trust in Jesus.

In this issue of *Theology for Life*, we aim to help you understand that the Bible and church history have good questions and answers to the issues you face. Jesus is not a distant and dead Savior. The Bible is not a book of fairytales and myths. So, join us as we look at a variety of issues and questions people ask about the person and work of Jesus, both from Scripture and church history. Along the way in your reading of this issue, I pray that your faith in Christ is strengthened, and you are equipped to proclaim the glories of Christ's finished and sufficient work for God's glory.

In Christ Alone,

Dave Jenkins, Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*

Setting the Stage for the First Millennium

By R.C. Sproul



Volumes have been written giving detailed analyses of the extraordinary things that occurred in the first thousand years of Church history, events that influenced everything that came after them. In this brief overview, I'm going to look at five dimensions of activity that had monumental

impact for the future history of Christianity.

The first such matter was the rise of the so-called “mono-episcopacy”. By the end of the first century, it was seen that the bishop of Rome had grown exceedingly more influential than other bishops of that

period. Within the next century or so, the authority and power of the bishop of Rome was consolidated for all future history of the Roman Catholic Church. The singular authority that became located in the bishop of Rome gave the Church a unifying base. The influence of the pope in the first thousand years of the Church is almost impossible to measure.

In that light, we see the second major impact come to the fore—the innovations brought to Christianity by perhaps the most important pope of the first millennium: Gregory the Great. In his activities he consolidated the power vested in the sacraments of the Church and spawned the vast sacerdotal system (priests through ordination receiving the ability to act as mediators of God's grace to man through the sacraments) with which all future Catholicism would be associated.

A third element that had great influence on the future of Christianity was the rise of the monastic movement. Beginning with the extreme asceticism of people such as Anthony of the Desert (ca. 251–356 A.D.), this radical brand of self-denial became institutionalized with the rise of various monastic orders, most of which exist to this day. These orders include the Benedictines, the Augustinians, the Franciscans, and others that date back several centuries.

Perhaps most important in the first thousand years were the ecumenical councils. Of the several ecumenical councils, clearly the two most important were those that were convened in the fourth and in the fifth centuries. The fourth century saw the convening of the Council of Nicaea and the production of the historic Nicene Creed. Here the church gave its definition of the deity of Christ over against the heretic Arius, who argued that, though Jesus was the first creature created by God and in that sense the firstborn of God, He nevertheless remained a *creature* and so was not to be worshiped as the second person of the Trinity.

The tension that was provoked by the Arian controversy and the years of deliberation and discussion that ensued finally culminated in the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. In that council the full deity of Christ was affirmed, and Christ, the divine Logos, the second person of the Trinity,

was declared to be co-essential and co-eternal with the Father. This formula gave the Church a way to distinguish among the persons of the Godhead, while at the same time attributing a singular divine essence to the three. The antitrinitarian Christology of Arius saw the beginning of its defeat with this ecumenical council.

The fifth century saw the convening of perhaps the most important Christological council in all of Church history at Chalcedon in 451 A.D. Here orthodox Christianity had to fight a battle on two fronts.

On the one hand was the opposition to the orthodox view of the nature of Christ in His incarnation by Eutyches. Eutyches was a Monophysite — he declared that Jesus had only one nature. This nature was called a single “theanthropic nature”, meaning a divinely human nature or a humanly divine nature. This position—saying that Christ had one nature (Greek: *monophysis*)—obscured both the real deity and the real humanity that were united in the incarnation of Christ. On the other side of the debate, the Nestorians argued that if Jesus had two natures, He had to have had two persons as well, so they separated the two natures of Christ into two persons.

“This was a watershed council because it set the boundaries or parameters of Christological speculation.”

Over against both heresies, Chalcedon gave its famous formula by which it declared that Christ is truly God and truly man, with the natures perfectly united in such a way that they are not confused—the natures are without mixture, confusion, division, or separation; each nature retains its own attributes. This was a watershed council because it set the boundaries or parameters of Christological speculation. The two natures were not to be merged or confused; the human nature, for example, would not be absorbed or swallowed up in the divine nature and vice

versa. At the same time, the two natures were not to be separated so as to lose their unity in the one person.

Throughout history since Chalcedon, the Church in virtually every generation has had to face the tendencies of either confusing the two natures or dividing or separating the two natures. Orthodoxy in the fifth century declared that the natures must be distinguished yet never separated. They must be distinguished and never be co-mingled.

The other noteworthy event of the first millennium was the extraordinary impact of Augustine of Hippo, perhaps the greatest theologian of that millennium. Augustine was called to defend the Church against the heresies of the Donatists in their disputes about baptism and—more importantly—against the heretical views of Pelagius, who denied original sin, arguing that even apart from grace, the descendants of Adam could achieve lives of perfection. Augustine’s theology of salvation shaped the future history of Christianity, particularly as it helped quicken Luther and Calvin for the Protestant Reformation. At the same time, Augustine’s view of the Church solidified the power of the monoepiscopacy and the Roman magisterium for all future generations.

These five aspects of the first millennium are only illustrative of a vast number of things that, in the providence of God, developed over this period of time. Sadly, at the end of this millennium, the Church was already groping in the darkness and biblical soteriology had declined to such a degree that the gospel was rapidly becoming obscured, even becoming almost totally eclipsed until it was recovered in the 16th century Reformation.

Does Scripture Teach That Jesus is Fully God?

By Greg Lanier

The confession that the true God of all creation is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is rooted deeply in the soil of Christian theology.

And one of the most debated and, at times, perplexing aspects of this confession

is the question: “Does Scripture actually teach that Jesus is fully God?”

The early Church experienced numerous fights on this front, as Theodotus, Noetus, Arius, Nestorius, and Eutyches (among others) challenged, in various ways, the full divinity of Jesus Christ. A series of writ-



ings and councils spearheaded by a prominent group of early Church fathers, ranging from Athanasius to Cyril of Alexandria, defended the traditional doctrine and ruled the competing teachings as out of bounds. The key doctrines were crystallized in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) and Chalcedonian Definition (451 A.D.).

But the debates have not gone away. Outside the Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons (Latter-Day Saints) reject the Christian teaching that Jesus is fully divine. For instance, the translation of the Bible used by Jehovah’s Witnesses (New World Translation) famously renders John 1:1, “The Word was *a god*” (emphasis added), ascribing to Jesus the status of a “god”-like or quasi-angelic being, but nothing more. Furthermore, while the Qur’an affirms some true facts about Jesus—such as His birth to Mary and His role as a prophet—Islam holds that the confession of Jesus as the fully divine Son of God is *shirk*—that is, the unforgivable sin of ascribing “partners” to Allah (e.g., Qur’an Ali ‘Imran 3:151; Qur’an An-Nisa 4:48). And the acid rain of secularism has, for more than two centuries, eroded all possibility of a divine human altogether, instead holding that this doctrine was invented when Greek-pagan theology was imported into the Church.

“...95 percent of self-described evangelical Christians affirm the Trinity, but ...80 percent believe that Jesus Christ is the “first and greatest being created by God.””

Even within the Church, Jesus is often taken to be an “ideal human” at best, or perhaps simply a good teacher—especially within mainline denominations. But many evangelical Christians are confused or inconsistent as well. A 2018 survey by Ligonier Ministries and Life-way Research found that nearly 95 percent of self-described evangelical Christians affirm the Trinity, but simultaneously, about 80 percent believe that Jesus Christ is the “first and greatest being created by God.”¹

The shocking thing is that these respondents do not appear to realize the stark contradiction in these two positions. There is thus a clear need for fresh teaching on Christology (i.e., the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus). It could take many shapes: retrieving the teachings of Athanasius, deconstructing ancient and modern heresies, summarizing the orthodox teaching from the angle of historical or modern systematic theology, or even sorting out the complexities of Karl Barth.

Each of these paths would be fruitful, but instead, I aim to do something even more basic. I want not only to affirm that, yes, Scrip-

ture does indeed teach *that* Jesus Christ is fully God, while also to helping the average Christian understand how it does so. It is one thing to know the “right” answer; it is another thing altogether to understand how the New Testament authors get there—to show their work, so to speak.

Such an endeavor is by no means new. Numerous scholars—particularly among the members of the self-described “early high Christology club” (Richard Bauckham, Martin Hengel, Larry Hurtado, and others)—have recently explored these issues; not just in the creeds and church fathers, but in the pages of Scripture itself. But, the vast majority of their work has focused on one aspect of the issue, or one subset of writings (such as Paul’s letters), and their output has been largely confined to scholarly monographs and articles. It is high time for the findings to be set forth in a way that reaches a broader audience.²

In short, I am arguing that the full *Trinitarian Christology* that is bedrock to Christianity is found throughout the New Testament, from the earliest days, is derived from the teachings of Jesus Himself and rooted in the Old Testament. Put differently, my aim is to help discern how the concepts that later coalesce in the creeds are right there in the pages of

“It would take an entire book to iron out the physics of *how* Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine at the same time.”

Scripture from the outset of the Christian Church.

But First: The Humanity of the Son

In view of all this, many Christians are surprised to find out that the early Church spent just as much time debating whether Jesus Christ was *fully human*, which is rarely a real debate today, as it did debating whether He was fully divine.³ If the Nicene Creed majors on the question of Jesus' full divinity ("Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds...very God of very God"), the Chalcedonian Definition majors on His humanity.⁴ It affirms that Jesus is "the same perfect in deity and the same perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man...acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably."⁵

It would be a mistake, thus, to press on in discussing the divinity of Jesus without making clear that the Church has historically taught that the two natures—divine and human—cannot be fully separated. Yet the two are also *distinguishable* in various ways ("unconfusedly", per Chalcedon), and there is value in understanding Scripture's teaching on both. It would take an entire book to iron out the physics of *how* Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine at the same time. Here I simply survey the New Testament's key affirmations of His humanity before turning the bulk of attention to His divinity.

First, several passages assert that Jesus is human in the fullest possible sense and not just a visible apparition of a deity or angel. Matthew 1:16, Luke 2:6-7, and Galatians 4:4 state that Jesus was "*born*" or "*begotten*" of a woman. Similarly, John 1:14, 1st Timothy 3:16, and Hebrews 2:14 affirm that Jesus "*became*", was "*manifested in*", and "*share[d] in*" the same kind of "*flesh*" (Greek: *sarx*) that all humans possess. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus eats, walks, sweats, shows emotion, sleeps, and so forth.

Even—or perhaps especially—after Jesus's resurrection, the Gospel writers go to great lengths to reiterate that His resurrected *body* is still a

fully human—though transformed—body, as seen in John 20:27 (Thomas touches Jesus’s scars) and Luke 24:42-43 (Jesus eats a fish). The apostle John emphasizes that he has “seen” and “touched” Jesus (1st John 1:1) and declares that anyone who denies “*the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh*” is a deceiver and “*antichrist*” (2nd John 7). Indeed, the full humanity of Jesus is a line in the sand, separating true Christianity from unbelief.

“Without [Jesus’] fully human nature, there is no redemption of humans.”

Second, the New Testament draws attention to the ways in which Jesus’ humanity is not only a fact but is central to His accomplishing God’s redemptive plan. His humanity is essential to His fulfillment of everything expected of the *human* Messiah, or deliverer. I will catalog but a few. Jesus is:

- The eschatological prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22)
- A priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:10)
- The King like David (Matthew 21:9; Romans 1:3), who is born from his line (Matthew 1:1-18).
- The anointed one, or Messiah/Christ (Luke 2:11; 9:20; John 20:31).
- The second and greater Adam (Romans 5:14; 1st Corinthians 15:45).
- The servant who would suffer and die vicariously (Acts 8:32-33; 1st Peter 2:22-23).
- The “root” of Jesse and “star” of Jacob (Revelation 5:5; 22:16, echoing Isaiah 11:1 and Numbers 24:17).
- The Shepherd of the flock of Israel (John 10:14; Hebrews 13:20).

Each is grounded in Old Covenant promises and comes to fruition in Christ. None of these, strictly speaking, *require* fulfillment by a fully

divine person, but they do, often quite explicitly, envision a *human fulfillment* (e.g., shedding of blood, keeping the law in place of Adam). Consequently, these passages highlight how Jesus Christ accomplishes salvation specifically as a *human mediator* (1st Timothy 2:5). Without His full human nature, there is no redemption of humans.

So, how does the New Testament go further and teach that Jesus is specifically a *divine* messianic deliverer? How is He not only a human prophet, priest, king, and mediator, but *more than that*—fully God? The shocking “reveal” of the New Testament that Jesus is not just the Messiah, but *more than a Messiah*.⁶

References:

1. See “The State of Theology,” Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research, accessed October 28, 2019, www.thestateoftheology.com.
2. Larry W. Hurtado has taken this step in summarizing thirty years of research on early-church worship patterns in his *Honoring the Son: Jesus in Earliest Christian Devotional Practice* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018).
3. The Docetism controversy—asserting that Jesus only appeared human—arose with Serapion (among others) and was refuted in the ecumenical councils.
4. *Trinity Psalter Hymnal* (Willow Grove, PA: Trinity Psalter Hymnal Joint Venture, 2018), 852.
5. Author’s own translation from the Greek provided in Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, Early Eastern and Medieval (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 180.
6. To borrow language from Andrew Chester, “The Christ of Paul,” in *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and James Carleton Paget (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 121.

Truly God, Truly Man: The Council of Chalcedon

By Nicholas Needham



It's hard enough to pronounce "Chalcedon."

Getting to grips with its theology can be even more daunting. But the effort will be very richly rewarded. For the past 1,500 years—right up to the present day—virtually all orthodox Christian theologians have defined their

“orthodoxy” with reference to the Council of Chalcedon. That certainly includes the Reformed tradition. We may not think that the early ecumenical councils were infallible. But we have generally held that they were gloriously right in what they affirmed, and that Christians who take the Church and its history seriously must reckon with these great councils as providential landmarks in the unfolding life story of God’s people.

What was Chalcedon all about? Basically, it was trying to settle the

aftermath of the Arian controversy in the fourth century. Biblical theologians had struggled successfully against Arianism to affirm the deity of Christ. But this led to further controversy. This time, the issue was the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ.

Two tendencies quickly became prominent. One was associated with the church in Antioch. It wanted to protect the full reality of Christ's deity and humanity. To do this, it tended to keep them as far apart as possible. The Antiochenes were afraid that any close blending of the two natures might mix them up. Christ's human limitations might get applied to His deity—in which case He wasn't fully God. Or His divine attributes might get applied to His humanity—in which case He wasn't fully human. This was fine, as far as it went. The trouble, however, was that the Antiochenes sometimes separated Christ's two natures so much that He seemed to end up as two persons: a human son of Mary, indwelt by a divine Son of God. The most famous Antiochene thinker who took this line of reasoning was Nestorius, a preacher who became patriarch (chief bishop) of Constantinople in 428 A.D. Nestorius was condemned by the third ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. (it also condemned Pelagianism as heresy).

The other tendency was associated with the church of Alexandria. Their main concern was to protect the divine person of the Son as the one single "subject" of the incarnation. In other words, there is in Christ only one "I", only one personal agent, and this is the second person of the Trinity, God the Son. And again, this was fine as far as it went. The trouble was, Alexandrians sometimes became so zealous for Christ's divine person, they could lose sight of His humanity. To the extremists of Alexandria, any sort of emphasis on Christ's human nature seemed to threaten the sovereignty of His single divine person. Would Christ not break apart into two persons—the hated Nestorian heresy—if one insisted too much on the full reality of His humanness?

In the aftermath of Nestorius' condemnation at Ephesus in 431 A.D., their greatest thinker was Cyril of Alexandria. But when Cyril died

in 444 A.D., a more extreme figure stepped into his place. This was Eutyches, a leading monk in Constantinople. Eutyches was so violent in his commitment to Christ's single divine person, he could tolerate no rivalry (as it were) from His humanity.

So, in an infamous phrase, Eutyches taught that in the incarnation, Christ's human nature had been swallowed up and lost in His divinity: "like a drop of wine in the sea." This extreme Alexandrian view triumphed at another ecumenical council in Ephesus in 449 A.D. Its victory, however, was due less to theological argument and persuasion, and due more to gangs of unruly Alexandrian monks who terrorized the proceedings, supported by the troops of Emperor Theodosius II, who favored Eutyches.

The council was condemned in the western, Latin-speaking half of the Roman Empire. Pope Leo the Great thundered against it as the "Robber Synod" (and the name stuck). After the death of Emperor Theodosius, a new emperor, Marcian, called a new council at Chalcedon (in Asia Minor) in 451 A.D. This time, Eutyches and the extreme Alexandrians were defeated. The council skillfully wove together all that was good and true in the Antiochene and Alexandrian outlooks, producing a theological masterpiece on the person of Christ:

So, following the holy fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; of one essence with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same of one essence with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days, for

"Think of what this does to our doctrine of the atonement. We would have to say we are saved by the sufferings of a merely human Jesus..."

us and for our salvation, the same born of Mary, the virgin God-bearer, as regards his humanity. He is one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation. At no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being. He is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself instructed us, and as the creed of the fathers handed it down to us.

Perhaps we can best appreciate what the Council of Chalcedon achieved by asking what the consequences would have been if either Nestorius or Eutyches had won the day. Let's take Nestorianism first. If the incarnation is really a case of a human son of Mary being indwelt by a divine Son of God, then Christ is no different, in principle, from any holy human. Every sanctified man is indwelt by the Son. Was Christ merely the highest example of that? If so, no true incarnation has taken place at all. We cannot say "Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God." We can only say "Jesus of Nazareth had a relationship with the Son of God."

Think of what this does to our doctrine of the atonement. We would have to say we are saved by the sufferings of a merely human Jesus who happened to be indwelt by God (as all holy people are). Would that not inevitably lead to a belief that human suffering—perhaps our own—can atone for our sins? And think of what it would do to our worship. We would not be able to worship Jesus—only the divine Son, by whom Jesus was indwelt. That would destroy Christian worship entirely.

But then, think what would have happened if Eutychianism had won out. If Christ's humanity was lost and swallowed up in His deity

“like a drop of wine in the sea”, then once again, no real incarnation has taken place. Rather than God becoming man, we have man being annihilated in God. One can see how this would easily have lent itself to all manner of humanity-denying mysticism. After all, if Christ is our pattern, shouldn’t we too seek for our own humanity to be lost and swallowed up in deity like a drop of wine in the sea?

The fathers at Chalcedon set themselves firmly against both of these unwholesome tendencies. They affirmed that Christ is indeed one single divine person, not some alliance of a divine and a human person, as in Nestorianism. The subject, the “I”, the personal agent whom we meet in Jesus Christ is singular, not plural; this person is “the Only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord”—the second person of the Godhead. Mary is therefore rightly called the “God-bearer”, a truth passionately rejected by Nestorius. The person whom Mary bore was precisely God the Son! Mary is the mother of God incarnate (although not, of course, the mother of the divine nature).

The fathers of Chalcedon equally affirmed that this one person exists in two distinct natures—complete deity and complete humanity—thus rejecting the Eutychian absorption of one into the other. We see in Christ everything that it is to be human, and everything that it is to be divine, at one and the same time, without either being compromised by the other. We could say that in Christ, for the first time and the last, all the fullness of human being, and all the fullness of divine being, have come together and exist together in exactly the same way—as the Son of the Father and the Bearer of the Holy Spirit. Or to put it more simply, Christ is fully and truly man, fully and truly God, at the same time, in a single person.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;

“In matters Christological, we can perhaps only ever be dwarves on their giant shoulders.”

*Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased as Man with man to dwell:
Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

The fathers of Chalcedon did a fine job. In matters Christological, we can perhaps only ever be dwarves on their giant shoulders. We may be enabled to see even further, if we sit there. But if we climb off, I somehow doubt that we'll see anything but Nestorian and Eutychian mud.

Saint Nicholas and the Origins of Santa Claus

By Stephen Nichols

It might surprise many today to find out that Saint Nicholas (spoiler alert) was a real person after all. Was he the white-bearded man with a red suit, a cap, and a sleigh? Not quite, but he probably was bearded, did wear a hat, and did travel in horse-drawn—albeit not reindeer-drawn—transportation. The legend behind “Santa Claus” is Saint Nicholas, the fourth-century bishop of Myra. His hat was the bishop's miter.

Nicholas was born in modern day Turkey to a rather wealthy family. Losing his parents at a young age, Nicholas dedicated both his fortune and



his life to the Christian church. Very quickly he was appointed the bishop of Myra, on the southern coast of modern-day Turkey.

These were days of persecution for Christians. Roman Emperor Diocletian, who reigned from 284–305 A.D., hated Christians and stuffed Roman jails full of them. Bishop Nicholas spent the first few years of the fourth century in jail and faced routine beatings. In the next decade, Constantine legalized Christianity and Nicholas was set free.

As the legend goes, Bishop Nicholas was present at the Church's First Ecumenical Council at Constantine's summer palace in Nicaea in 325 A.D. Hundreds of Bishops gathered there to refute the false teachings of Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria. Arius denied Christ's deity. At one point while Arius was addressing the council, Nicholas's rage got the better of him. According to some of his biographers, Nicholas stood up, crossed the floor to Arius, and promptly punched him in the face.

For the assault, Nicholas found himself back in jail again. The bishops deliberated his fate. Nicholas was repentant and sought forgiveness. After the Council, Constantine granted clemency and restored Bishop Nicholas to his post.

And at his post Bishop Nicholas diligently served. Over the course of his entire life, he was known for being extremely generous. He was especially generous to children, regularly giving them gifts. Myra was a busy port city with ships and sailors coming and going. The ships went out of Myra's port loaded with gifts and goods for the needy, all provided and packed on by Bishop Nicholas. His gifts went all around the Mediterranean world. As sailors went around the world, they took with them the stories of the generosity of Bishop Nicholas.

The year of Bishop Nicholas's death is uncertain, but the month is firmly believed to be December. As the story of his generosity spread, the stories of his life grew and grew. He was becoming legendary. In the sixth century, a church was dedicated to him and named for him in Constantinople. His image was depicted more in the Middle Ages than

any other except those of Christ and of Mary. No longer Bishop Nicholas, now he became Saint Nicholas, and his Feast Day would be December 6.

One of the legends around Nicholas concerned his giving dowries to young poor girls so they would be able to marry. To reflect that legend, images of him carrying bags bulging with gold coins began to appear.

As his legend moved northward, the story takes an even more interesting turn. In Germany, the tradition arose of giving gifts to each other in the name of Saint Nicholas. So, too, in the Netherlands; the

“Interestingly enough, Saint Nicholas and his legend began in the early Church.”

Dutch word for him became *Sinterklaas*. The German word eventually became “Santa Claus”. These celebrations of gift-giving occurred on December 6, the anniversary of his death. The gift of a gold coin was highly prized and showed great favor. Even Martin Luther would come to play a role in the legend. Luther wanted a Protestant alternative to the

Roman Catholic practice of celebrating the Feast of Saint Nicholas (Santa Claus). Instead of giving gifts in the name of Santa Claus on December 6, Luther started the tradition of giving gifts in the name of the Christ child, *Christkindl*, on Christmas Eve. Perhaps in this we have an argument for Protestant kids everywhere as to why they should be allowed to open at least one present on Christmas Eve.

Luther loved Christmas. He wanted it to be a celebration of giving around the supreme gift of the babe born of the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. As he preached in 1530 A.D., "He who lies in the virgin's lap is our Savior...give thanks to God, who so loved you that he gave you a Savior."

Christmas evolved from the word *Christ Mass*, the celebration of the incarnation of Christ, fixed by tradition as being on December 25th. The word Luther coined, *Christkindl*, also evolved over the centuries. It would become Santa Claus' other moniker, *Kris Kringle*. This effort of

Luther's to move away from the Santa Claus tradition inadvertently veered right toward it.

So, we have the story of Santa Claus. Interestingly enough, Saint Nicholas and his legend began in the early Church. The stories wove their way through the Middle Ages, and they even made an appearance at the Reformation. Those stories still live with us today.

Why Jesus Cannot Be One Truth Among Many

By Rebecca McLaughlin



It is tempting in our melting-pot societies to think that living alongside people of different faiths is a purely modern phenomenon. But people of different religious beliefs have been coexisting for millennia, sometimes in conflict and sometimes in peace. One way in which religious difference was negotiated was through polytheism. This allowed different tribes to worship their own local gods, and regional gods to be integrated with a larger set. Polytheism certainly did not prevent interreligious violence or desire for conquest, as evidenced by the Greek and Roman Empires. But there was

the possibility of accommodation: everyone’s gods could be gods without necessarily hurting anyone’s dignity.

This potential for accommodation was compromised, however, when a fiercely monotheistic faith emerged. Judaism introduced a fundamental belief that Israel’s covenant God had created the heavens and the earth, a fearless assertion that this God is the only true God, and a foundational command to worship Him alone. Christianity and, later, Islam built upon these foundations, asserting that there was one true, universal God, who had uniquely revealed Himself, and that other so-called “gods” are idols.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have been asserting that there is only one true faith among a panoply of other “gods” for millennia. The early Jews made this claim among the pagan, polytheistic religions of the ancient Near East. The early Christians made this claim among the pagan, polytheistic religions of the Roman Empire. Monotheism is at its heart exclusive and universal. It proclaims that there is only one true God, who made the universe and demands the allegiance of every human. Claiming that monotheism fits with an all-religions-are-one approach is like claiming someone can be in two places at one time: it’s possible, but only if you kill the person first and dismember the body!

The Problem of Jesus

While it might be possible to square some religions with each other, particularly those with multiple gods, Christianity is like a puzzle piece drawn from the wrong set: however hard we try to bend the edges, it won’t fit. This problem stems both from Jesus’s direct statements—for example, His famous assertion, *“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6)—and from the actions by which He claimed to be God in the flesh, a claim that both Jews and Muslims hold to be blasphemous.

One of my favorite examples of this distinctiveness of Jesus comes early in His ministry. Jesus was teaching in a house so packed that no

one else could squeeze in. Determined to get their paralyzed comrade in front of this healer, a group of friends dug a hole in the roof and lowered him down.

Jesus looked at the man and said, “*Son, your sins are forgiven*” (Mark 2:5). The crowd must have been confused. Why was Jesus talking about forgiveness, when what the man clearly needed was healing?

The religious leaders were outraged: “*Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*” (Mark 2:7).

Jesus asked, “*Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk?’*” (Mark 2:9). He then proved His authority to forgive sins by telling the paralyzed man to get up. Notice that He did not deny the premise of the religious leaders’ complaint: only God has the right to forgive sins. But He demonstrated that their conclusion was wrong: Jesus had that right, because He is God in the flesh.

Later, Jesus looked into the eyes of a bereaved woman and said: “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die*” (John 11:25-26). This is not the teaching of a “good man”. As Oxford

“But [Jesus] cannot be *one* truth among many. He has not left us that option.”

professor and author C. S. Lewis argued, this is the teaching of an egotistical maniac, an evil manipulator, or God in the flesh.

Time and again, the Gospels record Jesus doing outrageous things only God can do: commanding the wind, forgiving sins, feeding multitudes, raising the dead. His universal claim is finally

rammed home in His parting words to His disciples: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son*

and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus claims rule over all of heaven and earth.

He presents Himself not as *one* possible path to God, but as God Himself. We may choose to disbelieve Him. But He cannot be *one* truth among many. He has not left us that option.

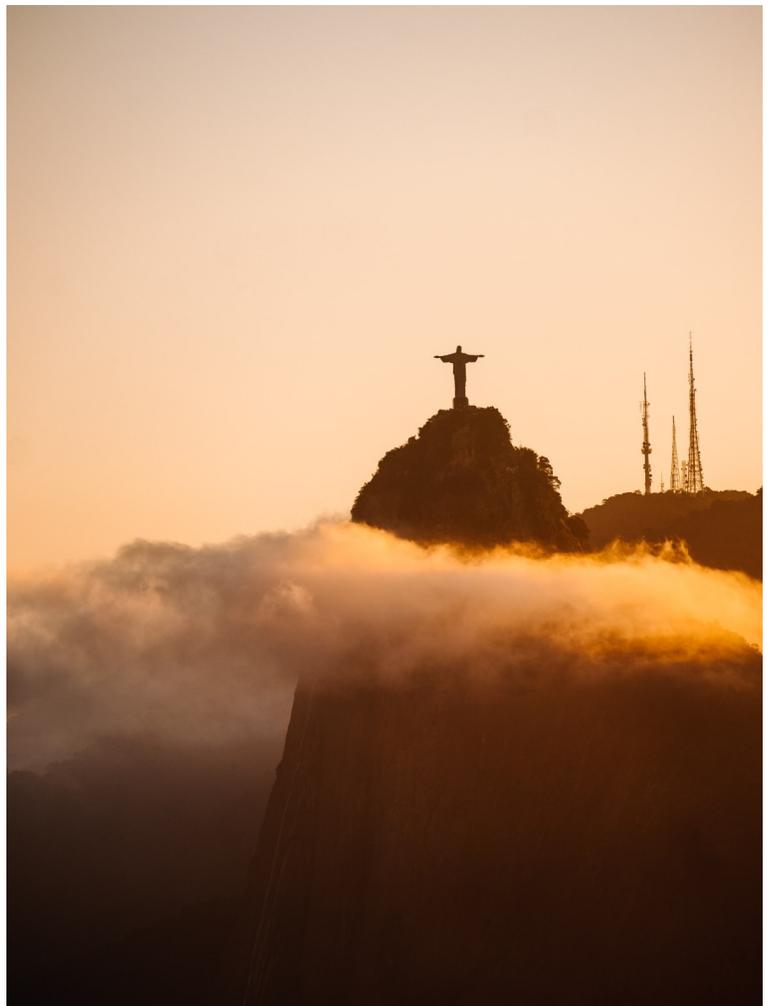
Three Questions About Christ's Sinlessness

By Robert Letham

Question: How real were Christ's temptations? Is there a distinction between His temptations and ours?

Answer: Temptation cannot be defined in terms of the capacity of the one tempted to succumb. Temptation is enticement to sin from whatever source. On this basis, Christ endured stronger temptations than we do, since no one has resisted them as He did. A person walking into the teeth of a force-9 gale feels the stresses and strains far more than the one who goes with the flow. Moreover, Christ took the form of a servant, humanity in a low condition, living in a world torn by sin and decay (Hebrews 2:13-18).¹

Nineteenth century



American Presbyterian theologian, W. G. T. Shedd, addressing the objection of whether a person who cannot sin can really be tempted to sin, says: “This is not correct; any more than it would be correct to say that because an army cannot be conquered, it cannot be attacked. Temptability depends upon the constitutional *susceptibility*, while impeccability depends upon the *will*.”² Oliver Crisp has a sporting analogy: it is a foregone conclusion that an invincible boxer will win, but in order to do so he must put up a fight against a real opponent.³

This simply refers us back to the question of the nature of temptation and what its sources are. As a working definition, I have proposed that temptation is incitement to sin, from whatever source that incitement arises. We face onslaughts from three sources: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The key for us is the flesh. Temptations from without meeting an answering response from within. There is always something within us that finds such inducements attractive in varying ways, depending on our differing predilections for particular sins. Often, we do not need external stimuli to draw us to sin. There is enough within us to lead us astray without our looking elsewhere.

With Jesus, temptation came from without—from the devil and from the world around Him. Nevertheless, this was still temptation. It was still inducement to break the law of God. If anything, He felt it more fiercely than anyone else. He endured the uninhibited fury of the devil seeking to divert Him from the course prepared by the Father (Matthew 4:1-10). The stronger the resistance, the more forceful the buffeting, and no one felt temptation more than He. It is enough that He was induced to sin. The twin forces of the devil and militant human opponents were quite sufficient, for His steadfast resistance made their enticements unremitting in their fury.⁴

Question: Is there a distinction between impeccability and temptability?

Answer: Yes; temptability relates to the capacity to face an incitement to sin, whereas impeccability refers to the impossibility of responding

positively to such incitement. As Bavinck indicates, the struggle Christ faced in temptation was not nullified by His being impeccable, since the latter was ethical and had to be demonstrated in an ethical manner.⁴

Crisp draws attention to the argument of Anselm that Christ had the capacity to lie, but was incapable of doing so.⁵ Anselm considers that Christ could have told a lie if He had willed to do so. However, He could not will to lie.⁶ In this there is a distinction between Christ having the capacity to sin, since He was human, and the impossibility of His sinning due to His obedient will. Crisp compares this to a fragile champagne glass, capable of breaking but protected by secure wrapping that prevents this outcome.⁷

Question: Is the possibility of sinning a defining characteristic of humanity?

Answer: This is not sustainable. The redeemed in heaven can hardly have the possibility of sinning, as their status is secure. Yet this, apart from its exemplification in Christ, will be the quintessence of what it means to be human, freedom consisting in the total deliverance from sin.

However, Bruce Ware and John McKinley suggest the possibility that temptation may still exist in heaven, but they agree that the redeemed will resist it.⁸ If we suppose that such temptation might occur, it would support the point that genuine temptation is compatible with impeccability. However, the idea is entirely speculative, and there are strong countervailing reasons. From what source would such temptations arise? It could hardly be from a corrupt nature, which would be eradicated by glorification. The world, in its rebellion against God, would no longer be present, while the devil would be cast into eternal fire. It is hard to see what forces there might be that could pose such a threat.

However, the point at issue if peccability for the redeemed were involved in that scenario would be the possibility of the failure of eschato-

logical salvation, of being cast out of heaven, of another fall. The whole sense of Scripture is that this is ruled out. If the quintessence of being human is found in heaven and consists, among other things, in freedom from the possibility of sinning, it follows that impeccability of itself does not undermine the humanity of Christ in His state of incarnate weakness prior to the resurrection.

Thomas Morris has an important proposal in his distinction between an *individual essence*, a cluster of properties essential for an individual to be the entity it is, and a *kind essence*, which he considers to be a cluster of properties without which an individual could not belong to the natural kind it exemplifies. In terms of the latter, he suggests that “there are properties which happen to be *common* to members of a natural kind, which may even be *universal* to all members of that kind, without being *essential* to membership in the kind.”

Many critics have employed what Morris calls “the look around town approach.” As you look around town, you observe that every human being has certain properties in common, among which is the property of being sinful. To conclude that being sinful is an essential part of human nature is to miss this distinction. Being sinful is common to humans as they are, universally so, but it does not follow that it is essential to being human.⁹ We may conclude that since a sinful condition is not essential to being human, the argument that impeccability undermines the reality of Christ’s humanity and the genuineness of His temptations fails.

References:

1. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 329.
2. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:336.
3. Crisp, *God Incarnate*, 133.
4. For a detailed analysis of temptations of various kinds, see Crisp, *God Incarnate*, 122–36.
5. Bavinck, RD, 3:315.
6. Crisp, *God Incarnate*, 132–33.
7. Anselm, *Cur Deus homo?* 2.10, in Brian Davies, *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 326.
8. Crisp, *God Incarnate*, 132.
9. Thomas V. Morris, “The Metaphysics of God Incarnate,” in *Oxford Readings in Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1, *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, ed. Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 216.

What the Atonement Means for You

By Stephen Wellum



Central to the *why* our triune God created humans is that He created us to know Him in covenant **relationship** and to display His glory in the world as His kings and

queens (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8). But given human sin, how does God's purpose still stand? In our sin, we—who were created to know, love, and obey the God of all glory—stand guilty and condemned before Him; we cannot save ourselves. How will God forgive us, especially since “*there is no one righteous, not even one*” (Romans 3:10)? Adam's sin turned the created order upside down and brought on all of humanity the sentence of death (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

Humans, who were made for covenant relationship with God and for each other, are now under God's righteous judgment as His enemies and objects of His wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). What hope is there for us? Our only hope is that our triune God, who does not need us, takes the initiative in grace to redeem, justify, and transform us (Ephesians 2:4-7).

Contrary to non-Christian thought, we cannot save ourselves. We must never forget that the gospel message is not about self-help or our doing good for the betterment of society. No doubt, as a result of the gospel, our lives are transformed, and we begin to act properly towards God and one another. But, first and foremost, the gospel is about the majesty, glory, and beauty of our triune God and what *He* has done to redeem, justify, and reconcile moral rebels against Him—who deserve nothing but judgment—and to make all things new. Apart from God's acting in sovereign grace, the human race is completely lost and without hope. This point is especially reinforced when we remember *Who* we have sinned against.

Given that our triune Creator and Lord is holy and just (Isaiah 6:1-4; Revelation 4:8-11)—the moral standard of the universe—He cannot simply overlook our sin. Think of God's holy justice (Genesis 18:25). God is not like a human judge, who adjudicates laws external to Himself; God *is* the law. What is true, good, and beautiful is measured against the standard of God's own perfect nature and will.

This is why our sin is no small matter! In our willful rebellion against God, we have not sinned against an abstract force or an impersonal law, nor is our sin only viewed horizontally—that is, against one

another. Above all, our sin is against *God*. David, for example, sinned against many people in his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and all that resulted from it, but David also rightly knew that his sin was first *against God* (Psalm 51:4). For this reason, Scripture reminds us that

“In His humanity, He is the only one who can obey for us as our covenant head.”

God’s forgiveness of our sin is not cheap. Instead, for God to forgive us, given who He is as the holy and just one, He *must* remain true to Himself. He must act to satisfy His own righteous demand against us (Romans 3:25-26).

But this raises a crucial question that runs from Genesis 3

throughout the entire Bible: In the forgiveness of our sin, how will God demonstrate His holy justice, covenant love, remain true to Himself, *and* justify the ungodly (Romans 4:5)? Scripture is clear: it is only in Christ alone, the eternal Son made flesh (John 1:1, 14) that our triune God has satisfied His own righteous demand against sinners and secured our reconciliation, justification, and redemption by His obedient life and substitutionary death (Romans 5:1; 8:1). Only our Lord Jesus Christ was able to undo, reverse, and pay for Adam’s sin, on our behalf.

In His humanity, He is the only one who can obey for us as our covenant head. As the divine Son, He is the only one able to satisfy God’s own demand against us by paying the penalty for our sin (Romans 6:23). Apart from His obedient life and atoning death, we have no Savior (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 5:12-21; Hebrews 2:5-18). But, thankfully and gloriously, because of the divine Son’s incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, we have an all-sufficient Redeemer who meets our every need (Hebrews 7:23-28).

There is no greater news than this: Christ Jesus, as God the Son incarnate, perfectly meets our need before God by His obedient life and

substitutionary death. In Christ, the triune love of God is gloriously revealed because, in Christ, we receive the gift of righteousness which is now ours by faith in Him. In covenant union with His people, Christ—as our covenant representative and head—obeys in our place, dies our death, and satisfies divine justice—indeed, *His* own justice—which is evidenced in His glorious resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2).

As a result, by faith alone, in Christ alone, His righteousness is ours, now and forever (Romans 8:1; 2nd Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). By faith-union in Christ, we stand complete: justified before God by the forgiveness of our sins and clothed in *His* righteousness (Romans 4:1-8; 5:1-2).

All of this is to say that in fully understanding who Jesus is and what He has done for us, we see anew how *God* is at the center of His universe, not us. By thinking about Christ's atoning work for us, we are reminded that our triune God of grace has planned our redemption from eternity and achieved it on the stage of human history. From beginning to end, God alone acted in majestic power and grace to provide, achieve, and accomplish our salvation by the Father's initiative, in and through the Son, and the Spirit's work to unite us to Christ so that His entire work is now ours (Ephesians 1:3-14).

Living as Justified and Reconciled People in Christ

In light of what our triune God has done for us in Christ, what practical effect does this have on our lives? Many applications could be made, but my focus is on a single specific one. As we think of God's forgiveness of our sin in Christ and our justification before God, this puts into perspective people's sin against us, as horrendous as they may be, and it allows us to forgive one another.

In the Lord's Prayer, we are told to petition God for the forgiveness of our sins and to forgive others who have sinned against us (Matthew

6:12). Jesus makes it even stronger when He says: “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (Matthew 6:14-15). Many have struggled with this statement as if Jesus is giving us a tit-for-tat relationship, but this is not what He means. Instead, we have to set the Lord’s Prayer in light of its context in Matthew, and in light of the achievement of Christ’s cross.

“Unless we see our problem is first against God and that we have been forgiven much, we will always struggle to forgive others.”

When we do this, we realize that our Lord is teaching His people about how we rightly relate to one another and the relationship between God’s forgiveness of our sin *and* our forgiveness of others. We could say it this way: since, in Christ, we have been forgiven of our horrendous sin against the God of all glory, and that, in Christ, everything we have received is by grace, then if God has forgiven us of our treason against Him, then we can certainly forgive others of their sin against us! God has done the greater thing in our forgiveness, and human sin against us is not the same as our rebellion against God.

In other words, what is assumed is that *all* of us have the same sin problem; namely, we stand *equally* under God’s wrath and judgment. Thus, before we consider what others have done to us, we must never forget what we have done to God! Furthermore, as we consider our justification in Christ: our sin has been fully atoned and we stand clothed in Christ’s perfect righteousness—which we have received by grace! (Ephesians 2:8-10). As we relate to others, we must learn to forgive them because of what God, in Christ, has done for us.

Think of how this point is reinforced later in Matthew’s gospel. As

Peter comes to Jesus and asks Him how often he should forgive his brother, who has sinned against him, Jesus answers: “*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times*” (Matthew 18:22), thus underscoring our need to forgive our brother’s sin against us over and over again. Why? Because first, God has forgiven us of the greater sin—namely, our sin before Him—and we are to reciprocate in the forgiveness of the lesser—namely, human sin against us. This is not to minimize the awful nature of human sin against us. Instead, it is to remind us that our greatest problem as humans is first our sin *before God*, our Creator and Lord, who is worthy of all our love, devotion, and obedience.

Another way we can think of this is by asking ourselves the question: if we have difficulty forgiving those who have sinned against us, do we first think of *our sin* before God and God’s glorious and gracious justification of our sin in Christ Jesus? Unless we see that our problem is first against God and that we have been forgiven much, we will always struggle to forgive others.

Sadly, today in the Church, it seems that we can focus on what someone has done against us—either in the past or present—and *not* first focus on our sin before God and our justification in Christ. If you are struggling with forgiving others, first think of what God has done for you!

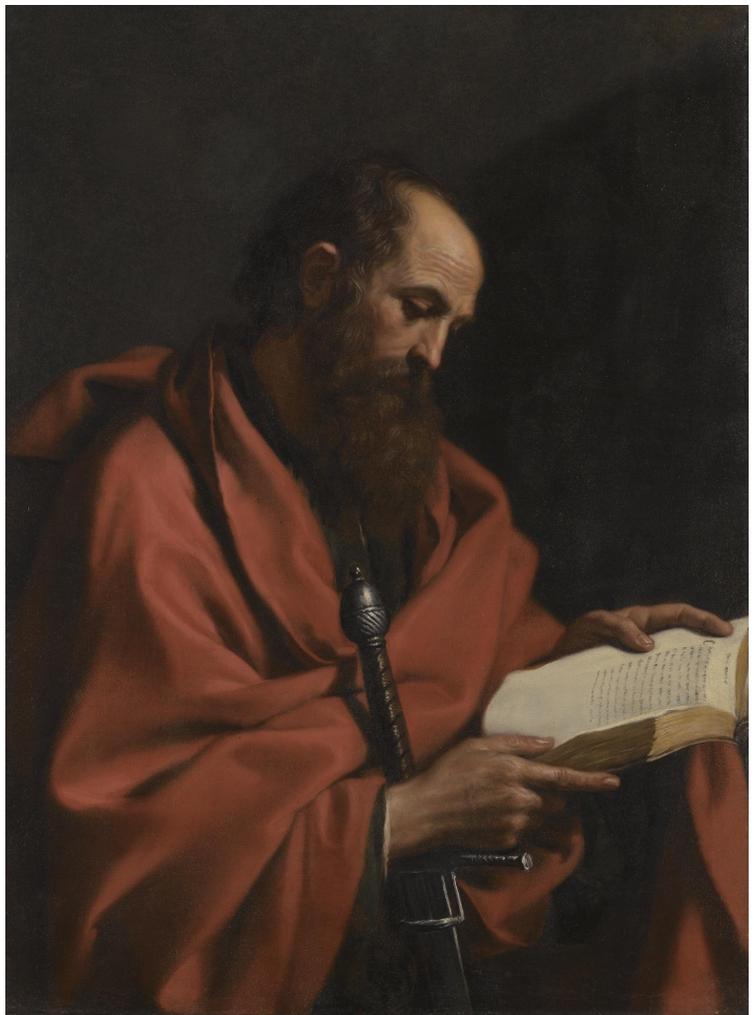
10 Things You Should Know About Justification by Faith

By Kevin McFadden

One: Justification by Faith is a Whole-Bible Doctrine

Some Christians may be surprised to learn that the doctrine of justification by faith is not only found in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament. Genesis tells us that Abraham, in response to God's promise, "*believed the LORD, and it was counted to him as righteousness*" (Genesis 15:6). Job sought to justify himself before God and in the end renounced his own righteousness (Job 32:2; 42:1-6).

David was a man after God's own heart, and yet he speaks of the blessing of justification apart from works: "*Blessed is the one whose trans-*



gression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psalm 32:1). And he reiterates this in Psalm 143:2, “Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.”

Isaiah prophesied that the servant of the Lord will “*make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities*” (Isaiah 53:11). And Habakkuk teaches us that “*the righteous shall live by his faith*” (Habakkuk 2:4), a truth which he also exemplified in his own life (Habakkuk 3:16-19).

Finally, Jesus himself teaches this doctrine in His parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector; a parable in which He said, “*to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt*” (Luke 18:9). Thus, justification by faith is a doctrine taught by the whole Bible. But it is most clearly taught in Paul’s letters, which leads to my second point.

Two: Justification by Faith is Articulated Most Clearly by the Apostle Paul

Most agree that the doctrine of justification by faith is seen most clearly in Paul’s letters, and especially in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. Paul sums up the point of his letter to the Romans in 1:17, “*For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed by faith to faith, as it is written, ‘The righteousness shall live by faith.’*” Note that I have modified the ESV slightly, changing “*from faith for faith*” to “*by faith to faith*” in order to show how “*by faith*” is used two times in the original Greek of this verse. Justification by faith is at the center of Paul’s argument in this letter. Similarly, it is at the center of Paul’s argument in Galatians, which is summarized nicely in Galatians 2:16, “*yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*”

In this latter statement, we can see how Paul often contrasts justifi-

cation by faith with justification by works of the law, which leads to my third point.

Three: Justification by Faith is Another Way of Saying We are Not Justified by Our Works

Justification by faith is the opposite of justification by our works of obedience to the law. As Paul says it in Romans, “*we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (Romans 3:28). He also

“Once again, Paul clearly teaches that we are justified by our faith (Romans 3:28).”

draws an enlightening contrast between the worker and the believer: “*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness*” (Romans 4:4-5). Recall that Jesus also teaches that the

one who is justified before God is not the one who boasts in his or her own righteousness, but the sinner who cries out to God for mercy. Isaiah prophesied that our justification would come about through the suffering of the servant for our transgressions. And David teaches that “*no one living is righteous before [God].*” This means that none of us will be justified by our righteous works or our obedience to the law. Rather, we are justified through faith in Christ.

But wait...if we are justified by our faith, isn't that still something we do? Does justification by faith throw the onus of our justification on ourselves? This question leads to my fourth point.

Four: Justification by Faith Does Not Mean That Our Faith is the Ultimate Cause of Our Justification

Once again, Paul clearly teaches that we are justified by our faith

(Romans 3:28). And yet he does not mean by this that our faith is the ultimate reason we are justified. The ultimate reason that we are justified is this: Christ *“was delivered up [by God] for our trespasses and raised [by God] for our justification”* (Romans 4:25). Why then does Paul say that we are justified by our faith? Because our faith is the thing that rests upon—and unites us to—the Christ, who was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. Faith is belief in the truth of the gospel, as well as trust in the God of the gospel. It is an act of the whole inner person (“the heart”, Romans 10:9), which is directed toward the word of God, God himself, and especially toward the crucified and risen Christ. But if our faith is the inward act of the heart believing and trusting in Christ, does this mean our outward actions don’t matter at all for justification? This question leads to my fifth point.

Five: Justification by Faith Affirms That Good Works Necessarily Follow from Faith

The doctrine of justification by faith excludes our works of obedience to the law as a means, or cause, of our justification before God. But it also affirms that acts of love and good works necessarily follow from our faith as the fruit of our faith. For example, Paul teaches that *“in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love”* (Galatians 5:6). And James teaches that our faith is *“completed by”* our works (James 2:22), concluding that *“a person is justified by works and not by faith alone”* (James 2:24).

On the surface, this seems to correct and even contradict Paul’s teaching about justification by faith. But it is better to see James correcting a misrepresentation of Paul’s teaching—one that would say our works don’t matter at all (Romans 3:8). In contrast, James teaches that our works do matter. Genuine faith must result in good works. Paul also teaches that justification by faith results in the inclusion of the Gentile believers as part of God’s people, which leads to my next point.

Six: Justification by Faith Results in the

Inclusion of All Believers as God's People

One necessary conclusion from Paul's doctrine of justification by faith is the idea that God will therefore justify both Jewish believers and Gentile believers. If "*all have sinned*" and "*are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:23-24), then it follows that God is the God not only of Jewish believers, but of Gentile believers. Paul makes this point in Romans 3:29-30, "*Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not God of the Gentiles also? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.*"

Again, in Romans 4:9 he asks, "*Is this blessing [of righteousness apart from works] then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?*" Paul concludes strongly in favor of the latter option. The inclusion of the Gentiles is a point rightly emphasized by the New Perspective on Paul, although scholars who hold this view tend to wrongly see Gentile inclusion as the essential meaning of justification by faith, rather than as a necessary result of the doctrine of justification by faith.

We see then that justification by faith has corporate entailments. Our justification before God by faith results in the creation of a family of faith that includes all believers, Jewish or Gentile, slave or free. Nevertheless, the doctrine still speaks fundamentally about the individual's standing before God—something which has been captured well by its theological formations in church history. This leads to my seventh point.

Seven: Justification by Faith is a Protestant Doctrine

The doctrine of justification by faith, as we think of it today, was formulated by Protestant theologians at the time of the Reformation. One thinks immediately of the formula "justification by faith alone". This is a way of capturing the Bible's teaching that we cannot be justified before God by our own righteous obedience to the law, but only by our faith in the satisfaction and merit of Christ on our behalf. "Faith alone"

does not mean that works do not matter at all, because Protestant theologians are quick to affirm that while justification is “by faith alone”, this justifying faith is “never alone”, but is necessarily accompanied by love and good works.

A second important formulation for the doctrine of justification is imputation. Because we are united to Christ by the Spirit and by faith, our sins have been imputed to His account, and His righteousness has been imputed to our account. *Imputation* is an attempt to capture the truth of biblical statements like 2nd Corin-

thians 5:21, “*For our sake he [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*” Here Paul does not mean that God actually made Christ a sinner, but that He imputed our sin to Christ’s account, just as, in the parallel statement, He has imputed His own righteousness to our account.

Thus, as our doctrine of the Trinity is associated with the formulations of the Council of Nicaea, so our doctrine of justification by faith is associated with the formulations of the Protestant Reformation. But this does not mean that ancient Christians did not believe or experience the doctrine, which leads to my eighth point.

Eight: Justification by Faith is an Ancient Christian Doctrine

The formal articulation of the doctrine of justification by faith stems from the Reformation of the Western Church, beginning in the 16th century. But the doctrine of justification by faith had been taught and experienced by Christians long before the Reformation. We have already seen this in the Bible, but we also read of this doctrine in the Church fathers. For example, in the second or third century defense of Christianity called

“But the doctrine of justification by faith had been taught and experienced by Christians long before the Reformation.”

the *Epistle to Diognetus*, we find this beautiful passage: “He [God] did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us; instead he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins; he him-

“The promise of God in the gospel is that He will justify the ungodly and even bring the dead to life in Christ.”

self gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the

unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!” (Diognetus 9:2–5).

One can see here that justification by faith, as J. I. Packer says in his classic article on the subject, is a doctrine not only to be articulated, but to be experienced. But unfortunately, it is also a doctrine that has been surrounded by controversy, which leads to my ninth point.

Nine: Justification by Faith is an Embattled Doctrine

It seems that the doctrine of justification by faith often finds itself in the midst of controversy. Paul speaks of it in his conflict with false teachers, who were giving the Galatians a hard time about not being circumcised. And Protestant theologians formally articulated it in their attempt to reform the Western Church. We could say then it is a “polemic” doctrine, in that it is actively attacking false doctrine; but Paul and the Reformers were also defending the truth of the gospel—

the gospel Paul had received from God (Galatians 1:11-12), and the gospel the Reformers received from Holy Scripture. Today, among evangelicals—the heirs of English reformation—this doctrine is still often embattled. This can be discouraging, especially in an era where it seems that conflict is waiting around every corner. But perhaps it can also be encouraging that we are not the first ones to be in conflict over this doctrine. Indeed, the most important doctrines in the history of the Church are typically forged in the context of controversy. But my last point reminds us that the articulation, experience, and even controversy of justification are worth it.

Ten: Justification by Faith Brings Glory to God

There is something about justification by faith that gives particular glory to God. Paul says this of Abraham's faith: "*No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised*" (Romans 4:20-21).

The promise of God in the gospel is that He will justify the ungodly and even bring the dead to life in Christ. Thus, when we, like Abraham, acknowledge the gospel to be true and trust that God will do it, we give Him particular glory through Jesus Christ. This is why He says that the great aim of hearing the gospel, believing it, and receiving the Spirit as the down-payment of our future inheritance is all "*to the praise of his glory*" (Ephesians 1:14).

Once again, we see that justification by faith does not draw attention to ourselves and our great faith, but rather to Christ and God's great work of redemption through Him. ***"To him be glory forever. Amen"* (Romans 11:36).**

Do the Narratives of Jesus' Birth Contradict Each Other?

By Dave Jenkins



Two of the Gospel narratives give an account of the happenings surrounding the birth of Jesus.

Matthew 1-2 tells about Joseph and includes the story of the Magi from the East. Luke 1-2 does not

mention the Magi but focuses on Mary and others—including Elizabeth, Zacharias, the shepherds, Simeon, and Anna. Anna praised the Lord for the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus.

Various people have claimed that Matthew and Luke contradict each, and the narratives of the birth of Jesus seem to be in opposition to each other. The details provided by Matthew and Luke, as we will see, are easily reconciled and do not contradict each other.

Details That are Agreed Upon by Matthew and Luke:

- Jesus was born of a virgin (Matthew 1:18, 23, 25; Luke 1:27).
- Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, a town in Galilee (Matthew 2:23; Luke 1:26; 2:4).
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4-7).
- Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth after Jesus' birth (Matthew 2:23; Luke 2:39).

Details Unique to Matthew or Luke:

- The Magi visit Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12).
- Joseph and Mary flee Egypt to escape Herod's cruelty (Matthew 2:13-18).
- A group of shepherds visit Jesus in the manger (Luke 2:8-20).
- Joseph and Mary make a trip to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the Law (Luke 2:22-39).

The Central Claim of Contradiction in the Narratives

At the heart of the claim of a contradiction in the birth narratives are Matthew 2:21-23 and Luke 2:39. According to critics, Luke, who says nothing about the flight to Egypt, indicates that Jesus was taken directly from the temple. Matthew, according to the critics, does not mention the temple observances and says that Jesus was taken to Nazareth directly from Egypt.

Luke never says that Joseph and Mary did not go to Egypt and didn't comment on that event. Matthew never mentions the shepherds of the nativity. Neither Matthew nor Luke claim they are penning an exhaustive account of every detail surrounding the birth of Jesus.

The best way to understand Matthew's and Luke's narratives is to place the flight to Egypt after Jesus' appearance in the temple. This places Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem after Jesus' birth and stayed at

the “house” of Matthew 2:11.

Luke 2:39 doesn't say that they immediately returned to Galilee and doesn't specify how much time has elapsed here. Instead, he says that after they visited the temple, Joseph and Mary settled in at Nazareth, which means it could have been days or months. If we observe the details of the flight to Egypt in Luke 2:39, we discover the following:

- After visiting the temple, Joseph and Mary returned to Bethlehem (to a house they'd found a room in after Jesus' birth in the stable).
- Simeon and Anna began spreading the news that they had seen the Messiah in Jerusalem (Luke 2:25-38).
- Sometime later, the Magi arrived at Jerusalem and confirmed the news on the street that the Messiah had been born (Matthew 2:1-2).
- Herod sends the Magi on to Bethlehem, where they find Jesus (Matthew 2:3-11).
- The Magi return home a different way, and Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:12-13).
- Herod figures out that the Magi have disregarded his wishes, and he orders the slaughter of all male children, two years old and younger, in/near Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). The “two-year” computation indicates that Jesus could have already been that old.
- Herod dies in 4 B.C.
- Joseph brings his family back from Egypt (Matthew 2:19-21).
- Out of fear of Herod's son, Joseph changes his plan to settle in Bethlehem and instead moves back to Galilee (Matthew 2:22-23).

Nothing in the chronology mentioned above contradicts Matthew or Luke.

Some critics claim to find another supposed contradiction in the genealogies associated with the narratives of Jesus' birth. Matthew 1:16,

for example, says that Joseph's father was Jacob. Luke 3:23 says that Joseph's father was Heli. The best response to this is that Luke is recording Mary's genealogy, and Matthew is recording Joseph's.

All the Differences in the Gospels Can Be Harmonized

Four different men wrote the Gospels to four different audiences. The previous sentence is important because the Gospels include different details concerning the life of Jesus. Even so, their writing was inspired by the Holy Spirit, guaranteeing that what they wrote was the truth. So, while there are differences, they can all be harmonized. The narratives of Jesus' birth found in Matthew and Luke are not contradictory but complementary.

Supposed Bible Contradictions and Trusting the Bible

I'll never forget the conversation I had with a friend who had come home from Bible college. He told me during our discussion that apparent Bible contradictions shook his faith and confidence in the Bible.

“I've seen many people come home from Bible college or go through seminary and come out on the other side, questioning their faith.”

Growing up in the same church, we were encouraged to study the Bible and were equipped to do so from middle school on. Questions were encouraged, and I remember fondly studying systematic theology in high school. Many teenagers today don't have this opportunity. For me, it fueled a love for the Lord, the local Church, and the Word of God.

I've seen many people come home from Bible college or go through seminary and come out on the other side, questioning their faith. As we

considered apparent Bible contradictions, it's important to say there are good answers to questions people have from God's Word. The question isn't whether there are good answers to the questions being asked, but whether people ask the right questions from the biblical text.

One example of asking the wrong questions and getting the wrong answers is from liberal Protestantism. Decades ago, most mainline denominations abandoned the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. These denominations thought they could continue affirming the core tenets of Christianity while they rejected inerrancy and infallibility. Such a rejection, however, leads to a denial of orthodoxy and other matters. For these mainline denominations it all began with questioning biblical sexual ethics and other teachings, which led to rejecting the atonement and other critical teachings.

These mainline denominations had to question those core biblical teachings for consistency's sake. To deny the Word of God is without error (inerrancy) and without the possibility of error (infallibility) is to deny that the people of God have a trustworthy revelation from the Lord. When the people of God reject the authority of God's Word, they have stopped adhering to biblical Christianity and begun to adhere to another religion entirely, as J. Gresham Machen said in his classic book, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

As we study the Scripture, everything mentioned in the previous two paragraphs is demonstrated to be critically important because it will affect how we deal with the supposed contradictions in the Scripture. If we think that the Bible is full of errors and fairytales, no matter how good the answer is, it won't matter. But if we believe the Bible is without error and without the possibility of error, then we will come to the Scriptures, looking to unearth them by asking questions and enabling our faith to grow in and through Christ.

The Bible didn't fall from the sky on a parachute but took many different writers centuries to give us the complete works of Scripture.

Verbal-plenary inspiration doesn't mean the people of God won't find it difficult to reconcile biblical texts. The Bible is a divine book, but it is also a human book, not in that it is full of human errors, but in that it tells the human stories of the Lord's work in their lives. No two people write in the same way, and no two human beings report their perspectives on the same event(s) identically. Two people can accurately represent the same event without covering the same details. This is the issue, as we've seen in Matthew 2 and Luke 2. Differences do not mean contradiction. They mean that the author is putting more stress on one point, while another writer comes along and emphasizes a different point. Together these details fill in and tell the whole story.

Parting Encouragement

Today you might be questioning the Bible because of contradictions in Scripture. Dear Christian, you have a reliable, sufficient, and trustworthy Bible. You can open your Bible and ask all the hard questions you want of it, but asking questions apart from confidence in the Bible will lead you to be like my friend, who eventually left the church. Instead, I encourage you to wrestle with what the Bible teaches, not from a place of unbelief but belief in the Word. God has given you a Word in the Scriptures. God is faithful to His Word because He is a faithful and trustworthy God. Therefore, you can trust the Word because it reveals His holy, just, and perfect character. Please, dear friend, trust the Lord, read the Word, and grow in His grace.

How Was There Peace on Earth at Jesus' Birth?

By Dave Jenkins

After giving the shepherds the good news of the gospel in Luke, chapter 2, the angel punctuated his proclamation with praise. But he did not do this alone, as the Scripture



states, *“Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’”* (Luke 2:13–14). This is the third Christmas carol in the Gospel of Luke. Like the others, it was spoken rather than sung, yet it was written in a poetic form that has of-

ten been set to music. And like the other lyrics, it is commonly known by its first words in Latin: *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*—"Glory to God in the highest."

The Difference Between This Christmas Carol and Others

What makes this song different from the others is that it was sung by a chorus of angels. It was not a hymn that rose up from the earth, but an anthem that came down from Heaven. For this reason, the *Gloria* gives a fuller revelation of the true divine glory of Jesus Christ. God the Son had always enjoyed the adoration of angels. From eternity past, those sinless creatures had worshiped Him with perpetual praise. But now God was sending His Son into the world, where He would be despised and rejected unto death for the salvation of a lost and fallen race. This was the most glorious demonstration that God had ever made of His grace. Therefore, it was only right for Him to receive the highest praise. In the words of J. C. Ryle (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospel of Luke*), "Now is come the highest degree of glory to God, by the appearing of His Son Jesus Christ in the world. He by His life and death on the cross will glorify God's attributes,—justice, holiness, mercy, and wisdom—as they never were glorified before."

Imagine what joy it must have been to sing in that angelic choir. The skies opened up, and the countless choruses streamed from the courts of Heaven—an army of angels revealed in all its glory. They were singing in a new venue, praising God on Earth as they had always done in Heaven. Imagine what joy they had in going out in the middle of the night and scaring people half to death with the glory of God. They were also singing in a new key, praising God for His grace to sinners. Imagine what joy they had in worshiping the newborn Christ and saying, "Glory to God." God was highly glorified in sending His Son to be our Savior. The Christmas angels saw this glory and revealed it to the shepherds so that we could see it too.

The Benediction of the Angels

Then the angels pronounced a benediction. The coming of Christ was not just for God's glory, but also for the good of humanity. So after giving glory to God in the highest, they proclaimed peace on earth. What a contrast this was to the kind of peace that the Romans had to offer. This story began with a decree from Caesar Augustus, which reminds us that this was the age of the *Pax Romana*, when the Romans often praised their emperor for bringing “peace on earth”. But this peace came at a dreadful cost. Nations were subjugated and plundered, peoples enslaved, the poor oppressed. There were peace and prosperity for some, fear and poverty for others. According to Arnaldo Momigliano, Caesar “gave peace as long as it was consistent with the interests of the Empire and the myth of his own glory.”

“The shepherds are the perfect example. They did not choose God; God chose them.”

Even those who had outward peace in Roman times did not have rest for their souls. The famous Stoic philosopher Epictetus—a contemporary of Luke—observed that “while the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than even for outward peace.” Nor could the emperor offer peace with God, which is the most necessary peace of all.

The Peace of God for the Whole Person

But now a new King was born, and with His birth, the angels pronounced peace on earth—peace like the Hebrew *shalom*: total peace for the whole person. This meant peace with God, first of all. Until we have peace with God, we cannot have any true peace at all. Our sins cry out against us and we are afraid to die because, deep down, we know that we deserve judgment. But Jesus came to give us peace with God by pay-

ing the penalty that our sins deserve. The Bible says that in Christ, God was “*making peace by the blood of his cross*” (Colossians 1:20).

Once we have peace with God, we can have peace with one another by the power of His Holy Spirit. We no longer have to push to get our own way, but we can wait for God to work. “It is the work of Christ to bring peace into all human relations,” wrote Norval Geldenhuys in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, “Into man’s relation to God, to himself (his own feelings, desires, and the like), to his life’s circumstances (calamities and trials), and to his fellow-men. According as Christ is honored and is given admission to human lives, to that extent the peace on earth, which He came to bring, becomes a glorious actuality. In so far as people live outside Him, the earth remains in a state of disorder and strife without real peace.”

The Glory of God and Biblical Election

This peace is not for everyone, but only for the people whom God is pleased to bless. The *Gloria* is often taken as a promise of universal salvation: “*Peace on earth, goodwill to men.*” But as surprising as it may seem, this song teaches the doctrine of election. Its wording is essential: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*” (Luke 2:14). According to Darrell Bock, who has written the definitive commentary on Luke, the phrase “with whom he is pleased” (Luke 1:1–9:50), is “almost a technical phrase in first-century Judaism for God’s elect, those on whom God has poured out his favor.” The peace of God comes according to His sovereign pleasure. The shepherds are the perfect example. They did not choose God; God chose them. They had to respond in faith, of course, but it was by the sovereign grace of God that they heard the good news.

As one missionary studied this verse, he struggled to translate it into a native tongue. The term “peace” was incredibly difficult because there was no equivalent in the local language. But with the help of his assistant, he finally came up with a translation that captured the heart

of this verse when he wrote in a 2001 newsletter from Wycliffe Bible Translators, “God in heaven is just so good! So the people who live in this world, if God’s heart is happy with them, then their fear is all-gone now!”

“Their fear is all-gone now.” This is one of the happy results of the Savior’s birth. When we come to God through faith in Jesus Christ, we have real peace. We do not always gain the full benefit of that peace because sometimes we forget to trust God for it. But as we trust in Him, He gives us peace. We do not need to be anxious about the future. We do not need to be afraid of what people will think. We do not need to try to solve our problems on our own. We do not need to worry about how God will provide for us. We do not need to despair if we lose what we love. All we need to do is trust in God and He will give us peace.

Nasty Nazareth: Why Jesus' Hometown Had a Bad Rap

By Dave Jenkins



Luke 4:24 gives a general principle of human relationships.

We often envy the success of those who come from the same circumstances that we do. Indeed, the people of Nazareth seemed to resent the fact that rather than staying at home, Jesus went off and became a success elsewhere. This is especially a problem

for prophets, who get less respect than almost everyone else. People love their hometown heroes, but not their local prophets. Prophets have a way of confronting sin and unbelief, as Jesus did, which is hardly the way to become popular.

To prove His point about prophets without honor, Jesus used two examples from the lives of two of the greatest Old Testament prophets:

Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4:25–27). Like Jesus, these men often went without honor in their home country. Yet God used them to share His grace with two outsiders: the poor widow of Zarephath and Naaman the leper. Jesus emphasizes that these needy people were not from Israel: the widow lived in the land of Sidon; Naaman came from Syria. Since both of them were Gentiles, they came from somewhere outside the family of God.

Two Who Believed

The first story came from the ministry of the prophet Elijah (Luke 4:25–26). This woman was desperate: she was down to her last meal. But God sent Elijah to meet her and ask for a drink of water and a morsel of bread. At first, the woman refused (1st Kings 17:12). Elijah told her not to be afraid, but to go ahead and bake him a cake, then to feed herself and her son. He told her this based on a promise from God (1st Kings 17:14). Amazingly, the widow did what Elijah said. She went home to bake him some bread, and God miraculously provided for her. Her supplies did not run out, just as God had promised.

Why did Jesus use this story for one of His examples? Partly because the widow lived in Zarephath, which was outside of Israel, and therefore confirmed what He said about prophets being without honor at home. But Jesus also used her story for another reason: the widow had to believe God's promise *before* seeing God's miracle. If she had waited for God to prove Himself, she would have died of starvation long before she ever ate another mouthful of food. God would perform the miracle of the flour and oil only if she acted in faith by first making the bread. Only then would she see what God could do. In other words, she had to believe it before she could see it. And she did believe it! There were many widows in Israel, but this was the woman who had faith. She knew her need, recognizing her extreme poverty and fatal lack of resources. And she believed that God would do what He said.

The story of Naaman teaches the same lesson (Luke 4:27). Again,

like the widow of Zarephath, Naaman was an outsider—a commander in the army of one of Israel’s most hated enemies. Unlike the widow, Naaman was extremely wealthy; nevertheless, his leprosy made him just as needy. So, he traveled down from Syria to see if God’s prophet Elisha could do anything to heal him.

Elisha had just the remedy that Naaman needed. All he had to do was bathe in the Jordan River seven times, and his skin would be restored. But to do this, Naaman had to trust God’s word, and at first, he was skeptical. Elisha’s instructions made him angry because he was looking for a miracle that worked more like magic (2nd Kings 5:11). But eventually, Naaman’s servants persuaded him to do what Elisha told him to do. After all, his need was desperate, and all he had to do was wash and be clean (2nd Kings 5:14). Naaman acted in faith on God’s word, and when he did, he witnessed God’s saving power in his life.

With these two stories, Jesus was calling the people of Nazareth—and us—to faith. If they refused to believe, He would give His grace to those who would believe, just as He did in the days of Elijah and Elisha. But if only they took Him at His word, they would see the salvation of their God. This is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian faith. If we want to receive eternal life, we need to believe the promise of the gospel. God does not take us to heaven first and then ask us if we want to go there. Instead, He invites us to believe in Christ, promising that we will be saved forever when we do. We have to believe it to see it.

An Angry Response

The people of Nazareth still couldn’t see it, and they were not ready to believe it. The longer Jesus preached, the angrier they became until finally, they were ready to put Him to death (Luke 4:28–29). No prophet receives honor in his hometown, but even so, this was an extreme reaction.

Whenever Jesus said that His gospel was for the world, it always touched a raw nerve of Jewish patriotism, not to mention prejudice.

Later the Apostles faced the same kind of hostility (Acts 13:46–50; 22:21–22). People in places like Nazareth wanted to believe that God was only for them and not for others. They were offended by the idea that God would share His grace with people who did not even deserve it. So, when Jesus started talking about lepers and foreigners, it made them angry. They resented the implication that Gentiles would receive something that they did not have the faith to believe.

And so, they tried to stone Him, executing the ancient penalty for blasphemy. In those days, there was more than one way to stone someone. Sometimes the guilty party was tied up so people could throw rocks at him. But sometimes, it was easier to throw someone off a cliff, dashing him against the stones below. This is what the Nazarenes wanted to do with Jesus, so they dragged Him up a steep slope and tried to push Him over the edge. It was a clear case of mob violence.

This was not the first time someone tried to kill Jesus, and it would

“Jesus says that He can rescue us from our debt and bondage to sin, and restore our spiritual sight.”

not be the last. Herod tried to kill Him when He was still a baby. When He was a full-grown man, many people plotted against Jesus, until finally, they put Him to death. What happened at Nazareth was a premonition of the cross. Already we can tell that something horrible will happen to this man. We see what kind of Savior He will

become: someone *“despised and rejected by men”* (Isaiah 53:3). No prophet was ever dishonored like Jesus, not only in His hometown, but also by the very world He had made.

This time God delivered Him. Luke tells us that *“passing through their midst, he went away”* (Luke 4:30). This mysterious verse does not explain quite how Jesus escaped. Jesus came to suffer and die for sinners. But it was not yet time for Him to die. When it came time, He

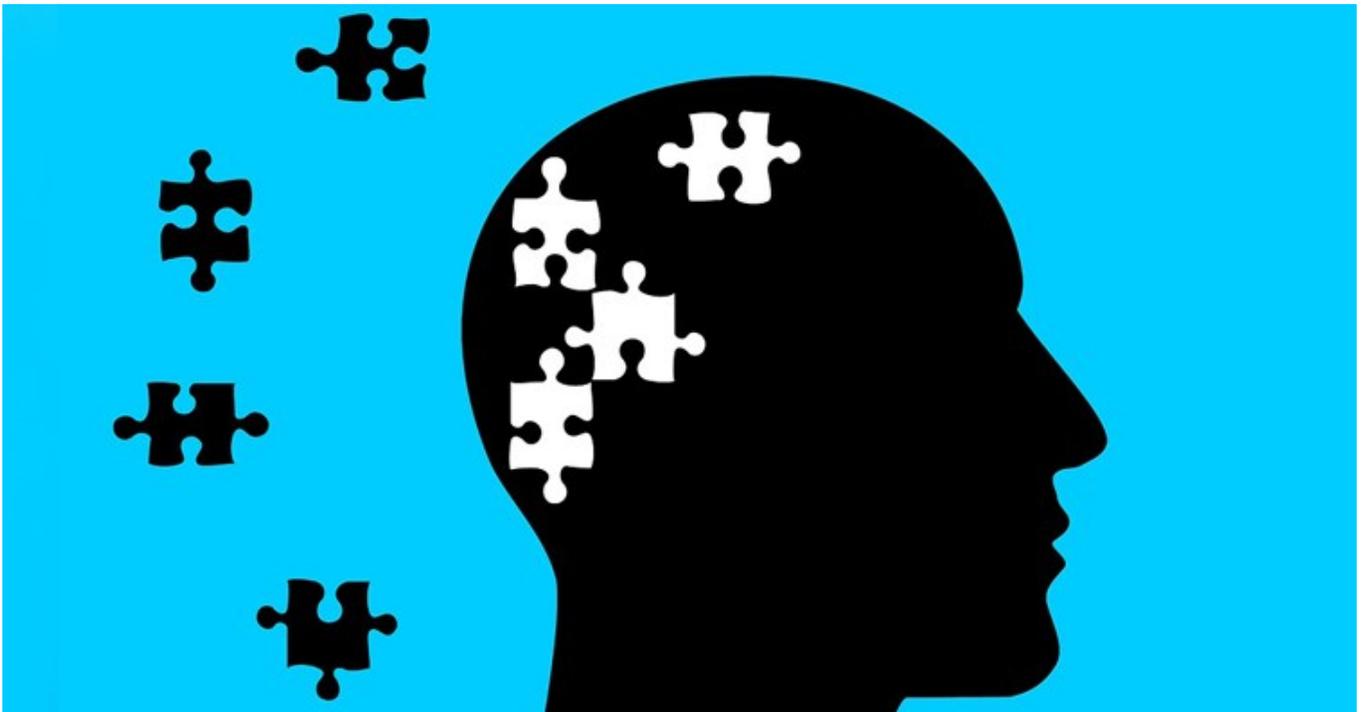
would do it of His own accord (John 10:18), but the hour of His greatest suffering had not yet come.

As far as we know from the Gospel of Luke, this was the last time that Jesus ever appeared in Nazareth. He went away and never returned. As John comments in his Gospel, "*He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*" (John 1:11). For some of them, it must have been the last opportunity they ever had to hear Jesus preach, to believe that He was the Christ, and to worship Him as their Savior and their Lord. They missed their chance! Rather than receiving Him by faith, they demanded more evidence, and when He refused to give in to their demands, they tried to kill Him.

Luke tells us these things to confront us with the claims of Christ. The question comes back to us: Who is Jesus, and what does He want with me? As we see how people responded to Jesus, we start to realize that we need to make a response of our own. We do not wish to kill Him of course, but if Jesus is who He says He is, then even an indifferent response will condemn us. We have heard the same gospel that the people heard in Nazareth, preached by the same Christ. Jesus says that He can rescue us from our debt and bondage to sin, and restore our spiritual sight. This is precisely what we need, if only we will admit it. If we trust in Him, He will release us and rescue us.

Does God Forget Our Sins?

By Dave Jenkins



Scripture teaches that God forgives and forgets sinners' sin in Christ (Isaiah 43:25; Hebrews 10:14-18). Passages such as Isaiah 43:25 and Hebrews 10 teach that the Lord does not remember the sins of sinners in Christ. Yet, we should not confuse the Lord remembering our sins with what we think of “forgetfulness”. The Lord is omniscient. He knows everything and forgets nothing. The Lord can still choose not to remember something. We may

or may not forget the offense against someone/ourselves. To forgive, however, prevents us from dwelling on past troubles.

Instead of treating our sins like they deserve, the Lord removes our sin as far as the *“east is from the west”* (Psalm 103:12). When we are saved, our sins are forgiven entirely, which is what Hebrews 10 is talking about—the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus—a one-time sacrifice that entirely removes our sins. In Christ, the people of God are justified

“One of Satan’s favorite tricks is to convince Christians that their sins aren’t forgiven...”

before Him. Romans 8:1 tells readers that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Romans 8:31-39 repeatedly speaks down to the nanosecond that Christians are held secure because of the Lord Jesus' finished and sufficient work. The Lord does not remember our sins because He treats us as righteous in Christ (2nd Corinthians 5:21).

Even when Christians do sin, the Lord is faithful to forgive (1st John 1:9). The Lord frees His people from the slavery of sin and sets them free to experience new life. Knowing the forgiveness of God in Christ, Christians can join with King Hezekiah in praise to Jesus, *“You have put all my sins behind your back”* (Isaiah 38:17). And like Paul we can *“press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3:13).

The Christian and Assurance

One of Satan's favorite tricks is to convince Christians that their sins aren't forgiven, despite the teaching we've seen from the Word of God so far in this article. Satan desires to constantly remind Christians of their past sins and uses those as “proof” that the Lord couldn't forgive them.

Psalm 103:12 tells Believers that the Lord not only removes our

sins, but removes them entirely from His presence. 1st John 1:9 makes clear that the Lord forgives the people of God as they come with an attitude of repentance and ask to be forgiven. Further, 1st John 2:1-2 solidifies this promise because it is backed by the work of Jesus as Advocate.

Christians need to be careful not to assume in light of this teaching that it doesn't matter how they live, because it does. It is not biblical for a child of God to live in habitual sin and continually live a lifestyle of disobedience (1st John 3:8-9). Paul's teaching in 2nd Corinthians 13:5 is relevant here because there's a difference between stumbling in sin and living a lifestyle of continual unrepentant sin.

Each Christian sins. Even the Apostle Paul did what he didn't want to do because of indwelling sin (Romans 7:15). Like Paul, the Christian's response is to hate sin, repent of it, and trust the grace of God to overcome it (Romans 7:24-25). Christians do not fall into slavery to sin because of the sufficient grace of God. When the faith of a Believer grows cold and we, like Peter, deny our Lord in word or deed, the Lord is still there, just as in the Prodigal Son's story, to forgive him/her of his/her sin.

Forgiveness and Assurance

Satan aims to get Christians to think that there is no hope and no possibility of forgiveness. Many people feel trapped by an overwhelming sense of guilt and so walk away from the Lord. What we must remember is that we were never worthy of the grace of God. The Lord loved, forgave, and chose His people to be in Christ before the foundation of the world, not because of anything they did (Ephesians 1:4-6), but *“in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be the praise of his glory.”* There is no place that the grace of God cannot reach, no depth to which we can sink that God is not able to rescue His chosen. The grace of God is greater than all of our sins, so whether we are starting to wander off course or we are drowning in our sin, the grace of God can forgive us.

Grace is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8), so when a Christian sins, the Holy Spirit will convict him/her of his/her sin so that godly sorrow is the result (2nd Corinthians 7:10-11). The Lord will not condemn the Christian, for there is no longer any condemnation for those who are in Christ (Romans 8:1). The conviction of the Holy Spirit is one of grace and love. Grace is not an excuse to sin (Romans 6:1-2). Grace is not to be abused nor treated as if sin is harmless or inoffensive. Unrepentant Christians need to be lovingly confronted and guided to freedom. Non-Christians need to be told they need to repent and put their trust in Christ alone.

Each people group needs to be told that the remedy to sin is the grace of Jesus (John 1:16). God's grace is how people are saved, how Christians are sanctified, and how they are kept by and glorified by God. Rather than cheapening the grace of God, every Christian should be grateful to Him for His gift and live a life of honor before His face.

The Apostles' Creed and Forgiveness

In Question and Answer 56 of the Heidelberg Catechism, which continues the exposition of the Apostles' Creed by focusing on the statement that Christians believe in the "forgiveness of sins", belief in divine forgiveness is confessed and deals with the Holy Spirit. The writers of the Apostles' Creed could have also placed this particular point in the creed's statement on the Father and the Son.

Though sinners may petition any of the persons of the Trinity for forgiveness, Scripture directs Christians to make their requests for pardon to the Father (Matthew 6:9-13). Christians are to ask for forgiveness grounded in the finished and sufficient work of Jesus (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit must regenerate sinners before they acknowledge their need for forgiveness and seek the remedy to it in the finished and sufficient work of Jesus (John 3:5). In our experience and understanding of Scripture, the Holy Spirit makes the first move toward the sinner for them to receive divine forgiveness.

Thus, the Apostles' Creed is right to discuss forgiveness within the setting of the Holy Spirit.

Micah and Forgiveness

Question and Answer 56 of the Heidelberg Catechism helps people understand divine forgiveness. In Micah 7:18-19, the prophet helps people understand and marvel at the greatness of the pardon offered by the Lord. Micah 7:18 teaches the uniqueness of the forgiveness of the Lord, revealing that no other deity can offer the pardon that the covenant Lord offers to His people. The forgiveness of God is incomparable because He forgives sinners in Christ alone, without compromising the justice of God (Romans 3:21-26). Scripture is clear that the Lord is both Just and the Justifier. The other "gods" of this world, who are no gods at all but demons masquerading as gods (Deuteronomy 32:17; 1st Corinthians 8:4-6; 10:20), compromise their "righteousness" when they "forgive" because they do not demand true atonement for sin.

The Righteousness of Christ and the Christian

Those whom the Lord has forgiven are genuinely forgiven. The Lord does not forget what His children have done, but He no longer holds their wickedness against them when their trust is placed in Christ. Through the blood of Jesus, the Lord sees His people as righteous and acceptable in His sight. The Lord will not take this status away from His people. While we may find it hard not to hold others' sins against them, the Lord easily and readily refuses to hold the sins of Believers against them.

Recommended Reading on the Person and Work of Jesus

In this issue of *Theology for Life Magazine*, we've been considering common questions about Jesus. We understand that we haven't covered everything on this topic, but it is our prayer that, hopefully, readers of this issue of *Theology for Life* will grow in their understanding of it so they can stand fast on the Word of God.

If you've found this issue helpful and would like to study this subject further, please check out the following reading list below. These pieces are at the top of their genre in both excellence and readability.

The Person of Jesus:

- *The Unexpected Jesus* by R.C. Sproul
- *The Person of Christ* by Donald Macleod
- *The Person of Christ* by G.C. Berkouwer
- *The Glory of Christ* by John Owen
- *The Person and Work of Christ* by B.B. Warfield

The Work of Jesus:

- *The Truth of the Cross* by R.C. Sproul
- *The Christian Life A Doctrinal Introduction* by Sinclair Ferguson
- *Putting Amazing Back Into Grace* by Michael Horton
- *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray
- *The Work of Christ* by Robert Letham
- *Pierced for Our Transgressions* by Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach

- *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* by John Owen
- *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott

Obviously there are many more great books on this subject not listed here, but hopefully you will find this a good place to start.

In Christ,
Dave Jenkins
Executive Editor, *Theology for Life Magazine*



About the Authors:



Robert Letham

Robert Letham (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is professor of systematic and historical theology at Union School of Theology. A Presbyterian minister with twenty-five years of pastoral experience, he is the author of books such as, *The Work of Christ*, *The Holy Trinity*, and *Union with Christ*, as well as a range of articles published in encyclopedias and journals.



Dave Jenkins

Dave Jenkins is the Executive Director of Servants of Grace Ministries, and the Executive Editor of *Theology for Life Magazine* and author of *The Word Explored: The Problem of Biblical Illiteracy and What to do About It*. Dave received his M.A.R. and M. Div. through Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Sarah, attend Covenant Life Fellowship in Roseburg, Oregon.



Stephen Wellum

Stephen Wellum (PhD, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) is professor of Christian theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and editor of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He and his wife, Karen, have five adult children.

About the Authors (Cont'd):



Kevin McFadden

Kevin McFadden (PhD, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the associate professor of New Testament at Cairn University in Philadelphia and the co-author of *Biblical Theology According to the Apostles*. He and his wife, Colleen, are members of Trinity Community Church in Abington, Pennsylvania.



Rebecca McLaughlin

Rebecca McLaughlin holds a PhD in renaissance literature from Cambridge University and a theology degree from Oak Hill College in London. She is the co-founder of Vocabular Communications and the author of *Confronting Christianity*, named *Christianity Today's* 2020 Beautiful Orthodoxy Book of the Year.

About the Authors:



Stephen Nichols

Stephen J. Nichols is President of Reformation Bible College, Chief Academic Officer for Ligonier Ministries, and a Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow. He is author of numerous books, including, *For Us and for Our Salvation*, *Peace, A Time for Confidence*, *5 Minutes in Church History*, and volumes in the *Guided Tour* series on Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, and J. Gresham Machen.



Greg Lanier

Greg Lanier (PhD, University of Cambridge) is an associate professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. He also serves as an associate pastor of River Oaks Church (PCA). He has published multiple books and scholarly articles on early Christology, the Gospels, the Septuagint, and other topics. Greg and his wife, Kate, live in Florida with their three daughters.

About the Authors (Cont'd):



R.C. Sproul

R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Florida, and executive editor of *Tabletalk Magazine*. He was author of more than one hundred books including, *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, and *Everyone's a Theologian*. He was recognized throughout the world for his articulate defense of the inerrancy of Scripture and the need for God's people to stand with conviction upon His Word.



Nicholas Needham

Nicholas Needham is a minister of Inverness Reformed Baptist Church in Inverness, Scotland, and lecturer in church history at Highland Theological College in Dingwall, Scotland. He is author of *2,000 Years of Christ's Power*.

Servants of Grace Ministries

www.servantsofgrace.org

www.theologylife.org



<https://www.facebook.com/Servantsofgrace>



<https://twitter.com/servantsofgrace>

Executive Editor:

Dave Jenkins

E-mail: dave@servantsofgrace.org

Design Coordinator & Editor:

Sarah Jenkins

Email: sarah@servantsofgrace.org