

“You Are That Man!” Accountability and Confrontation in Action

There is a powerful story found in 2 Samuel 12 detailing the confrontation of King David by the prophet Nathan. I suggest you read it if you have not done so before. David had sinned. He had committed adultery and worse. Nathan tells him the story of a family with one special lamb that is taken away by a rich man. As Nathan relates the details, David becomes increasingly angrier with the rich man and his selfish and greedy behavior. At the conclusion of the story, Nathan asks David to offer his take on the story – his verdict. David wastes no time. He declares that the rich man is guilty and that he deserves to die. (He also needs to make restitution fourfold.) Nathan responds with some of the most powerful and damning words found in Scripture: “You are that man!”

Nathan handled this entire situation masterfully. He laid bare David’s sin, his potential for excuses, and any conceivable defense. He confronted David boldly but with wisdom. He did not kick down the palace doors, get in David’s face, and yell and scream. He did not point any fingers until it was necessary. We have a lot to learn from Nathan in how we confront fellow believers who are sinning.

Earlier this week, Gordy Cannon [wrote a wonderful piece](#) about biblical confrontation. I agree with his take completely. He outlines our responsibilities at every turn, using practical language. I cannot begin to add to what he wrote or to make it any clearer. What I would like to do today is to add some texture to the conversation. This is not necessarily biblical in the strictest sense, but I do think it holds to biblical teaching and examples. What I am going to relate to you today is a personal story – an anecdote from my life – that will

hopefully help provide a practical approach to a situation that is difficult and complicated.

Right before I started my junior year at Welch College, my girlfriend broke up with me. It was quite possibly the most painful and traumatic experience of my life. I loved her. Even then, after only a year of dating, I was convinced we were going to marry. That break-up sent me into a downward spiral of self-pity and sadness. To put as fine a point on it as I can, that next school year was awful. I hated pretty much everything. I hated school. I hated (or seriously disliked) most of the people at school. I was miserable. I was angry. (Obviously, I handled the break-up with class, style, and maturity.) My grades plummeted. I skipped class, chapel, and all sorts of other things. I did the bare minimum, just enough to keep a passing grade in most of my classes. My older brother, fellow REO contributor Michael Lytle, was a graduating senior that year. He would make comments from time to time, trying to get me to stop being so lazy and wasteful with my time. Nothing worked. I was enjoying my anger and slothfulness.

I have no idea how many people around me knew how miserable I was or how much I was slacking off my responsibilities. I doubt many people except those closest to me realized anything was amiss. I rebelled as quietly and as under-the-radar as I could. I was not depressed or hopeless. I was angry and that anger turned into apathy.

Back when I was in college at Welch, the graduates would give their "Senior Testimony" during chapel. The day my brother was scheduled, I made sure I attended. He did a great job. He was funny, sincere, and concise. (Too many seniors felt it was their duty to go on and on during their testimony.) During his testimony, he thanked me personally – for my "inspiring work ethic" or something very close to that. It got some good laughs, especially from those who knew me best. I laughed. I was to the point that I knew exactly what I was doing and I

did not care anymore. However, those words stuck with me. They stuck with me every time someone I barely knew from college would come up to me and make a joke about that line. They stuck with me when some teachers did the same thing. I smiled. I laughed. Deep down, though, it was starting to cut. I had become a joke. I was a punch-line to a lot of people. When people saw me, many of them saw wasted potential. They saw laziness. That did not sit well with me anymore. My brother's words said in fun and with love, stopped feeling like a joke, and more like a subtle and incredibly wise form of confrontation. His words brought back to mind all the lessons I had learned from Scripture about hard work, excellence, and all those other defining attributes of a wise and godly person. I was not living up to any of those ideals.

Here is where things get a little tricky. I have no idea if my brother was going for confrontation when he made that joke in chapel. Maybe he was. Honestly, it does not really matter. It worked as the perfect form of accountability for me. Gentle rebukes were not working. Encouragement was not working. Telling me to stop being lazy and go to class was not working. Making a joke about my work ethic in front of the entire school worked. It was a turning point for me. It was not the end of my laziness, anger, and misery, but it was the first moment of self-reflection and change. And don't feel too bad about the break-up. We got back together a year later and ended up getting married. We are still married – nearly 19 years later. [You can read more about that story here.](#)

Not to get too hung up on the particulars of this story, but I think there is a lot to learn from both Nathan the prophet and my brother...the prophet. When we live in a community of faith, we will need to confront sin. Scripture is very clear that we must approach these situations with humility, but I think the story of Nathan gives us another angle to our approach. We need to be wise. Blunt and in your face does not work with most people. Too much subtlety is useless. We have to walk a

fine line with being direct and bold but not to the point where we burn the bridge before real confrontation even occurs. Obviously, this will take on a new form with each confrontation. That is where prayer and wisdom come into play. Literally, no one else in my life could have made that joke the way my brother did without it making me more angry and resentful. It was disarming coming from him. That is why it is of utmost importance for us to develop strong, intimate relationships with other believers. We need to truly know them to know what works if or when they stumble.

Take this for what it is worth, which might not be much. It is a very specific example from my life. It might not apply to anyone else's life but I am very grateful that it applied to mine. I am glad my brother has a great sense of humor and that he used to it to such a powerful effect on me. He was Nathan to my David. I was "that man" and I needed someone to hold me accountable. I hope we can do that for each other as we walk this road of faith together.

Church Discipline: The Form, The Attitude, The Reasoning, and The Goal

While I am positive the Bible runs counter to every culture in the world in many ways, it is how it is countercultural to America that most interests me as a citizen of this nation. Here at REO, we've written about many of them and one that I have not touched thus far due to how nasty its connotation can be is the issue of how churches deal with people caught in sin. What happens when the church finds out about a marital

affair? Or a porn addiction? Or that someone has been lying habitually, or dealing with anger in sinful ways?

I realize that orthodox American Christian churches historically have messed up this aspect of theology and practice quite badly at times and that has caused the concept of church discipline to be treated as a profane term to be avoided both in speech and action. I add that I believe my current church in Chicago has actually done this quite well biblically speaking, thanks almost entirely to the other elders I have worked with. This doesn't change the fact that this issue is significantly misunderstood and poorly practiced in some Baptist and Evangelical churches, if practiced at all.

I fear churches avoid discipline for at minimum three reasons. First, people so often in recent church history have done this with so little grace and without reconciliation in mind that it conjures up images of gossiping, self-righteous church members and leaders and scarlet letters. Second, on the opposite end, some churches simply do not judge the behaviors of their membership. Either through a warped view of grace, because of the fear of man, or a huge overlap of both, they never confront for any reason. These first two demonstrate how easy it is to live in extremes and not in the tension of balanced biblical interpretation and application—in this case, grace and truth[1. Which are not true opposites and need to work together, and that is basically the point of this whole article]. And third, the the current American church culture bends to segregating your church life and your personal life so that church is just a place to worship an hour a week and blend in and not a place to live in transparent, confessional community with other believers every day.

None of these things are remotely biblical.

Today I want to deal with it head on and with as much wisdom as I can. And as alluded to above, I do not come at this with mere head knowledge. I feel like I have been led by other men

of God and have through the fire. By the grace of God we have come to understand this area of theology to some level. Having said that, while the best teaching and preaching involves illustrations and personal experiences, I will obviously be avoiding that today out of prudence and common sense. At least for the most part. A simple interpretation of a few Bible passages will be enough to start and these interpretations—and not my own war stories—will be most effective in helping others understand this topic. Jesus and Paul, the main source material for the NT for this topic, both speak very plainly about it.

With these two men in mind, here are four crucial aspects to confronting sin in the church, according to the inspired New Testament authorities:

The Form: Four Steps of Increasing Severity

In Matthew 18:15-18 Jesus gives a very basic and practical model to follow when a fellow believer has sinned. First, confront them personally. If they do not listen, take another Christian with you. If that doesn't work, take it to the church. And then if they still do not listen then "treat them as an unbeliever (Gentile, pagan) or tax collector".

There is a lot to unpack there and some of it is open to interpretation but I'll try to be succinct. Disagreement here is welcomed below in the comment section (as well as disagreement with any part of this). The first two steps are pretty simple so I'll skip to the third one. Our church has interpreted "the church" as this being the step when the elders get involved. Not the whole church at large. Not only does the latter seem impractical in our culture, it is our aim to show as much grace and patience in keeping things private until absolutely necessary. I hasten to add here that my church does not practice these steps with a "one and done"

approach, meaning we may have several conversations at each step with the person caught in sin, as we try to figure out the truth and how best to serve the person, either through discipline or counseling or something similar.

Once the fourth step comes, then there is no choice. If the offending person shows no willingness to repent or even to meet with the church to present their side, then the person is removed from membership and the church must be notified.

What exactly does it mean to “treat them as an unbeliever or a tax collector”? Well in some way I believe it means you consider them as someone who is not a Christian because they cannot be if they are living in unrepentant sin. Especially after being shown that much grace. That part seems pretty straightforward. And after that? Well, this is where it can get hairy and part of this discussion is affected by how we view certain passages on the topic. I once had a disagreement with another elder at my church about how to treat a person at the fourth step, as far as how to interact with them. Based on 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 I was adamant that this person needed to be cut off and left to their own selfishness as punishment. No association with them would be biblical. Another elder more graciously advocated for trying to win them back through relationship, since that is what our church does with unbelievers. Isn't that the ultimate end to treating them as a pagan or tax collector? Could Paul and Jesus be in conflict here?

We discussed it for a long time. I admit the other elder was closer to the truth than I was but we both moved some towards the middle. We established that the way we would go about would be to try to maintain a relational connection if possible (in our experience people in stage four often do not want to have any communication with the church), but only to try to win them back with loving and graceful truth. Essentially by evangelizing them. But this does not mean we simply hang out with them as we would any other lost person

just to be a friend. I share Jesus with the lost friends I have but not in an aggressive way every time we are together. Sometimes we just get together to watch a baseball game. I may work Jesus into the conversation, but it is not always the main point in the meeting. That is a crucial difference between a Step Four unbeliever and an unbeliever who has never been a part of the church. The former needs to be approached with restoration as the primary goal of the meeting. That is at least where my church landed.

The Attitude: Humble Self-Awareness

In Galatians 6:1, Paul makes it clear that when we confront someone in sin, no matter which step I would think, it has to be with humility. This can be shown through our word choices and the whole of our nonverbal communication, though I am sure what humility looks like will change from person to person. It obviously isn't weak or passive or apologetic in this context but it absolutely should communicate to the sinning party, "I am not better than you. I could very easily be caught in sin just as you have been." Self-righteousness has no place in church discipline. And it is my firm belief that if a Christian is living face down before God in worship, preaching the Gospel to themselves, and seeking forgiveness from God and others daily, then when it is time to confront, they will be able to practice Galatians 6:1 correctly. Isn't this what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:1-3 as well?

The Reasoning: Protect the Body from Death

Paul gives a significant amount of teaching on this topic in 1 Corinthians 5. But for this article, I want to zero in on one thing he teaches. We practice church discipline and are willing to put people out of membership for a reasonable end:

if you do not take sin out of the church, it will spread throughout the church like gangrene in a diseased foot will go to the rest of the body. Amputation can absolutely be the most gracious thing to keep a body healthy. He uses the illustration of yeast in bread but the point is the same; the sin of one person can corrupt the whole church if not extracted. That is just the nature of sin and humanity. If a person sins without repentance and the church lets them stay, other members will be extremely inclined to fall into similar temptations. So by removing the unrepentant former member from the church community, you are actually doing something entirely gracious—you are protecting God's bride, who is supposed to be presented to him as radiant and without spot or wrinkle. This is of course primarily because the blood of Christ makes the church clean, but repentance keeps her clean. A lack of repentance, even by a single individual, can potentially ruin the whole body. Churches must be willing to seem ungracious to that one so that they are being gracious to all.

The Goal: Reconciliation, Always

Perhaps the biggest sin of Phariseeism is that its self-righteousness makes reconciliation impossible. No matter the teaching in the New Testament, I cannot help but comprehend this topic as one where reconciliation with the one caught in sin and the church as the goal of every step. There is no room in our churches for "You messed up so you don't belong here." Quite often in my experience, people do not say this to the sinning person's face; they just gossip them out of the church. Gossip is about as perpendicular to healthy confrontation, humility and reconciliation as it can be. And as such is listed with the worst sins in New Testament lists (Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:20).

Instead, we need to be actively seeking reconciliation and

restoration with the person caught in sin. That is what Jesus was teaching by giving the steps he gave in Matthew. It seems obvious to me that just looking at those four verses (vs. 15-18) you can see grace being shown by giving the person numerous chances to repent and by giving their sin privacy. But by looking at the larger context of Matthew 18, it becomes even more obvious how essential it is to see the guilty person as someone to be forgiven if they repent. In 18:21-35, Jesus teaches that we forgive over and over and over precisely because God has forgiven us far more than we have been offended.

Additionally, I believe Paul dealt with the offending man from 1 Corinthians 5 in his second Corinthian letter and taught to welcome him back into fellowship. Now I must assume that the man had repented because I do not think you can have reconciliation without repentance. You can forgive without it, but reconciliation takes two people: A forgiving victim and a sorrowful offender. But the fact Paul advises to forgive and accept the man from 1 Corinthians 5 is powerful when you consider how repulsive his sin was.

Much more could be said on this topic but part of why REO exists is to foster discussion and not presume to present the final, authoritative word on subjects like these. So feedback even in the form of disagreement is welcomed below.

m

Five Lessons Learned from F. Leroy Forlines

Let me tell you a story. I am one of many who grew up under the ministry of Leroy Forlines, long-time theologian and professor at Free Will Baptist Bible College (now [Welch College](#)). There are few people who have had as great an influence in shaping me than Mr. Forlines; my mother, my pastor, and a handful of others.

Mr. Forlines was a teacher, mentor, example whose personal integrity and godly life touched many of us. Now in his 90s, Mr. Forlines is a national treasure to our denomination, and to the entire body of Christ. A few months ago, an REO contributor [wrote a tribute to him](#). My thoughts here are somewhat a tribute as well, obviously, but I want to be more personal and talk of how he influenced me in several ways, both big and small. I hope to follow this article with another that will focus on one of his sayings or approaches to finding the truth: his well-known “poles of tension” that I first heard articulated in the 1970s.

1. Mr. Forlines was intentional in teaching good manners.
2. Mr. Forlines was insistent in teaching his students to accept responsibility.
3. Mr. Forlines was inexorable in emphasizing a commitment to holiness.
4. Mr. Forlines was important in our movement as a theologian.
5. Mr. Forlines was involved in ministry in his later years – bearing fruit even unto old age.

1. Mr. Forlines was intentional in teaching good manners.

It was my first or second year at Free Will Baptist Bible College, 1969 or 1970. I asked a young lady (not Judy; it was

before we started dating) for an on-campus date. These consisted of either sitting in the student lounge, outside in certain designated areas or walking around one of the approved blocks on or near the campus. This particular day the young lady and I were walking, probably around Richland-Bowling, and met Mr. and Mrs. Forlines who were approaching from the opposite direction. He greeted us, and then pulled me aside and said: "a gentleman walks on the outside of a lady on the sidewalk." I hadn't even thought about it. I learned a lesson in etiquette I remember to this day.

2. Mr. Forlines was insistent in teaching his students to accept responsibility.

Every week, usually on Wednesdays, we men students had an on-campus meeting. Usually, Mr. Forlines met with us. Some guys found the meetings boring and a waste of time, but my friend Seldon Buck and I had a ball, listening and laughing (not out loud) as Bro. Forlines shared with the guys. There was always Scripture, some sort of devotional thought, but so much more, especially as it related to living responsibly in a campus dormitory situation. Things like flushing the toilet, knocking on a fellow students' door before entering, keeping your room neat; things of that nature that some of the guys didn't do too well. Occasionally, Mr. Forlines would do some entertainment, such as his famous trick of standing on his head and drinking water. Amazing! I don't know if we realized it at the time, but he was helping us grow up as young men, and even when it was emphasizing rules, it had its value. I personally am grateful for those "Boy Scout" meetings, as they were known.

3. Mr. Forlines was inexorable in emphasizing a commitment to

holiness.

I don't recall the first time I heard him utter the phrase "a passion for holiness," if it was during my student years or shortly after graduation when I heard him speak at a National Convention or Bible Conference, but I do know that it became a passion of his to stress the importance of striving after personal holiness. It came up frequently and reminded us of how far we often fell short, and how our hearts needed to be focused on holiness. He drove it home every time he could, and I am thankful.

4. Mr. Forlines was *importantísimo* in our movement as a theologian.

That's a Spanish word which conveys a little more than any English word could: he was of the greatest importance as the theological voice in our movement. After Bible College, he spent nearly a decade in institutions of higher education, earning multiple degrees, and studying under some of the finest minds in the world. Not only did he shape our movement by training hundreds of pastors and missionaries, he was able to influence others who came to the college who weren't Free Will Baptist. Additionally, his articles in CONTACT magazine provided theological insight to many more who did not study at the college. His years of service on the Commission on Theological Liberalism was a voice of warning about dangerous trends that threatened the evangelical faith once delivered to the saints. His works such as *Systematics*, and later *The Quest for Truth*, showed how he remained current and relevant in theological debate, and did so with grace, kindness, and an irenic spirit, even while standing for the truth boldly.

5. Mr. Forlines was involved in ministry in his later years, bearing fruit even in old age.

Amazingly, while still teaching at Free Will Baptist Bible College, Leroy Forlines and his wife Fay were able to travel to Russia and spend considerable time there teaching Russian pastors. After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, it immediately became possible to travel to Russia, and the Western evangelical world began to do just that. Russian Baptists have always been historically Arminian in theology, but most of those going from the West were Calvinist and brought a strong Calvinist emphasis. Our brothers there were so thankful to learn of Arminian theologians from the West who were virtually identical in their viewpoints with them, and Leroy Forlines, Robert Picirilli, Garnett Reid, Thomas Marberry, and Ron Callaway were able to spend much time with them. The Forlines stayed for several months, and covered the entire country. Mr. Forlines also spent time in India with veteran missionary and former college classmate, Carlisle Hanna. I well remember him sharing with me, with tears, the impact the India trip made on his life. I think it was tremendous to see someone his age expand his horizons, and no doubt at great personal discomfort serve His Lord in that way.

I suppose someone might ask, "feeling as you do about F. Leroy Forlines, he must have been your favorite teacher." Actually, I never had one class under Mr. Forlines! The reason is, I had not determined my area of study my first two years, and when I was called into missions I had to cram a number of missions courses into three semesters, and I was not able to include Systematic Theology or Biblical Ethics.

However...in subsequent years I devoured everything Mr. Forlines wrote. I taught Systematic Theology no less than five times in Spanish in Panama, and Ethics at least four times. Mr. Forlines' works and thought are so embedded in mine, that I

think it's safe to say no other theologian or thinker has influenced me more. I am truly thankful for his life.

*Image courtesy of [ONE Magazine](#).

Is Holiness God's Fundamental Attribute?

Is God's fundamental attribute holiness instead of love?

I was taught this in my Systematic Theology class back in Bible College. I rejected the teaching for years, however, thinking that God doesn't really have a fundamental attribute. I stated my opinion as God's love doesn't cause him to be holy but his holiness didn't require Jesus to go to the cross and die in the greatest act of sacrificial love of all time.

I don't necessarily disagree with my stated opinion above but I have come to the conclusion that even if that opinion is true, God does have a fundamental attribute. The problem I had in seeing it is that I had a definition of "holy" that was too narrow. I suppose it was because of how I was raised but even though I knew the technical definition of the word as "set apart" I associated it with moral perfection. God is morally perfect and when he tells his people to be holy it means he wants them to be set apart from other nations in their moral excellence.

But that isn't the totality of the meaning and when you get closer to the fuller meaning it becomes clearer as to why I changed my mind about this.

First I want to establish that definition. But I want to go

beyond a strict dictionary definition of “holy” and its like forms. Back in grad school, my favorite professor, Dr. Wong Loi Sing, used to teach us to consider when doing hermeneutics what he called the “wording of meaning”. He distinguished it from the meaning of words. To give an illustration of what he meant by the difference, if I said you are the “apple of my eye,” then you would know that a strict dictionary definition of “apple” would be wrong. (A good dictionary will give idioms and the like, and that is the point.) A biblical example is when David writes in Psalm 139, ‘You discern my going out and my lying down”. He obviously means that God knows everything about him, and says so plainly in the same verse. But he uses two phrases that are not meant to be taken literally to get the totality of the meaning. This can be classified as a merism in Hebrew, which is when an author uses two extreme boundaries to speak to the entirety of something. Like English may say “I love you from your head to your toes” to talk about loving a person completely.

In all of these cases, how the words interact with each other in phrases and clauses—and not precisely what the words mean in a dictionary—is of utmost importance. Dictionary definitions matter, of course, but communication meaning resides more so with how we use words to make meaning.

So with that in mind, I want to look at ways the Bible uses the word “holy” in context of other words and terms around it and pull out a more fuller meaning than just “set apart.” Then I will examine why I think this definition fits with God’s core attribute.

1. The Sabbath Day

In verses like Gen. 2:3 and Ex. 12:16 God establishes this day as set apart in the sense that it was not like other days. Six days were for work, one was set aside for worship and rest. This day was unique. It was different. At its heart, it was

opposite the previous six days.

2. Israel

“Now, therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” (Ex. 19:5-6)

Again they were set apart, as special. They were treasured in a distinct way. They were not like other nations.

3. The Holy Place and The Holy of Holies

In reading chapters like Exodus 26, 28 and 31, we learn that only priests could enter into the Holy Place and it was separate from the people by a veil or a curtain[1. Words like “veil” and “curtain” conjure up more flimsy images of material than what this was—extra-biblical materials say that it was four inches thick and that two teams of horses pulling in opposite directions could not pull it apart.]. Entering the Holy Place had to be preceded by quite an ordeal of clothing or death would result. That is how serious this separation of holy place from what was outside is.

The Holy of Holies was even more separated—only one man one time a year could enter it.

So you can get a sense of “holy” from the things God considered holy—days, people and places. Yet the Bible defines God as holy in the most extreme sense of “set apart”. It describes Him, as I did about Aslan the Lion from the Narnia series, as wholly unique, transcendent and “other.” No person or god or anything in all of the universe is like him. He hits upon this idea over and over in a long section near the end in Isaiah. Even though Isaiah does not use the word “holy” in all of these verses, this is what I think it means:

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Is 43:3)

I, I am the Lord,
and besides me there is no savior (43:11)

I am the Lord, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King. (43:15)

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
"I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and set it before me." (44:6-7a)

Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!
Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any. (44:8)

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer,
who formed you from the womb:
"I am the Lord, who made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself." (44:24)

I am the Lord, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God; (45:5 ab)

For thus says the Lord,
who created the heavens
(he is God!),
who formed the earth and made it
(he established it;
he did not create it empty,
he formed it to be inhabited!):
"I am the Lord, and there is no other."(45:18)

Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!

For I am God, and there is no other.
By myself I have sworn;
from my mouth has gone out in righteousness
a word that shall not return:
'To me every knee shall bow,
every tongue shall swear allegiance.' (45:22-23)

To whom will you liken me and make me equal,
and compare me, that we may be alike? (46:5)

For I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me,
10 declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times
things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I
will accomplish all my purpose,' (46:9-10a)

For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my
name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. Listen
to me, O Jacob,
and Israel, whom I called!
I am he; I am the first, and I am the last. (47:11-12)

This is why I think holiness, and not love or anything else,
is God's fundamental attribute. If you asked me what God is
like, there is nothing more essential to his being than that
he is not like us. And different and unique in the most
magnificent way possible. Worthy of worship and glory because
of who he is. I will use words like "respect" and "honor" to
describe how I react to my dad or my pastor. But there are
some words and phrases I will only use for God: "worship,"
"glorify," "bow down to," etc. This is the essence of God to
me. His holiness doesn't necessarily cause him to love, but it
does mean his love is also unique and set apart, as Romans
5:6-8 explains that it is. Human love is not in the same
universe as God's love.

As the church we, of course, are supposed to be holy as Israel

was commanded to be thousands of years ago in that we are different from the world—morally and in other ways—and unique as God’s special possession. The word church even literally means “called out ones”. But we can never truly be like God. Not when his holiness is understood most fully and completely.

And that is why I consider it his primary attribute.

Early Church Christianity in 2019 and Beyond

If you have a problem, a simple online search will present you with an almost unlimited array of solutions. Most of these solutions will be of the quick and easy variety. We look for shortcuts to save us time and energy. We call these things “life hacks” or “cheat codes” or “quick-fix schemes.” I am definitely not against finding more efficient ways to handle my problems. There is a catch, though, as these schemes and hacks are often fraudulent or ineffective and they end up creating more problems than they solve.

It can be difficult to navigate a broken and sinful culture. Often, we feel our Christianity becomes more about what we do not do and whom we are not as opposed to what we do and who we are. Instead of presenting the positive side of our faith, we feel that we are constantly labeled by the negative side. (By positive, I am referring to being salt and light to the world. By negative, I am referring to sinful behaviors we rightly avoid.) Our faith is reduced to going to church and avoiding sins.

Obviously, that is not the life Jesus calls us to live. That is not the life the Scriptures exhort us to cultivate. As I

stated earlier, we are called to be salt and light – things that preserve, flavor, and shine. So, how can we do that? Is there a cheat code to get from where we are to where we need to be? Yes and no. We have clear directions in Scripture to help us but we either overlook them or ignore them. This is not a quick-fix scheme, but these are all practical things each of us can do to make our Christian walk richer, deeper, and more impactful to the world around us.

1. Love without hypocrisy.

This is the foundational piece. Our love needs to be real and authentic. It cannot be reserved only for those that love us in return. We need to love and bless those that curse us – our enemies or those people who hate and mock us. We should be known for our love – love for the church and for everyone around us. Our love should keep us humble as we constantly strive to prioritize others. Our love should spur us to greater acts of service, kindness, and generosity – showing hospitality to all. Love should be our defining characteristic.

2. Hate evil and cling to what is good.

This is easier said than done but it is what we are called to do as believers. The two-part idea here is clear: It is not just about avoiding evil. Our lives should be characterized by good. Clinging brings to mind holding on for our lives. We are drowning people and we are clinging to the hand of our Master who walks on the waves.

3. Be diligent and hard working in our service to the Lord.

This is where it hits me the hardest. It is easy for me to work hard if it is something I love. It is not so easy to work hard if it is mundane and boring. Often, my job is mundane and boring. That should not matter. My work ethic should point to Christ. If it does not, then I am failing in one of the key Evangelism tools I have at my disposal.

I fail too often.

4. Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice – even in difficult times.

How often are we commanded to be filled with joy? To look pain, suffering, and loss in the eye and rejoice? Too many to count. We live with hope, unlike the world that has none. So even in times of great trial and loss, the hope that is in us should shine out the brighter.

5. Be peacemakers.

How easy is it to “hate” that person on the news (a person you do not even know) who is espousing some insane political/social/ethical stance with which you completely disagree? How easy is it to dismiss your neighbors who are boorish and loud? How easy is it to lose your temper when driving in horrible traffic, yelling at the drivers around you? These are not the actions of a person of peace – a child of peace. So far as it depends on us, we should be at peace with everyone. It is not a suggestion. It is a command.

Bonus: We should be devoted to prayer. This one is self-explanatory. We all need to pray more often and more

fervently.

For what it's worth, these are not my ideas. I did not come up with this list on my own. I repackaged the second half of Romans 12. We read that passage this Sunday morning in small group and it hit me hard. I have not been able to take my mind off of it all week. I figured God was keeping it in my mind for a reason so I decided to share it with the REO audience. Go read the passage yourself. There is much more I barely hinted at. If we start living this passage every day, everything would change. I am 100% sure of that. I do not live this passage out, as I should. That changes now. Will you join me?

Book Review: The Gospel Comes With A House Key

When I was in college studying youth ministry and biblical theology, my degree professor read from "My Utmost From His Highest" to begin some of our classes and he referred to it as "The Hammer." That's the word that first came to mind as I read the book I'm about to review. There are clearly parts of the Bible and especially the Gospels that are woefully under-practiced in America and our culture is good about making excuses and rationalizations as to why. This book crushes those two things with a mighty swing of a basic theology of what the author calls "radically ordinary hospitality".

Rosaria Butterfield splashed onto the scene a few years ago with *The Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert*, which my dad strongly encouraged every teenager and adult in my immediately family to read. That work put her on the map and for very good

reason. It is a unique story of transformation that only the Christian God could have written. But using her to tell it made her a must-read author to my mind and I am thrilled my senior pastor informed me about this book. In reviewing it I am not going to get fancy; I will tell you what I loved about it and then talk about the things that I was unsure about. I aim to give the benefit of the doubt so I won't go as far as to say I do not like them. But they are things I would love ask Rosaria about if I ever got to talk to her.

Things I Loved

First, I loved just the simple premise of the book and how plainly yet boldly the challenge is laid out and exegeted: The Bible calls us to hospitality and that means doing the sacrificial thing and opening up our homes to people in extremely intimate and absolutely inconvenient ways. In the Preface on page 11, she articulates her thesis very simply: "A truly hospitable heart anticipates every day, Christ-centered table fellowship and guests who are genuinely in need." I may be in the minority but I do not know many people who practice this. The fact she wrote this makes me think I am not in the minority. The way she uses the Bible (passages like Luke 9:44-50) and her own experience (including her daily schedule!) to support this statement is the heart of the book. It is what convicted me for nearly 200 pages. She is not afraid to be offensive by speaking a hard truth. I deeply respect that.

Secondly, I love how brutally honest she is about how rough hospitality can be in 3D. After a few dozen pages, you may think (if you are like me), "Man she sure is bragging on herself a lot." That thought was not enough to get me to put the book down because the material was far too good, and I know that sometimes my own insecurity and defensiveness cause me to perceive other people preaching truth to be haughty. But

Butterfield eventually makes sure that God's grace is manifested through human weaknesses. She tells of a time her family adopted a daughter at 17 years old and how the girl did not take to them and as she aged out she left them behind. She tells about how when her mother lived with them it wrecked their hospitality efforts and put a strain on their family that exposed her (Butterfield's) own sinful nature. She tells of a time her family got robbed and how no one in her house "found okay" for months. She talks about how to deal with hospitality with a "Judas," the individual at a church under church discipline and how complicated that makes living out her thesis. By the end of the book, I appreciated significantly how Butterfield demonstrates that life in Christ is not picture perfect and that community can be ugly, messy and filled with rejection. She has a sober view of self in my opinion and does not come across as falsely humble. Any time a Christian is honest about themselves, humility should be the result. She is raw and transparent in her stories.

I also love how she brings self-righteous people like me to their knees by pointing out when church leaders get caught in sins and prove that our judgmental, inhospitable approaches to people we perceive to be more sinful than us are not biblical. Jesus got his hands and feet dirty reaching out to the people in society that no one would touch (the way she explains Jesus' response to leprosy is masterful) and he was morally perfect. Who am I to walk to the other side of the road to avoid others? People in my circles of Christianity know Jesus ministered to the disenfranchised. Yet who among us is living as he did? We often are too worried about getting taken advantage of to really live out the story of the Good Samaritan or too concerned with dignity to bend down and associate with the dirty sinners among us. The truth is that quite often that the same pride that prevents us from ministering to those people is the same pride that leads to our own downfalls. Butterfield is at her best here, providing a searing rebuke to modern Pharisaical Christianity. Trust me,

I need this. I get this teaching at my church but her skills as a writer really accentuated things I can get complacent about. Just recently I heard about a girl who got pregnant at 11 years old and my first thought was a Pharisaical one (I didn't have sex before marriage!), even though I've lusted after women thousands of times in my life. I need this book for this reason.

Lastly I love how she makes a point to say that hospitality is not just receiving people but going into their homes as well. It is being a host and a guest. This is something I have noted good churches in Chicago have been promoting in recent months—why not do what Jesus did with Zaccheus and others and invite ourselves to others' homes to evangelize and disciple them? This is definitely counterintuitive and countercultural to me but this book motivates me to try it.

What I Am Unsure About

If you have read anything by Butterfield you know it seems like she has passionate and pointed opinions about secondary things, like singing only biblical psalms and not “man-made hymns”. But at the same time, I do not know her personally so I tread very carefully in judging the things she writes that cause me to furrow my brow. One of the things in this book I am speaking to is from page 103:

“Next in the biblical family is a mom who is home and available to serve. While I am employable in a full-time way outside of the home, our family has always needed me at home, and so home I am. As a stay-at-home mom I can do one hundred helpful things for the people I love most in the world in the first thirty minutes of waking. Things that matter and cannot be farmed out to others for pay.”

Now, of course as a man married to a Chicago Public School

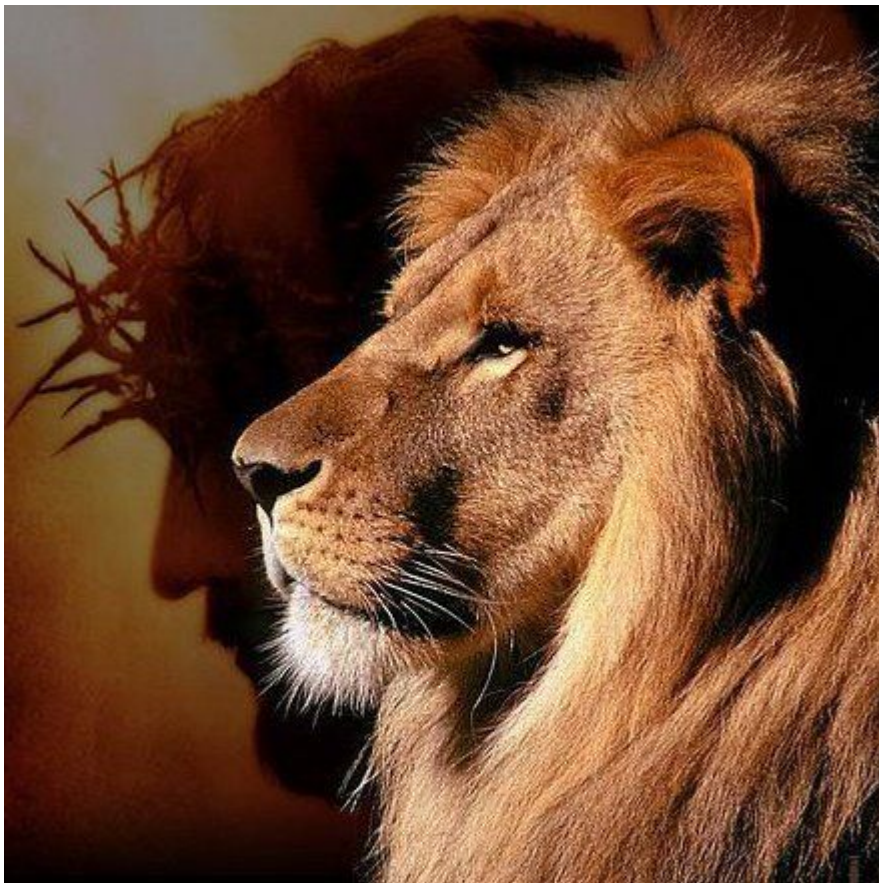
teacher who is paid pretty well to experience some of the most frightening aspects of humanity, all to be salt and light to inner-city children, I wonder at first exactly what she means by that. Other parts of the book make me think that it is not as myopic as it may sound. Part of the issue is that stay-at-home/homeschooling debate has created a lot of scars, for all kinds of people. But setting aside this baggage, which biblically I should do to live in community, I can try to understand Butterfield better here. She and I are absolutely on the same team. We can sharpen iron with iron on topics like these.

Another thing that gave me a bit of pause is her willingness to bring the government and politics into the discussion on hospitality. Now, I agree with everything she said, but I come at it with a bias. Also, I have zero issue with Christians calling out politicians on their words about people who are different, especially those who are not from America. But on the issue of policy I am less clear how much the Bible says about what a sovereign nation is required to do in the compassion vs. national security debate. I appreciate how plainly she speaks and the risks she takes here, but I am not sure how much I agree with every jot and tittle of her conclusions. I vote for compassion but I have Christian friends who think differently so I do not consider this an absolute truth issue, as some people on both sides seem to want to.

Overall this is a necessary book for 2019 America. It has messed with my mind in the best way possible. I hope to practice it, even with a baby coming. Because as Butterfield teaches, our excuses, even those that involve the protection and safety of our children, can at times succumb to the weight of Biblical demands to love the unlovable and to allow others to infiltrate our most secure dwelling: our home. I recommend it to all Christians everywhere.

Narnia's Aslan and The Biblical Trinity

*"Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again."*



The greatest fantasy works of the last century all have a character that feels larger than life, a leader that seems omniscient at times and full of wisdom all the time. I'm thinking of course of wizards like Gandalf and Dumbledore in literature and the Jedi Yoda in film. Each in their own way has an air of both invincibility and goodness to them so that you know the hero of each story is in good mentoring hands as

they seek to vanquish the evil they must face.

Even among this specific genre of character, there is something wholly unique about C.S. Lewis' Aslan the Lion, who impacted a wide range of heroes across seven distinct stories. As a Christian, his uniqueness is obvious after even a cursory reading of *The Chronicles of Narnia*—far more than a wizard or Jedi, he seems sovereign and completely transcendent over humans and every other being in the fantasy world in which he resides. To say it another way, he is godlike. And seeing as how C.S. Lewis' intention in creating Aslan is not a secret, I think we can say he is Godlike. Capital G. It would be an exaggeration to say that I've learned more about God from Narnia than from Lewis's non-fiction but it's closer than you would think. Every time I've read these stories, this aspect of Aslan has struck me as more and more meaningful.

This year I completed my 4th reading of this series all the way through (having read *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* maybe ten times), taking notes on this topic. And I was able to really zero in on this one thought as I read this time—Aslan not only communicates the attributes and personality of the Christian God, but also of each of his three persons, which are at times distinct. I think you can clearly see the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in his actions, words and general character. Today we at REO discuss them.



Note that because the allusions to the Trinitarian God in *LWW* are so famous—notably that Aslan dies as an act of atonement and rises from the dead and that the Beavers refer to him as “good” but not “safe”—I will bypass that book and focus on the other six. Note also that as I cannot cover them all due to space restraints I strongly encourage our readers to share any I may have missed in addition to commenting in general. Lastly, I will be going in publication order. If you disagree with that, prepare for a Prince Caspian-esque fight to the death! (Just kidding.)

Prince Caspian

One of the remarkable things about Aslan is that, other than *The Magician's Nephew* if I'm not mistaken, for such a dominant player in the story he actually has sporadic appearances. By the page count in my big one-volume version of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, this book begins on page 317 and Aslan doesn't show up until page 373 and then it is only by Lucy seeing him 'off camera' so to speak. He doesn't speak until page 378 and doesn't appear in all his glory until the following page.

The fact he shows up before he is heard or “seen” is exactly what I'm talking about. Lucy sees him with her childlike innocence and faith (a carryover from *LWW*), and the whole scene smacks of the story of God calling Samuel, as well as biblical statements like, “The last will be first,” and “A little child will lead them”. Which Lucy subsequently does. Literally. And while there is no one verse I can point to that mirrors this, I love that Aslan tells Lucy that he seemed bigger because she had grown. On the other hand, Aslan telling her “All of Narnia will be renewed” has a clear parallel in Revelation 21:5.



Aslan's later moment with Susan, forgiving her for not believing, definitely has a Jesus/God type feel to it. Especially since it's the sin of unbelief.

Finally, I love that Prince Caspian responds to Aslan that he doesn't feel sufficient to take up kingship in Narnia with Aslan replying, *"Good. If you had felt yourself sufficient, it would have been a proof that you are not."* There are few things as crucial to the Kingdom of God as being humble and meek. The New Testament reminds us over and over that the humble will be exalted. Just as Caspian was.

The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

The most obvious example of my thesis as seen in this book is Eustace explaining how he regained his human form after being stuck as a dragon for a time. The way he describes Aslan removing his dragon skin as being painful and pleasurable at the same time sound exactly like something you'd read in the Bible, where conflicts live in tension. And where transformation happens in Christ.



And later Aslan says, *“I call all times soon,”* echoing a thought the Apostle Peter has about how God views time in his second epistle.

I also appreciate how at the end he is a lamb at first before metamorphosing back into a lion, since both animals are used to describe Christ in the New Testament.

The Sliver Chair

I confess Jill’s first encounter with Aslan in the second chapter of this book was the first passage that really birthed the idea of this article. There are few passages in the whole series that cause my heart and mind to dance with joy the way this one does.

Aslan inviting her to drink makes me think of Divine invitations in both Old and New Testaments to do the same (Isaiah 55, John 4). Drinking the water immediately quenches the thirst and not drinking it leads to death.



And I adore this quote by Aslan: *“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,”* followed by the explanatory note: *“It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.”* That brings chills to my soul like few things outside of Scripture itself.

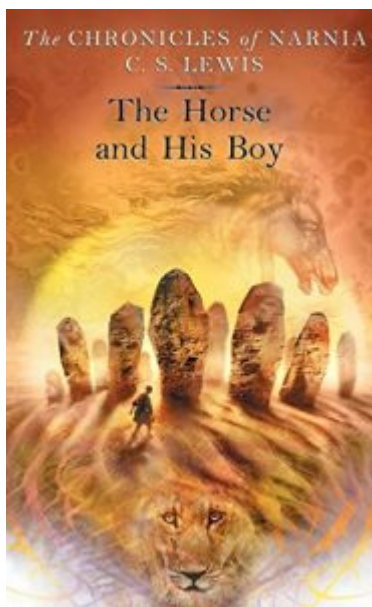
Their continued conversation just adds more and more to the image: He gets her to see her sin; He tells her that she would not call to him unless he called her first; at one point he replies to her question with *“I am”*, and he mandates her to *“Say [the signs] to yourself when you wake up in the morning and when you lie down at night and when you wake up in the middle of the night.”* The whole scene is overflowing with Scriptures—Deuteronomy 6, John 4, 6 and 8—that point to how God interacts with humanity.

Finally, it is perfect to me that Aslan uses his breath to send Eustace and Jill to Narnia from the cliff in this chapter, the same means he uses to bestow forgiveness on Susan in the previous book. Both Hebrew and Greek have a word that can be translated to *“spirit” “breath” and “wind”* and hence, it feels like yet another echo of deity.

The Horse and His Boy

Shasta’s intimate confrontation with Aslan is one that I could read over and over before moving on in the book. Especially this: *“I was the lion who forced you to join with Ararvis. I*

was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses new strength of fear for the last mile that you pushed bait in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight to receive you." I can clearly imbibe of the sovereignty of the Father, the comfort of the Spirit, the protection of the Son (as promised to Simon Peter), the invisible God who protects and never gets tired. All in this one short speech.



And then Shasta asks him *"Who are you?"* And Aslan says, *"Myself,"* which sounds semantically different yet quite similar to YHWH's answer to Moses in Exodus 3 to a similar question. Mere mortals do not give that kind of answer unless they are being obtuse. Which Aslan, nor God, ever is.

The Magician's Nephew

There can be no doubt about the chosen passage for this book:

"In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing...it seemed to come from all directions at once...Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the

earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful Digory could hardly bear it."

And then:

"Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."

There are few things as Godlike as the act of creating. Not just making or producing, though there is that, but creating from nothing. By nothing more than the spoken word. Creating life. *Life with personality*. As Aslan does here. This is Narnia's Genesis 1 and John 1. And what is remarkable in view of this article, between those two biblical chapters we know the Trinity is fully represented by the creation of the universe. There can be no mistaking who Aslan is to Narnia. Creation depends on the Creator but not vice-versa.



I will also add that even though I said I would not reference *LWW* in this article, this part of *The Magician's Nephew* takes me back to this exchange in the *LWW* movie containing a truth that is only implied in the *LWW* book:

Jadis: Have you forgotten the laws upon which Narnia was built?

Aslan: Don't cite the deep magic to me, Witch! I was there when it was written.

Boom!

The Last Battle



This scene gets me all choked up because it is so much bigger than fiction:

Then he fixed his eyes on Tirian, and Tirian came near, trembling and flung himself at the Lion's feet, and the Lion kissed him and said, "Well done, last of Kings of Narnia, who stood firm at the darkest hour." Not only does it sound like how Disciples Peter (Luke 5:8, pre-resurrection) and John (Revelation 1:17, post-resurrection) react to Christ, the words Aslan uses are clearly Christ's to all those who remain faithful until the end (Matthew 25, Luke 19).

A similar scene with Emeth a few pages later has the same effect. He falls at Aslan's feet only for Aslan to (again) breathe on him to raise him back to his feet, reminding me of Ezekiel's encounter with God in Ezekiel 1 and 2. And he too is welcomed in, despite a life lived quite differently than Tirian, showing grace that our God does manifest in Scripture to people like Cornelius.

And there are these words of the Lord Digory:

"Listen, Peter, When Aslan said you could never go back to Narnia, he meant the Narnia you were thinking of. But that was

not the real Narnia. They had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and will always be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world.

A whole article could be written just on the way this series ends. But suffice it to say that Aslan's role in the world he created and the "real" world is a clear a picture of the Christian God as could be. It makes me long for the New Heaven and New Earth unlike anything else in fiction. And not to merely experience the new but to experience seeing my Savior with my own eyes, and not the eyes of faith. I feel like that is the most real thing there is.

I believe God's fundamental attribute is that he is "other". He is not like us. He is exalted, highly lifted up, above and beyond and distinct from all beings in history. There is none like him, he says over and over in Isaiah. He is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. If that is what it means to be "holy" (and I believe it does) then that is who God is at his core, far more than other adjectives we use for his nature.



That is the air Aslan has about him throughout the seven stories. And that is why he has taught me so much about our God. Kudos to Lewis for this timeless children's series that impacts adults in such a meaningful way

The 5 Most Theologically Rich Christmas Songs

Thousands of Christmas songs and hymns have been written these past 2000 years. While many songs discuss sights of Santa and Rudolph, there have been others written to express the significance of God coming to earth and being born into a sinful world. These songs hold theological richness and can edify a group of believers during the Christmas season or any time of year.

Rather than reviewing every Christmas song that has been written since the time of Christ's birth, this list was limited to those Christmas songs that are familiar to most modern Christians. In assessing the most theologically rich Christmas songs, it was considered: 1) Whether the song does more than cover the basics of the biblical story, digging into the deeper theological implications behind the story and; 2) Whether the song reveals these truths in a beautiful way that sincerely indicates the living presence of the Holy Spirit. Here are the five most theologically rich Christmas songs:



5. "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Phillips Brooks penned the words to "O Little Town of

Bethlehem" in 1868. The words came to him one night as he rode from Jerusalem to Bethlehem by horseback to deliver a Christmas Eve message.

Many people are very familiar with the first two verses of the song. However, the last two verses are exceptional and should not be forgotten. The third verse in this classic hymn is particularly noteworthy. It speaks of "the wondrous gift" that was given. The thing about a gift is that it is not something we earn; a gift is freely bestowed. This "wondrous gift" is Jesus, who God the Father gave as a living sacrifice for humanity (John 3:16). He came to be our living sacrifice and to give man spiritual knowledge (John 10). In this fallen world we all must humbly accept our fallenness and our need for divine help. Only then can we rightly choose His hand of salvation (James 1:21). When our "meek souls" receive Him, "Christ enters in." He has called us to eternal salvation through Himself. Will we listen?

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight*

*For Christ is born of Mary
And gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King
And Peace to men on earth*

How silently, how silently

*The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still,
The dear Christ enters in.*

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel.*



4. "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne"

Emily Elliot wrote "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne" in 1864. The primary point of this song is the tremendous humility God expressed by lowering Himself for our benefit. He left His heavenly throne to come as a man to save us.

Echoing Philippians 2:7, the first two verses convey the awesome magnitude of His humiliation in becoming a lowly man. Jesus was born of a "lowly birth" and came in "great humility." He did this for us—people who don't deserve it.

The third verse alludes to Matthew 8:20, where Jesus stated that all earthly creatures had a place to rest—all except for Himself. He was saying His life was a difficult one and those who followed Him could expect the same.

The first four verses end with a refrain that declares we can now freely choose to make room for Jesus in our hearts

forever. With our entire being, we fully trust Him as our eternal Savior (Romans 10:9). The fifth verse concludes with a declaration of victory, rejoicing that God has made room for us in His heavenly home!

*Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.*

*Heaven's arches rang when the angels sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But of lowly birth didst Thou come to earth,
And in great humility.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.*

*The foxes found rest, and the birds their nest
In the shade of the forest tree;
But Thy couch was the sod, O Thou Son of God,
In the deserts of Galilee.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.*

*Thou camest, O Lord, with the living word
That should set Thy people free;
But with mocking scorn, and with crown of thorn,
They bore Thee to Calvary.
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.*

*When the heavens shall ring, and the angels sing,
At Thy coming to victory,
Let Thy voice call me home, saying "Yet there is room,
There is room at My side for thee."
My heart shall rejoice, Lord Jesus,*

When Thou comest and callest for me.



3. "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" was originally written in Latin, and many believe it dates back to the twelfth century. In 1851, John Mason Neale translated it into English. The English translation of the song contains several variations, and some versions include up to eight different verses.

It is easy to notice all the names and descriptions of Jesus presented in the song: Emmanuel (Immanuel), Dayspring, Wisdom from on High, Desire of Nations. These are all tremendous names and titles that describe the Messiah.

Each verse highlights one of them. What is traditionally viewed as the first verse highlights the name Emmanuel, which means "God with us." In Scripture, the name first occurs in Isaiah 7:14. This passage is quoted in Matthew 1:22 in specific reference to the infant Jesus who was God.

Another verse highlights the name Dayspring, which indicates how the Light of Heaven has delivered us from spiritual darkness. This was a name proclaimed by Zechariah in Luke 1:78 under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This song also gives Jesus the title Wisdom from on High. This may be a reference to Isaiah 11:2. The entire book of Isaiah is full of prophecies of the coming Savior. Only through this wisdom from Heaven (Jesus) may we may exit our fallen life and enter a new life with God.

The writer of this song also described Jesus as the Desire of Nations, a reference to Haggai 2:7. This is another prophecy of Jesus in which God foretold that great glory would one day once again fill the temple. Because He has finally come in His glory, we are freed from living lives of isolation and discord.

There are even amazing additional/optional verses of the song that refer to names like "Lord of might," "Rod of Jesse's stem," and "Key of David.". As this incredible song mentions, Jesus Christ has opened wide our heavenly home and therefore we can rejoice.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*O come Thou Dayspring come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death's dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*Oh, come, our Wisdom from on high,
Who ordered all things mightily;
To us the path of knowledge show,
and teach us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease,
And be yourself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

Additional/Optional verses:

*Oh, come, oh, come, our Lord of might,
Who to your tribes on Sinai's height
In ancient times gave holy law,*

In cloud and majesty and awe.

*Oh, come O Rod of Jesse's stem,
From every foe deliver them
That trust your mighty pow'r to save;
Bring them in victory through the grave.*

*Oh, come, O Key of David, come,
And open wide our heavenly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high,
And close the path to misery.*



2. "O Holy Night"

The French poet Placide Cappeau wrote the words to "O Holy Night" in 1847. In 1855 John Sullivan Dwight, a Unitarian minister, translated it into English. It is considered one of the greatest and most popular Christmas songs of all time, and for good reason. Its theological greatness cannot be denied.

The first verse describes our plight. Original sin introduced mankind to death (1 Corinthians 15:21-23). All of humanity inwardly longed for a deliverer who would set us free from this plight. So long did humanity toil under this that our individual souls got used to being away from God and we "lay in sin and error pining." But then Jesus came with a message of hope and the "weary world" rejoiced. He did all of His saving work to retrieve each individual person (Luke 15:1-7).

The second verse makes us firsthand witnesses of the holy child. We are one with the wise men who, like us, followed a light by faith to find Jesus. Jesus would not be a mere prophet of God or just a good man. The baby in the manger was the "King of Kings." He was and is the Son of God who is one with God the Father (John 5:16-18).

The third verse exalts in the implications of Jesus' earthly ministry leading up to His death. He taught mankind "to love one another" (cf. John 13:34-35) and broke the chains of oppression. Like the first two verses, the third verses finalize the song with an exuberant call to praise God the Son for His wonderful salvific work. This time the call is for everyone to unite in a magnificent song of praise lauding the holy birth.

It is rare to find a song whose melody actually works with and bolsters its message quite this well. In my opinion, "O Holy Night" does that better than any other song under Heaven. The last refrain of each stanza is full of genuine passion, exalting in the beauty that is the incarnation of Jesus.

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
'Til He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born;
O night divine, O night, O night Divine.*

*Led by the light of Faith serenely beaming,
With glowing hearts by His cradle we stand.
So led by light of a star sweetly gleaming,
Here come the wise men from Orient land.
The King of Kings lay thus in lowly manger;
In all our trials born to be our friend.
He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger,
Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!
Behold your King, Before Him lowly bend!*

*Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;*

*And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise His Name forever,
His power and glory evermore proclaim.
His power and glory evermore proclaim.*



1. "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"

Charles Wesley wrote the words to "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" in 1739. This song is absolutely loaded to the brim with incredible theological meat!

The first verse reveals why the baby in the manger is so special. This is not just any king who has been born. Through this baby "God and sinners [are] reconciled" after a long separation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18). This makes very valid the call for "all ye nations rise" and joyfully rejoice!

The second verse explains how this "offspring of a virgin's womb" was qualified to do any divine reconciling. He was able to do this because He was the "Christ," which means, "anointed." In other words, He was the Messiah and king of mankind (Luke 23:2-3). But He was more than a mere human king. He was God in human form—"veiled in flesh" and the "incarnate Deity." Jesus lowered Himself by taking on the complete form of a man (Philippians 2:5-7). Our God could have remained in His comfortable position in Heaven but He was "pleased as man with man to dwell." He was literally our Emmanuel—our God with us.

As a result of the work of Christ, the third verse calls us to praise Him for His infinitely gracious act. He is our "Prince of Peace" and our "Sun of Righteousness." God's Son came to give all men the truth of God's redeeming and life-giving grace. How did He do this? By being born. He did this so we

could experience a second birth and be born again into a new life in Him, living forever in His kingdom.

The fourth verse in some of today's hymnals is a fusion of the original fourth and fifth verses. Since the fused version is the one many are most familiar with, that is what I am including here. It tells us that as a man, Jesus was physically born into a very humble home. Now that He has died for all mankind, we should invite Him to reside within us by confessing full belief in Him (Romans 10:9). Its last few lines hearken both to Genesis 3 and 1 Corinthians. In Genesis 3 we find the world-changing act of original sin. In this same chapter, God placed a distinct curse on each of the two human wrongdoers and all of their descendants. He also cursed the snake (Satan). His curse to the snake included a prophecy of Jesus' final victory over Satan (Genesis 3:15). This is a prophecy of the Son of God who would one day come to earth to die. In so doing He would finally "bruise . . . the serpent's head." Wesley lauded the beauty of this story. Jesus' work of atonement successfully displayed His saving power. It is in 1 Corinthians 15 that the first man and Jesus are famously referred to as the first and second Adam. Jesus, the second Adam from above, sacrificed Himself for all mankind, reuniting us with God.

Charles Wesley's beautifully penned words not only bring about a feeling of the Christmas spirit, but beautifully explain the gospel message and give us reason to proclaim "glory to the newborn king!"

*Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled."
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With angelic hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem."*

*Christ, by highest heav'n adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Late in time behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail th' incarnate Deity!
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus our Immanuel.*

*Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Ris'n with healing in His wings:
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.*

*Come, Desire of nations, come!
Fix in us Thy humble home:
Rise, the woman's conqu'ring seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head;
Adam's likeness now efface,
Stamp Thine image in its place:
Final Adam from above,
Reinstate us in Thy love.*

This article first appeared in *The Brink* magazine

The Season, the Music, the Resonance

For Western Christians, and quite possibly for all believers everywhere, music is inseparable from Christmas. I'm aware that some folks delight in reminding us that the angelic choir that appeared to the shepherds the night of Jesus' birth didn't sing. "And the angel said to them..." (Luke 2:10). Then it says there was a multitude "praising God and saying." (2:13)

That's all well and good, but I still think they sang. For one thing, he/they might have spoken and then sung those or other words. Also, Job 38:7 tells us the "sons of God sang for joy" at creation, and I'm thinking those were angels, not humans since presumably no humans were present at creation.

No matter. Much of Christianity down through the centuries has inseparably linked the celebration of the nativity with singing.

From the 5th century "Of the Father's Love Begotten," a piece so hauntingly beautiful that pastor Rob Morgan considers it one of his favorites, to Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley and their powerful all-time hymns "Joy to the World" and "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," to "Mary, Did You Know," we all have our favorites, and I haven't even scratched the surface.



Every year some song or songs resonate with me. Maybe something new, previously unknown. Maybe an old favorite. This year there are several:

1. The afore-mentioned "Of the Father's Love Begotten". I've listened to it several times and mediated on the poignant

lyrics. The story of Christ retold in the 5th century. The Incarnation described in beautiful, ancient poetry. The recurring “evermore and evermore.” By the way, if memory serves this was the lead-off song for the Welch choir project from several years ago, “Alpha and Omega.”

2. “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus.” Written by Charles Wesley. Wesley is one of my all-time favorite songwriters, and this hymn has become a favorite Christmas song of mine. It’s the kind of song the ancients would have sung, had they known their Messiah’s name. We do know and celebrate accordingly.

3. The country gospel classic “O Beautiful Star of Bethlehem.” We sang it at our church a couple of weeks ago and the excitement was palpable, as “amens” were heard at the conclusion. Watching the Gaither video years ago as Ben Spear chokes with emotion as he sings the line “for Jesus is now that star divine, brighter and brighter He will shine,” touches me, as does the whole song.

Just for good measure, I’m going to throw in a few more. They aren’t really Christmas songs but are so fitting for the season. “I Call Him Lord,” by Dottie Rambo, reminds us “but the angel called Him Jesus, born of a virgin, Mary called Him Jesus, but I Call Him Lord. That lyric enables me to celebrate just a little more worshipfully this Christmas.

And there’s the old Fanny Crosby hymn “Tell Me the Story of Jesus.” The first stanza has a powerful incarnation lyric “...Tell how the angels in chorus sang as they welcomed his birth, glory to God in the highest, peace and good tidings to earth.. ”

Finally, an older song by Bill and Gloria Gaither, not so well-known. I’ve enjoyed hearing it again, as it tenderly breathes out its Christmas message: “love went on reaching, and love went on longing, right past the shackles of my mind, and the longing and the reaching became Mary’s little son, and

his love reached all the way to where I was.”

Christmas and music. Christmas carols. The birthday of our King. Still, a few days to go. I hope we all make the time and find the way, or ways, to worship the Newborn King this Christmas season. Going through the Old Testament Messianic prophecies. Reading and studying Matthew 1-2, and Luke 1-2. Singing the old songs joyfully, and adding in some newer ones. Going to a Christmas concert or candlelight service. “Let every heart prepare him room, and Heaven and nature sing.”

Now I need to listen to “Handel’s “Messiah,” and Andrew Peterson’s “Behold the Lamb of God.”

Jesus Is Offensive: Let Him Be (Part 4)

Links to the previous three essays can be found at the end of this article.

Part 4: Jesus Is Offensive In His Judgments

Injustice or Jealousy?

One of the hardest parables Jesus gave for me to preach is the one from Matthew 20 where Jesus talks about workers getting hired at different times of the day and all getting paid the same wage at the end of the day.

I think I get it in its interpretation. That’s not the

problem. The reason I say it is hard to preach is that no matter how you interpret it, it just sounds unfair. It is bookended by the phrase “The first will be last,” which sounds intriguing. But everything that happens in between sounds like a fast-talking businessman who gets you with the semantics of the contract he had you sign even though there is something clearly wrong with how it played out in real life.

Welcome to the world of not being able to put Jesus in any boxes. For the record, I do not think Jesus is a fast-talking businessman. I think God, and by nature Jesus, are completely fair in their judgments. But what is fair to God may not sound fair to me. And hence, it can be offensive. And crazy enough, this example isn't even close to how offensive Jesus as Judge over men's souls can be.

Even Tolerance Is Exclusive

It gets even more offensive, at least if secular American culture is any indication when you talk about how Jesus himself and his early followers claimed he was the sole path to get to God. In one sermon Jesus attested, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.” This sounds like arrogance unless you consider that Jesus believed himself to be God himself and proved it by rising from the dead. Taking that into consideration I think he has the authority to claim which way is correct. Besides, you cannot escape claims of exclusivity by any view on this topic and the major world religions do not even try. Jesus also claimed the vast majority of people would not accept the one path, adding to the arrogant exclusivity effect.

The One Subject We All Want To Avoid

Yet it gets even more offensive. It is not enough that the vast majority of the world will not get to God because they choose manmade religion or human ego instead of Jesus Christ. The Bible teaches that those that do not end up in Hell. Whether we interpret the biblical imagery of Hell as literal or figurative, I find it quite difficult to get around the harshness of it being a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual reality. Maybe there isn't really fire but there is real suffering[1. I learned a lot about this from Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle in *Erasing Hell*, 76-80.]

This may be the king of all the offensive Bible teachings[2. Tim Keller says it is in his experience in the multi-contributor book *Is There A Hell Or Does Everyone Go To Heaven When They Die?*]. When you hear atheists talk about it, often their ire will come in the form of them saying something along the lines of: "Say I live a good, moral life. I love people. I give to the poor. I live that way until I die. According to the Bible, God is going to send me to eternal fiery torment just because I didn't believe in his Son?" George Carlin, the comedian who used humor to make serious points, said it this way:

"Religion has convinced people there is an invisible man – living in the sky – who watches everything you do...And this invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time...But He loves you!"[3. Cited by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, 317.]

These types of statements are a clever bit of searing verbal gymnastics but are abysmal biblical hermeneutics.

The problem with it at its core is defining what a good moral life is. Take this statement from the late atheist Christopher

Hitchens: "My challenge—Name an ethical statement or action, made or performed by a person of faith, that could not have been made or performed by a nonbeliever." [4. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 289]

The answer to that is simple and it is the basis for all of Christian morality. *A nonbeliever could not give glory to God in covenant relationship.* It is foolish to use the Old Testament Law to try to castigate the Christian's basis for morality since we are no longer under it (Romans 6:14; Galatians 5:18). Our basis of morality is in a relationship with God, similar to children to a Father and a bride to a husband, worshipping him with our lives. And those who have and do that will spend eternity with Him. Those who do not, will not. Make no mistake, if I live a moral life by the world's definition but do not humble before God by confessing I am not moral by his standard [5. Remember, Jesus said put lust in the same category with adultery, and once disintegrated a rich young ruler's morality, utterly humiliating him, after the man claimed he was righteous by God's law], I am worthy of eternal punishment according to the Bible. If I never relationally enter into his kingdom to give Him all honor and glory for all that is good, I am worthy eternal punishment according to the Bible.

Here is what I mean: If there is a God who created you and gave you life and strongly desires a relationship with you in spite of you being sinful by his standards and you say, "Nope, I'm good. I got it on my own," then that is about as terrible an insult as you can throw at him. Reading Ezekiel 16 gives a graphic allegory of why God sees it that way. As a result, human pride—defined in the Bible as living life without giving God the glory in covenant relationship—is listed over and over as something that God hates. And it is at times listed right beside things like the murder of innocents (Proverbs 6:16-19).

I expect the secular world to bristle at that and find it

deeply offensive or just ludicrously stupid. But to me, it makes sense if there is a God. God's standard of perfection cannot be attained and he offers committed relationship anyway, as the lone sovereign Creator of the universe. And to spit at that is the worst we can do. In Ezekiel 8 God tells his people he wants to show them the most abhorrent, vile, repugnant thing he can. And does he show them rape? Bestiality? Torture? No. He shows them God's people worshipping other gods. For many the false gods are their own appetite and earthly things (Phil 3:19). Or to say it another way, it is themselves.

Hell in that sense makes rational sense to me. There will be people who end up in Hell who never killed a person or committed adultery. But there isn't a single person in Hell who didn't fail to give God the glory in covenant relationship. And if that is as evil as murder or rape or child abuse—and biblically I believe it is—then Hell makes sense. You can argue that even child abusers do not deserve Hell if they die without repenting, but putting it in that context definitely causes you to not take George Carlin or many atheist proclamations about biblical morality and Hell quite so seriously.

I hasten to add that I am adamant about saying Hell makes rational sense to me. It does not make emotional sense and I'm not sure it ever will. It causes me to be nauseous often when I think about it. It wages war on my emotions any time I preach it and no topic in the world makes me more uncomfortable. But if it is what the Bible teaches, I have to man up and deal with it.

Only Christ Can Judge You, And He Certainly Will

Jesus clearly laid claim to deity by claiming to be the Judge of all humanity. He said in John 5, "Moreover, the Father

judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son...And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man." And he also claimed his judgments were fair and true (John 5:30, 8:16). I think we can also add one heavy adjective to his judgments as well: offensive.

It has not been my fundamental intention to bring a downer to the Christmas season this year. It's simply to rediscover who Jesus is, at a time of year when people are talking about him and taking advantage of an innocent baby to make him someone he wasn't. I guarantee understanding the real Jesus of Scripture will only help us to worship him more biblically this time of year.

And that is what REO is all about.

[Read Part One Here.](#)

[Read Part Two Here.](#)

[Read Part Three Here.](#)