

How are Good Works and Salvation Connected?

People love the idea of earning stuff. There are trophies awarded in sports for winning a competition. Money earned by doing some sort of work. Students get a good grade for doing well on a test. The list goes on and on. Most of the time earning what you get is not wrong at all. In fact, much of the time it is good, right, and biblically-based. However, the mindset of needing to earn rewards explains why it is so hard to accept how salvation really works.

What All Christians Need to Accept

As indicated, we didn't and don't earn Salvation. That's a very good thing because it would be impossible for any human to actually do so. It is equally true, however, that now that we have been saved, we should be compelled to do good works for the person and cause of Jesus. Scripture tells us that a faith that does not result in good works is dead (James 2:14-26).

Accepting What You've Already Accepted

Sometimes this is a truth that is hard to really accept even for those of us who have already supposedly accepted it. Sometimes, if we are not careful, we who have known this truth for years can drift into backward ways of unbiblical thinking. Biblical Christian thought goes against the natural way most of society thinks today in so many ones. This idea that we don't have to and can't earn this really good thing, this salvation, is just one of those things. Like so many other Christian counter-cultural thoughts, we will likely be struggling with this issue for the rest of our Christian

lives.

Accepting the counter-cultural teaching of Scripture is something I have had trouble with in the past. Not just this particular truth, but many other biblical truths as well. If we are not careful and alert, unbiblical “spiritual” practices and ideas can become a lazy habit. For myself, sometimes along the road of the Christian life, while I thought I had fully accepted a truth, the Holy Spirit will lead me to take a long look at myself and show me that, no I hadn’t actually and fully accepted it yet, just some of it and that that some of it needed to be revitalized and more fully rounded. This kind of spiritual growth is what happens on the lifelong climb of sanctification.

The Short Story of Salvation

The whole need for human salvation in the first place started in the Garden of Eden. There was one particular tree there known as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree was exactly what its name implies. It embodied our free will to choose good or evil, to either willfully obey God or to willfully disobey Him. Adam and Eve, the first couple, chose evil, sin, disobedience of God’s one rule. Therefore, through them all humanity from that day forward was sentenced to death, eternal death.

The entirety of the rest of the Old Testament is God’s path toward the redemption of mankind through Jesus in the New Testament. We’re talking His own beloved Son here – His only Son. God the Father sent His only Son to die for a people who spat in His face and deserved exactly what they got. He did this so that we could be reunified with Him and have access to everlasting life (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9). Doing what God did would be an unthinkable, mind-boggling sacrifice for any parent—and this was our Creator!

After he arose from the dead, Jesus went to heaven to intercede on our behalf before the Father. For our benefit, he left the Holy Spirit to guide His believers to the end. We did not deserve access to the Holy Spirit; He was freely given (Titus 3:4-5).

Yes, acceptance of this sacrifice of God's Son Jesus was and still is the **only** way for us to begin on that Holy Spirit-led path. As Romans 3:23 points out, all of us have sinned and therefore fall short of the glory of God. Because of this, we are completely unworthy to stand in the presence of God. Accepting the sacrifice of Jesus cleanses our sin and makes us able to stand in His presence. It is then that the Holy Spirit leads us up the road of salvation. It will prove to be an up and down road for us, with lots of hills and valleys, but thankfully His work on our behalf does not depend on our constant spiritual highs. His infinite love and grace have got our back.

The Final Answer

Going back to that first question about the connection between good works and salvation, while the two are definitely connected, it's not like one might first assume. Salvation is nothing any human will ever earn by doing good. It was given to us. We were freely given the gift of salvation through the death of Jesus (Romans 6:23). With an authentic salvation experience, we are now bound for heaven, on the road of sanctification with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the end of final glorification in the eternal presence of God. And how does that authentic salvation experience work? It is by fully confessing complete and lifelong acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior in your heart and through your mouth (Romans 10:8-9). That is how salvation comes about. Now we do our good works not to earn salvation, more salvation, or continued salvation, but because Christ saved us, because He commanded

us to do so, because we love, honor, and praise Him for everything He has done for us and for humanity. Now we do so for the rewards awaiting us after this life with Jesus in eternity.

Now we obey His words and do our good works because He is truly our Lord today and forever (Luke 6:46).

“To Know God Aright”: Puritans and the Gift of Education II

Part 2: The Puritan Philosophy of Education

In 1646, in the midst of the English Civil War, leaders of the Scottish Presbyterian Church and the English Congregationalist Churches produced what could be considered the most profound philosophical statement ever written by mere mortals. It was the opening statement of a catechism, or a question and answer tool used to educate young people in religion. These men were Puritans and they famously asked: “What is the chief end of man?” Their Answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”[\[1\]](#) While the Westminster Assembly of Divines said and wrote much more than these words, this concise statement describing the purpose of human existence is the summit of Puritan thought. In many ways, it was the great gift of the Puritan movement to future generations. In many ways, it describes not only their theology but also their philosophy of life, including their view of education.

The printing presses of 17th century England proliferated new

Primers, catechisms, or books on educational philosophy. Education was a hot topic in the bustling streets of early modern England. This was especially true among the Puritans who, as we saw in [Part One](#), were already a more educated lot. Like all things the Puritans did, their education reforms were guided by their desire to better know God, glorify him more, and enjoy him forever.

Milton advocated a God-centered educational curriculum.

While many Puritan tract writers sought to reform education, John Milton's *On Education* serves as a representative work of Puritan education reforms.[\[ii\]](#) Although he is more famous for his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Milton began his career writing Puritan tractates and running a small school. In this book, Milton challenges many medieval assumptions about education and advocates a Christian Renaissance style curriculum.

The first thing one notices about *On Education* is that his reforms in education are theologically guided. Milton establishes the purpose of education stating, "The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents [Adam and Eve] by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up the highest perfection."[\[iii\]](#) In Milton's view, education is to help humans out of their depravity by giving them tools by which they can know God.

At this point, one wonders if Milton believed that education was something humans could do to bring one closer to salvation. Could educating one's self be seen as a work toward salvation? This certainly seems to conflict with the Calvinism so dominant in Puritan thought. Although Milton was not as Calvinistic (or even orthodox) as many of his contemporaries, this dichotomy between human responsibility to gain an

education to further one's knowledge of God and human inability to know God without divine grace is not unique to him. Historian Edmond Morgan notes that in the society of Puritan New England, "The ultimate purpose of education, then, was salvation."[\[iv\]](#) Yet, this society never could fully reconcile their nearly sacramental view of education with their Calvinist theology.[\[v\]](#) It appears that Milton, like most Puritans, lived with this tension.

While this tension remained the theological foundation for education was still clearly communicated and implemented by the Puritan faithful. To know God, one must know his word. This is, of course, a call for biblical literacy and theological training through catechesis, but it is also a mandate for moral instruction. Milton called for a "true virtue" which was a product of knowing God's Word.[\[vi\]](#) At its core, therefore, the purpose of education was theological and moral.

Milton proposed a liberal arts education curriculum.

A second key aspect of Milton's program of educational reform is that it is to be broad or liberal. In this way, his program is a variation of Renaissance humanism. Students are first to learn grammar (English, Greek, and Latin), then to read and learn to love the Greek and Latin classics.[\[vii\]](#) Undoubtedly influenced by Renaissance Humanists like Erasmus and Castiglione, as well as the Protestant Reformers, Milton called for "a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war."[\[viii\]](#) An educated man was to be a Renaissance man, not a mere specialist. This was because a man with a liberal education was a liberated man.

Aside from the theological and moral foundation and humanist curriculum, *On Education* called for education to be practical.

While Milton was no utilitarian in his philosophy, he believed that students should put in practice what they learn as soon as they are able to.[\[ix\]](#) He also argued that students should study practical subjects such as geometry, sailing, and warfare.[\[x\]](#) Milton's approach was both a traditional humanist approach and a modern one. Like other Puritans, he believed in the importance of ancient languages, classical literature, and biblical training. Also like other Puritans, he made room for practical subjects and experimental science.[\[xi\]](#)

Many often fail to realize how practical Puritan education really was. After a solid foundation, an adolescent Puritan in England or New England would typically be apprenticed in a trade. He would often live with another family and learn from the master of the house his trade. This was most certainly part of the educational process for most Puritan families. While apprenticeships were common in all of Europe, Puritan families strove to ensure that their young men did not study a trade before they could read and understand the Scripture.[\[xii\]](#)

The Puritan philosophy of education was not puritanical.

Even a cursory reading of Milton's tract shows that his Puritan philosophy of education is in direct contradiction to the stereotype of Puritans as rigid, overly-pious, authoritarian men who studied the Bible and Calvinist theology to the exclusion of all other subjects. In his work *The Puritan Revolution and Education Thought*, historian Richard Greaves argues against such an understanding of the Puritans. He states, "For the Puritans theology was superior though not contradictory to the other and subordinate areas of knowledge."[\[xiii\]](#) He goes on to argue that the Puritans maintained the "supremacy of theology without altogether neglecting the remaining arts and sciences which, with theology, comprised the all-encompassing body of knowledge,

divine and human.”[\[xiv\]](#) The Puritan philosophy of education was, therefore, theologically founded and theologically guided, but was also liberal in its scope and was to be practical in its execution.

Greaves also makes important observations when it comes to the Puritan’s goal of education in society. Focusing specifically on the sectaries or Separatists in Puritan England, he discusses their hatred of religious professionalism or dependence on clerical instruction for knowledge of the Bible. Greaves states: “What the sectaries [Puritans and Separatists] wanted was not professionalism but lay intellectualism. They rejected the idea of a society where a select group of monopolistic specialists victimized men through theology, law, and medicine.”[\[xv\]](#) While this view may be more anti-clerical than that of most Puritans, it has much the same ethos. The Puritans were driven by the idea that Scripture was to be read, studied, and followed by each individual. A large part of their solution to social problems and spiritual decay was to produce a more educated population.

The Puritan emphasis on the salvation of the individual through knowledge of the Word of God is a logical corollary to the desire for lay intellectualism. Greaves reiterates this argument: “[The] ultimate goal was not a society dependent on professionals for knowledge of particular subjects, but a society of enlightened, knowledgeable laymen. Their dream of a universally enlightened society is our heritage.”[\[xvi\]](#) It is this dream that the Puritans brought to the New World. As we will see in Part 3, it was in this New World context that this dream was made a reality.

The Puritans sought education for their children primarily so that they could know their Creator through reading the Scripture. They hoped this method would produce both salvation and moral excellence, or at least help them along in the process. They would not stop there, however. They wanted vocationally educated and economically competent heirs. They

sought the most liberal education for their children that their society could afford. They desired to produce holy renaissance men who were not utterly dependent on elites for knowledge. They wanted much more out of education than any society had ever offered. For the most part, they achieved it.

Read Part [One](#) and [Three](#) by clicking the links.

[\[i\]](#) Westminster Shorter Catechism, https://reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html?_top=https://reformed.org/documents/WSC.html

[\[ii\]](#) Identifying Milton as a Puritan is a subject of much debate. As I have defined Puritans broadly, Milton, especially in his early years, is certainly in this vein. Moreover, *On Education* is considered by many to be representatively Puritan on this subject. Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and Educational Thought: Background for Reform* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 41.

[\[iii\]](#) John Milton, *On Education* in Richard M. Gamble, ed. *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What it Means to be an Educated Human Being* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 2007), 469.

[\[iv\]](#) Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 92.

[\[v\]](#) Ibid, 94.

[\[vi\]](#) Milton, 469.

[\[vii\]](#) Ibid., 471.

[\[viii\]](#) Ibid., 470.

[\[ix\]](#) Ibid.

[\[x\]](#) Ibid., 475.

[\[xi\]](#) Greaves, 41.

[\[xii\]](#) See Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family*.

[\[xiii\]](#) Ibid., 38.

[\[xiv\]](#) Ibid., 39.

[\[xv\]](#) Ibid., 137.

[\[xvi\]](#) Ibid., 146.

Enlightened Woman Leaves Christianity Due to Jesus and the Apostles' Dehumanizing Language

Portland, Oregon – Emily Van Zant has been a churchgoer all her life, until now. She was born and raised attending church “any time the doors were open,” as she puts it. But recently, the more she reads the Bible, the more problems she has with the tone and rhetoric from some of Christianity’s key figures.

“I tried for a long time to ignore the angry and hostile language that many of the Apostles were spewing. My breaking point was when I realized that this problem originated with

Jesus. I decided I could no longer align myself with such intolerant and dehumanizing language and ideology. All people are valuable and created with the spark of divinity. Calling them 'a brood of vipers' or 'white-washed tombs' was just a bridge too far for me. Shouldn't we be showing love to everyone, not just those that agree with us?"

Ms. Van Zant joins a growing number of disillusioned ex-Christians who are looking to live out their faith in a more inclusive and tolerant manner. Ms. Van Zant continues:

"I was already struggling with Paul calling Jews "dogs" in Philippians 3:2. But when a good friend of mine pointed out that Jesus called a Canaanite woman a "dog" I knew this sort of intolerance and bigotry was something I could no longer condone. I embarked on a journey of reflection and fact-finding, and I realized this intolerance went deeper than just language. It was foundational to the entire Christian faith. Jesus' entire ministry and message were built on non-inclusivity, intolerance, and self-centeredness. He actually taught that he was the only way to heaven! The level of arrogance it takes to make that claim is mindboggling. That was his path, and I respect him for that, but you can't force your path on anyone else. You aren't allowed to tell other people that their path is wrong. That's not how this works. More and more people are seeing the truth and coming to the realization that the party is over for Jesus and his good time buddies of intolerance."

For the time being, Emily Van Zant is on her own path, seeking knowledge, wisdom, and faith in a number of religions and faiths.

"I will keep looking until I find something that works best for me. And once I do, I will be sure to tell everyone how intolerant and bigoted they are if they disagree with me."

Why “The Last Jedi” is the Most Christian “Star Wars” Movie Yet

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Jesus quoting Isaiah in Luke 4:18-19)*

Warning: There are some spoilers ahead.

Star Wars has always had a logical problem on its hands, a paradox created by George Lucas that has forcefully resurfaced in *The Last Jedi*. The problem is that the Force, with all its eastern dualism and Buddhist amoral mysticism is pointedly antithetical to what makes the movies so powerful—our overwhelming passion to see moral good stand up to moral evil. While the Force may be able to make rocks (and even princesses) float, good's struggle against evil gives us a necessary reason to want to see it happen.

It is because of this profoundly moral theme that *Star Wars* movies have felt familiar to Christians, like myself, who see that ultimate reality is a battle between moral good and moral evil. It is our deepest desire (and even eschatological hope) to see good destroy evil which explains why we love *Star Wars*. While the philosophy behind the Force was foreign and even

off-putting, the destruction of the Death Star, and Vader's change of heart speak our language. Our greatest Saint, once hunted Christians down in vicious persecution. And once he saw the light, he couldn't stop himself from preaching Jesus's defeat of death (I Corinthians 15).

The power of good verses evil does not only appeal to Christians. It appeals to all of us because it is something we all long for. There is certainly something fundamentally unsettling about living in a world where the Empire (or the first Order) calls the shots, but our desire is not for a balance between good and evil. Our desire is for the end of the darkness. This is not a uniquely Christian idea, it is a human longing that the Christian faith proposes a solution to.

The Last Jedi delved deeper into the eastern dualism, mystical humanism, and even veganism linked to the Force, and in so doing, it may achieve the distinction of being the most religious *Star Wars* movie to date. Like with all the *Star Wars* films, *The Last Jedi* may espouse religious ideas far from the Christian faith, but its themes tell a different story.

More than any other movie in this franchise, *The Last Jedi* links the cause of right with the cause of poor, suffering and oppressed. We even find those suffering to be children that the resistance fighters are able to offer hope to. We find that the rebellion, like the Kingdom, belongs to such as these. For Christians, this speaks to the core of who we are and Jesus' own mission statement. Jesus came to preach the good news of God's Kingdom to those being oppressed by the strong hand of the Roman Government and the powers of sin and death that stood behind that institution. (See Luke 4) The cause of the needy is a Christian cause; it's our storyline.

The makers of *The Last Jedi* fittingly settled the question of Rey's origins. After two years of online debate and speculation, we find out that she comes from nowhere. Her parents were paupers. For my money, this was one of the most

brilliant choices made by the movie. A choice that is profoundly Christian, when all humanity expected a savior from a powerful family, God provided his people with Gideon from the smallest family and the smallest tribe. When the prophet sought a King, God provided the youngest son, a shepherd named David. When Israel wept for a Messiah, God sent them a man from Nazareth, a place that apparently nothing good could come from. In *The Last Jedi* we find out that Rey, whose names means king, actually comes from nowhere. Maybe this really is a Christmas movie after all!

The *Star Wars* Movies have always come from the mind of leftist thinkers. Lucas wanted to exalt eastern meditation, critique the American Empire, and denounce the Vietnam War. Similarly, Disney is using *Star Wars* for the purposes of social commentary and ironic criticisms of capitalism and greed. I'm sure the makers of the movie are convinced that the film is sufficiently liberal in its themes, and perhaps they are right (or should I say left).

In the end, however, the reason *The Last Jedi* (or any good *Star Wars* movie) is so compelling is not the politics or "hokey" eastern religions. The story works because it has some of the same beauty that all people long for. It's the beauty that Christians celebrate every Sunday, of every race, in every country, in nearly every language. It's the beauty of God choosing the least likely people for his purposes, of good opposing evil, of hope for the oppressed, of death destroyed. It's the beauty of the Gospel. It's a beauty that *The Last Jedi* reminds us about—a beauty, that fortunately, our culture can't escape.

Is There A Biblical “Age of Accountability”?

Recently for Rambling Ever On I dealt with the hot-button issue of “What About Those Who Have Never Heard of Jesus?” This topic really gets people in Christianity talking because it creates a head-on collision of one obvious fact about the world—that not everyone has heard of Jesus—with a crucial piece of Biblical theology: Jesus is the only way to God. Trying to think through that collision and maintain that God is fair in how he judges people makes for some lively discussion and debate.

You can read that article [here](#).

Yet as a result of my thoughts on that topic a side conversation invariably comes up when I bring it up in public: What about an age of accountability?

This is a fair question. I lean toward believing there are no exceptions to the “Jesus is the only way to God” truth in terms of people from remote villages or really any place where the Gospel is not shared. Yet, if I am inclined to not believe in exceptions in this way, can I believe that a 1-month old baby who has minimal cognitive and moral development would go to Hell if he or she died?

Logic, of course, guides me to believe that a baby or very small child being accountable to God for their sin is perverse. Yet, I have chosen to follow the Bible wherever it leads because it has proven that often human logic can fail us because humans are fallible (for example, it may sound logical that since “God is love” that he would not eternally punish people, but biblically this is not so).

So the question is: does the Bible speak to this? I think in some sense it does. Not nearly as clearly as I would like, but

I gave up a long time ago trying to get God to do what I think he should. Yet, I want to look at five passages that I think help guide me to being satisfied that up to a certain age, people are not held accountable for their sin in terms of being judged by God for it.

Isaiah 7:16-17

He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste.

I have a very specific aim in this article so I will not be dealing with the bigger meaning of this passage. But suffice it to say that it sounds like God is saying that there is a point in this child's life where he is too young to *choose* right from wrong. That sounds, especially in Old Testament vernacular, like choosing to follow God. At the very least it speaks to a developed morality, but I think it's closer to the former. I have heard parents and child experts tell me that children have a concept of right and wrong at a very young age. But the idea of choosing right as in choosing God is something more complex and involves higher order thinking, self-awareness and a developed biblical morality[1. In other words, I can believe a child learns much more quickly that it is bad to touch something when they are told not to, than they can learn that there is a God, that we are sinners and that Jesus died to reconcile us to him.]. The Isaiah verse sounds more like this.

Deuteronomy 1:39

And the little ones that you said would be taken captive, your children who do not yet know good from bad—they will enter the

land. I will give it to them and they will take possession of it.

This is basically the same as the previous verse except it expands the thought to include all the children of Israel, instead of just one child. This is a crucial point of hermeneutics to me—that just because something was true for one person in the Bible does not mean it is true for all people everywhere[2. For example, I do not think putting out a fleece to test God as Gideon did is something for all people in the US in 2017 to practice]. But the broader the application of any truth in the Bible, the more easily I can believe it is a truth not confined by time or culture or specific circumstances. This verse speaks to many children who are too young to know good from bad, contrasting how the adult Israelites rejected God and could not enter the Promised Land. Again, this sounds like God didn't hold small children accountable for the sins of their community because they were too young to know better[3. And while I will not add it as its own entry because I am still not sure I agree with it, some interpreters believe the comment in Jonah about the Ninevites not knowing their right hand from their left is about the children without a developed morality that God was showing compassion to. This would go beyond even Israel to a Gentile people, meaning its application lying outside of time and culture would be more likely.].

Romans 9:10b-11a

When [Isaac] married Rebekah, she gave birth to twins. But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God.

Bringing up Romans 9 in the context of any theology discussion is like bringing up Donald Trump on Facebook. Yet the fact that God through Paul here acknowledges here again that these

two unborn children had not done good or bad leads me to believe that children are protected from judgment by God while in the womb. To say it one way, they are not “saved” but they are “safe”[4. I realize that if you adhere to some form of Calvinism these verses probably don’t support my thesis at all since the thought is that God chose them independently of anything other than His good will. Yet I go a different way—God didn’t choose them according to good or bad but according to His promise, eventually realized in Jesus Christ, and which still leaves room for human choice. But this article is not about this argument and if you’d like more you can [read this](#) or I always recommend Brian Abasciano’s book *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10-18* and Robert Picirilli’s *Grace, Faith, Free Will*.].

2 Samuel 12:22-23

David replied, “I fasted and wept while the child was alive, for I said, ‘Perhaps the Lord will be gracious to me and let the child live.’ But why should I fast when he is dead? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him one day, but he cannot return to me.”

David here seems to say that he will one day be reunited the baby Bathsheba lost, presumably in Heaven. The hermeneutical danger here still stands; Just because David says something here doesn’t mean it is an eternal truth, or even true at all. Yet, when somewhat obscure Bible passages remain without contradiction in the rest of Scripture and align with basic human logic and our sense of fairness, then I am more inclined to believe they are true for all people everywhere. I have little struggle believing God probably used David here to communicate an important truth about babies that are lost as Bathsheba’s was. Wise people I know have used these verses to comfort grieving parents and I think they do so with integrity.

Matthew 19:14

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

I'll be clear again: I do not think passages like these seal the deal on an age of accountability, but that they may support it. I am not 100% positive about what Jesus meant here other than I am sure he is saying that to follow him you have to take on the humility of a child. Yet is he saying something else? Is he wanting these little children to come to him because they have nothing in them to keep from him, that older children and adults do, i.e., sin and rebellion?

I stop short of saying I'm certain he is saying that. But that it is possible. Jesus loved children and it appears without a disclaimer and without commands like "repent" and "believe".

I close by saying that I have a hard time believing there are exceptions to coming to God through Christ for those who are in remote villages where there is no Gospel presence precisely because verses like Acts 17:26-30 appear to preclude those exceptions. They seem to be making the point that "You cannot be excused because of where you live." But small children are different biblically. They go the opposite way—that they can be too young to know right from wrong and to choose to follow God. For that reason, I believe in an age of accountability.

What is that age? I have no idea. I know of some children that began following Christ at the age of 3. I will guess that in cultures with less Christian presence the age is probably higher than in places where children go to a Gospel preaching church three times a week essentially from birth.

But at the end of the day, I think human logic and God's justice in the Bible on the issue are square. And that is enough for me for the moment. I will keep thinking and keep searching on the issue. I hope you will too.

This is the Church

This is the Church

It is the beautiful and broken body of Christ.

It is stumbling, faltering, and flawed. Pray for it.

It is vibrant, triumphant, and redeemed. Rejoice in it.

This is the Church

It is sacred and marred. Righteous and erring. The blood of the Lamb covers it all; redemption soaking the ground beneath its feet.

It is filled with sinners, hypocrites, blasphemers, and liars saved and transformed by the grace and love of the Giver of all good things.

Coarse and ugly, it is a priceless treasure. Loud and inconstant, it is the apple of Jehovah's eye. Timid and

afraid, it is the army of the omnipotent LORD of creation.

It is God's reflected light to the world. The hands and feet of the Great I AM. The voice crying out in the wilderness, calling all creation to renewal. It is the bearer of the greatest mandate ever given. It is the prophets, preachers, and teachers proclaiming truth in a world of lies. It is the lovers, nurturers, and healers extending grace and justice to a world of brokenness. It is the missionaries, Gospel-bringers, and martyrs humbly offering the Bread of Life to the starving.

This is the Church

Christ is its cornerstone. It is loved and cherished, sustained and protected. It is the bride of the Lamb, adorned and exalted. The gates of hell cannot stand against it. It is chosen and set apart. It is buffeted from every side, yet it will never fail. It is eternal and victorious, not by the strength of its hands but by the power of the LORD of hosts.

Reject it at your peril. Mock it at your risk. No weapon formed against it will prosper. All those who rise against it will fall. It is God's holy and established institution on earth, His ambassador to the nations. It is the imperfect representation of the Kingdom of God. It is the hopeful expectation of the perfected union of Heaven and earth. It is to be loved, nurtured, protected, purified, and embraced. It is the bride that is loved with a love so fierce and so overwhelming. A love that did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. A love that emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. A love that humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. A love so amazing, so divine it transcends all human understanding.

That love has called the Church His body.

His love.

His bride.

Therefore, what God has joined together, let no man separate.

This is the Church

Redeemed

Forgiven

Eternal

Triumphant

Loved

This is the Church

Why I Still Say “Ask Jesus Into Your Heart” and other similar phrases

“The hardest thing to achieve in the Christian life is balance.”

So says my mentor, David Potete. I open with this because I am

often very critical of how Christians take complex theology and boil it down to simple platitudes. Yet I also believe Christians have a tendency to be a tad overly critical at times. So for the sake of keeping my personal pendulum from swinging too far in the critical category I am going to defend some oft-critiqued Christian cliches.

Disclaimer, up front: Any time you quote someone, as I do below in reference to these popular American church phrases, you risk misrepresenting what they say. I have attempted to avoid that by trying to understand the speakers in context. I then find that I do not disagree with the person to any significant level. The only reason I am addressing this is because famous people get quotes attributed to them and those doing the attributing often do not see the issue with as much nuance and balance as the original author.

I aim to help us communicate God's truth as accurately and humbly as possible. So with that in mind, here are three phrases that have come under fire in mainstream Christianity the last few years that I have no problem saying when I preach.

"Asking Jesus into your heart"

Paul Washer: "Then they ask, 'Do you want Jesus to come into your heart?' Does it bother anyone that this formula or language is not found in the New Testament?"

Behind Tony Evans, Washer is probably my favorite famous preacher. I respect his desire to provide searing rebuke to terrible theology. As I have listened to him explain the quote above, I am positive that his biggest issue is that we teach people to pray a superficial prayer as fire insurance against living like a pagan. As he says, we make the decision to follow Christ a flu shot, when in reality it is a lifelong commitment to the Lord of the Universe.

So why do I bring it up? Because people may think that we should eliminate the expression “asking Jesus into your heart” from our vernacular completely, which I would not agree with. Perhaps Washer would advocate for a complete whitewashing of the phrase, but I am not going to put those words in his mouth.

The reason I am not going to stop saying it is because it truly is not unbiblical. The idea of Christ being in our hearts is stated plainly in verses like Ephesians 3:17 and strongly implied in verses like 2 Corinthians 4:6 and 2 Peter 1:19. And as long as a phrase is biblical in some sense, I would be very slow to denounce it[2. Having said that, there are cases where even true Christian cliches can do more harm than good, as when a person is grieving.]

However, I add that it can be dangerous to present a sinner’s prayer or a phrase like “ask Jesus into your heart” without other soteriology supporting it. Frankly, the Bible gives a variety of seemingly conflicting ways that a person becomes a Christian: by grace through faith, by confessing Jesus as Lord, by repentance, by taking up your cross, by believing the resurrection, etc[2. For a thorough investigation into resolving the tension between all of these phrases, I recommend *Discipleship: The Expression of Saving Faith* by Dr. Robert Picirilli.]. As a pastor I have the advantage of preaching to the same people every week and therefore some weeks I focus on some phrases and other weeks I focus on others. Too much focus on any of them can lead to bad theology at worst or confusion at best. So if one week I focus on the point of decision and praying for forgiveness, the next time I may focus on denying yourself.

As a result, I have no issue using the phrase “Ask Jesus into your heart.”

“Accepting Jesus”

David Platt: “Should it not concern us that the Bible never uses the phrase ‘accept Jesus into your heart’?”

This is extremely similar to the one above. I respect David Platt about as much as I can and I marvel at how he speaks so boldly and humbly at the same time. In trying to understand him in context I feel similarly as with Washer; he’s not complaining as much about the phrase as the philosophy of easy-decision salvation that produces no fruit.

He is even more nuanced than Washer in how he explains that the Bible does have allusions to phrases like “Jesus coming in our hearts” so it is not the exact phraseology as much as that there are more biblical phrases we can use for salvation.

He may be right about that, but in regards to the idea of “accepting” Christ, Jesus used that verb in his parable of the sower so I am not ready to take the verb “accept” totally out of my Gospel presentations. Again, as long as I explain it with other biblical verbs like “repent” and “believe” if I can. In the rare cases where I cannot, I find comfort in the range of Paul’s explanations of salvation in Acts and that the Holy Spirit can compensate for my limitations. I have no doubt the jailer could have been saved in Acts 16 even if Paul didn’t tell him to count the cost of following Jesus.

“Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a relationship”

Matt Walsh: “The phrase ‘it’s a relationship, not a religion’ is almost always used by people who want Christianity without any of the moral duties.”

In fairness, many Christians I know have not gone as far as this but instead have found balance in saying that Christianity is a relationship *and* a religion. I think that is much wiser, and true, yet I still have no issue at times

saying the phrase as I wrote it above.

The reason is that to my audience, often people need to be absolutely clear that Christianity is not rules, rituals or works. Chicago is modern day Athens in how religiously pluralistic it is. And I have reached the conclusion that it is much more likely that people in my neighborhood needs to understand the covenantal basis to salvation in Christianity before they understand what God expects of them. They need to understand that people enter into relationship with God by grace. Some people have so much religious baggage coming in that they need to hear grace preached dozens or even hundreds of times to grasp it.

But I adapt if the situation demands it. If I am talking to a 60-year old Muslim, I am very inclined to say "It's not a religion" but if I am talking to a 19-year old young woman who has been told her whole life that Jesus should be her boyfriend, then I'll probably describe it as a religion. We can err when we approach everyone with the same method.

Some people quote James 1:27 to me and to that I say that the word James used it is not quite like what many people within my reach think of when they hear "religion." The word James used can easily be translated "devotion," which we understand relationally and that is different than "Do X and X or you will not reach God." I have heard adherents of other religions say that they never know if they have done enough to merit God's approval and that is so utterly opposite Biblical Christianity that they desperately need to know the difference. And while I will eventually speak to what it means to be devoted to God so that I feed orphan and widows and avoid worldly pollution, I have no issue saying "Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship" in a sermon.

What do you think? We encourage thoughtful feedback below.

Fanny Crosby: The 19th Century Wonder Woman

I admit that I have not seen the new Wonder Woman movie yet, but I have seen a viral video in which it inspired a brave young lass to dress up...as something...and attempt all manner of swordplay with a toy sword and awkward acrobatics. I have also read lots of reviews of Wonder Woman; you can read Phill Lytle's excellent review right [here](#). While I fully intend to see Wonder Wonder, all the hubbub has put me in mind of an actual and probably far greater Wonder Woman of days gone by. While Wonder Woman herself is a daughter of Zeus, I am referring to a daughter of the one true God in heaven. I refer to no other than one of the greatest hymnists who has ever lived: Fanny Crosby. Fanny is mainly known by history as a great blind hymnist, but it might be that she would not want to be remembered for only her hymn writing. She regarded this as only part of her life and ministry, but certainly not all of it. And she was right to think that; her life and ministry included much more. During her life in addition to her status as The Queen of Gospel Music, she would serve as a teacher of the blind, a much in demand public speaker, and a full time minister among the homeless.

The Early Years

Crosby was born on March 24, 1820 in Southeast Putnam County, New York, in a small community called Gayville. About six weeks after she was born Crosby caught a bad cold. In the absence of the community doctor, a well-meaning neighbor stepped in claiming to have medical knowledge and know-how. He applied hot poultices (wet washcloths) to Fanny's eyes in a misguided attempt to draw out the infection. The man succeeded

only in permanently blinding her. (At this time her parents didn't know it was permanent and fully believed her sight would return after a time.)

When Fanny was almost one her father John Crosby died. That is when Fanny and her mother Mercy moved in with Fanny's grandmother, Eunice Crosby. Eunice Crosby would do much of the mothering of Fanny until she was five. During this time she did everything she could to strengthen her granddaughter's powers of memory and to help her see the world without eyes. As an adult, Fanny would recall how "Grandma...brought the Bible to me, and me to the Bible. The stories of the Holy Book came from her lips and entered my heart and took deep root there" (This is My Story, This is My Song, Fanny Crosby).

The Formative Years

When Fanny was about five her mother took her to New York to see Dr. Valentine Mott, a famous eye doctor. After inspecting Fanny, he informed Mrs. Crosby her daughter would never see again. This devastated Mrs. Crosby. However, Fanny herself was secretly relieved. She would never be able to see her blindness as anything but a gift from God.

Shortly after this disappointing visit Fanny's mother acquired a job in North Salem, Westchester County just south of Gayville. They still lived close enough to Gayville that Eunice Crosby was able to visit several times a week, but when Fanny was eight or nine they moved again after her mother landed a job in Ridgefield, Connecticut. This was much too far away for her grandmother to come visit all the time.

During these years, God had another kind caretaker took Eunice Crosby's place in Fanny's spiritual and mental education. We know this goodly individual only as Mrs. Hawley. Under Mrs. Hawley's care by ten years of age Fanny could recite by memory the Pentateuch, Proverbs, the four Gospels, numerous poems, and portions of a number of books. Her mental library would only grow as she got older. Eventually, she did not have to

have someone read the Bible to her; she could just recite any passage she wanted. Fanny never thought this an extraordinary feat. She sincerely believed that a blind person could do everything a person with sight could do—and sometimes even better. In one of her autobiographies she says, “It has always been my favorite theory that the blind can accomplish nearly everything that may be done by those who can see. Do not think that those deprived of physical vision are shut out from the best that earth has to offer her children” (Fanny Crosby, *Memories of Eighty Years*).

From an early age she was developing an extraordinarily descriptive mind and a keen writing ability. She wrote her very first poem when she was eight. When she was in her teens she submitted works of poetry to a nearby paper. This paper was published by the soon to be famous P.T. Barnum. It was also during these formative Ridgefield years that Fanny’s desire for formal education began to grow.

The Student Years

In 1834 Fanny and her mom left Ridgefield and returned to Westchester County. In November of that same year they first saw an advertisement for the New York Institution for the Blind. On March 3, 1835, Fanny set off for New York with a traveling companion to enter the institute. After enrolling in and beginning attendance of the school, Crosby quickly became known among the faculty, staff, and student body for her poetry. It was during these early student years that she first became well respected among the literary community of New York and in demand for her poetry skills.

A superintendent of the school named Mr. Jones foresaw the danger of this still young student being ruined by vanity from all the high praise. He therefore cautioned her against letting this vanity get the best of her. At the same time he commanded her to not write poetry for the next three months. He did this partly to temper her growing vanity and partly to

test her commitment to writing poetry. After proving herself (and learning to temper her vanity) she was encouraged to write to her heart's content. This is when a literary mentor named Hamilton Murray stepped in. Murray was a member of the Board of Managers of the institution who had great writing sensibilities and skill. He took her under his wing and taught her to write better. With his guidance, Crosby was able to branch out into other areas of writing. For instance, with his help she put her mind to writing poetry for campaigns and other political events.

The Teaching Years

In 1843, Fanny graduated from the institute. During that same year she became a teacher there. It was also during that same year that her health began to decline somewhat. Nevertheless, she still took a number of students to on planned trip to Washington D.C. While there, she recited some of her poetry to the politicians. This trip to Washington was such a success that Crosby would later take a second group of students to the U.S. capitol.

By 1845, she was gradually getting more and more into song lyric writing. During that year a man named George F. Roots came to the school to teach music. In 1853, the two composed a cantata called "The Flower Queen."

Fanny was also began publishing books of poetry during these teaching years. In 1844 she published her first official book of poems: "The Blind Girl and Other Poems." This book also contained her very first hymn which she called "An Evening Hymn." In 1851, she would publish another book of poetry called "Monterey and Other Poems."

Some really big events happened in Fanny's life in between these two books, in 1848 and 1849, the land was stricken by cholera. Like thousands throughout the country, many of the students died. It was so bad that during August of 1848, Crosby was ordered to retire to the country so she too would

not get sick. This was not an uncommon practice at this time; many city dwellers were departing the city to avoid the close quarters that fostered the disease. She did retire to the country, and it was not only a salvation for her physical self; it was a life changer for her spiritual self as well. During her time away from the institution, she received a full knowledge of Jesus Christ. This was not something that had just happened all of a sudden. Several years earlier in 1845 she had first met her spiritual mentor, Theodore Camp. He was instrumental in bringing her to Jesus on November 20, 1850 at a revival at the Broadway Methodist Tabernacle.

The Latter Years

Fanny met her future husband, Alexander Van Alstyne when he was a student at the institution in 1855. (He was 11 years younger than her.) After he graduated from school, he became a teacher and became engaged to Fanny. Three years later the couple resigned and very shortly thereafter got married.

Little is known regarding their married life, but there are three facts that are pretty clear: First, although very amicable and still doing some things together, they lived apart and had separate lives for the majority of their married life. Second, a few years after they were married they had a daughter who only lived for less than a day. Third, they would remain married until he died on July 18, 1902.

In 1858, the year she had resigned from teaching and gotten married, the stage of her hymnist career was set. During this year Fanny published "A Wreath of Columbia's Flowers." This would be her final book of poems before starting to write hymns. This next phase of her writing career was instigated in December 1863 after she was asked to write a hymn for the Dutch Reformed Church. She did so well on this project that an arrangement was made for her to meet the famous hymnist William B. Bradbury on February 2 of the next year. A historic years-long collaboration ensued. It was not long afterward

that she became known to evangelists and pastors on both sides of the Atlantic as Aunt Fanny and the Queen of Gospel Music. Many of these ministers commonly used her work in altar calls. The world famous evangelistic team Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey utilized her songs in this way throughout the 1870s and onward. The greatness of Fanny's hymns comes from their ability to be understood and to touch the lives of ordinary people.

By the time she died in 1915, Fanny would pen at least 9,000 hymns. Although she mostly signed them with her given name, she wrote a lot using pseudonyms. She is believed to have used almost 200.

It was also during these years of growing worldwide fame that Fanny became a much in demand public speaker at churches and charitable organizations. It is said that she was exceptionally gifted at this role.

The Last Years

By the 1880s, Fanny was both living and working in the slums. Her work in the missions here gave her the opportunity to evangelize common people on a personal basis.

At the same time she kept busy with her writing life. During these last years, she would write two autobiographies: "Fanny Crosby's Life-Story, By Herself" in 1903 (out of print) and "Memories of Eighty Years" (retitled Fanny J. Crosby: An Autobiography) in 1906.

Fanny died at the age of 95 sometime during the night between February 11 and 12, 1915. On her tombstone are the words, "She hath done what she could" (from Mark 14:8). Of the thousands of hymns Fanny penned, most have been forgotten, but those used in churches around the globe throughout the decades have been priceless tools in touching lives for Jesus and continue to be so. Fanny Crosby was a true Wonder Woman for the cause of Christ—a Wonder Woman for the ages.

No, The Greek Doesn't Reveal Secret Bible Meaning, But It Helps

"Well, I Use the Greek"

One of my favorite things I've heard Dr. Robert Picirilli say is that when talking about Bible interpretation in small groups or informal conversation, people always want to know, "Well, what does the Greek say?" It's a fair question if you understand how God gave us the Bible, and specifically the New Testament.

I didn't take Greek as an undergrad at Welch College because I was a youth ministry major and it wasn't required. And when I started grad school several years ago at Moody Theological Seminary, it still wasn't required for my degree. Yet being older and wiser, I delayed graduation to take all of the classes they had on the subject.

The first two courses were great, and it was a lot of vocabulary and translation. The third, with perhaps my favorite professor ever, Dr. Julius Wong Loi Sing, was the most beneficial for several reasons.

First, and most importantly, he taught us that if you learn to read the New Testament in Greek and it makes you proud instead of humble, then you are reading but not understanding. Which is utterly useless to the Kingdom of God. I'll never forget this quote: "You are not supposed to dominate the Bible; it is supposed to dominate you."

Second, he told us that Greek should be like your underwear;

you should use it but people should not be aware of it. In other words, do not constantly and haughtily make everything about, “Well the original Greek says...” and “Now if you understand the Greek syntax Paul uses here...” And lastly, and the point of this article, he taught us that Greek does not contain some kind of hidden, secret meaning to Bible texts. But it does help.

Last year for Rambling Ever On, I wrote an article called *#Blessed: The Beatitudes As Modern Day Facebook Statuses*, which if you would like you can read [here](#). In that article I tried to practice Dr. Wong Loi Sing’s advice about the underwear. Yet I think it could be interesting for the readers of REO to see how things go behind the scenes of an article like that, because it says something about the way God communicated the Bible to us.

First, I want to look at Matthew 5:3-16 in English. You don’t have to read this to get what I am wanting you to see. Just survey it quickly:

3 *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

4 *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

5 *“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

6 *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

7 *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

8 *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

9 *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

10 *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*

12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

13 *“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.*

14 *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; **15** nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **16** Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

First, note a couple of things. One, the translation I used (the NASB) separates vs. 13-16 from vs. 3-12. Two, there is little about vs. 3-12 that gives any sense of separation within these verses.

Now, I want to show you these verses in Greek. I just want you to look at them. You do not have to understand one iota of Greek to get what I am trying to communicate here. In fact, to save time and space I'm going to go ahead and highlight some things that stand out to me:

3 Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

4 μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

5 μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

6 μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

7 μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται.

8 μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῆ καρδία, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται.

9 μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ κληθήσονται.

10 μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

11 μακάριοί ἐστε ὅταν ὀνειδίωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ διώξωσιν καὶ εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν καθ' ὑμῶν ψευδόμενοι ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ. **12** χαίρετε καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφῆτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν.

13 Ὑμεῖς **ἐστε** τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς· ἐὰν δὲ τὸ ἅλας μωρανθῇ, ἐν τίνι ἀλισθήσεται; εἰς οὐδὲν ἰσχύει ἔτι εἰ μὴ βληθὲν ἔξω καταπατεῖσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων.

14 Ὑμεῖς **ἐστε** τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου. οὐ δύναται πόλις κρυβῆναι ἐπάνω ὄρους κειμένη· **15** οὐδὲ καίουσιν λύχνον καὶ τιθέασιν αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τὸν μόδιον ἀλλ' ἐπὶ τὴν λυχνίαν, καὶ λάμπει πᾶσιν τοῖς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ. **16** οὕτως λαμψάτω τὸ φῶς ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ὅπως ἴδωσιν ὑμῶν τὰ καλὰ ἔργα καὶ δοξάσωσιν τὸν πατέρα ὑμῶν τὸν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

A couple of things to notice, which are made easy by my highlights. First, there is a contrast in verses 10 and 11. You can see it in English as it changes from “Blessed are the/those” to “Blessed are you”. But for some reason I never saw it until the first time I read it in Greek. Perhaps because the English obscures the consistency of verses 3-10 by

switching between “the” and “those”. In Greek the form is exactly the same every time.

I think the change from vs. 10 to 11 is significant. If I wear khaki pants and a blue shirt eight days in a row and then on the ninth day I wear blue jeans and a blue shirt you will wonder why I changed. The same is true for understanding biblical authors in how they write.

I personally think the change is there because Jesus gives eight beatitudes (vs. 3-10) and vs. 11 begins a commentary on the last one about being persecuted. This sharp change in the passage can also be seen without any hindrance in English by the use of “for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven” in verses 3 and 10. This creates a bun type affect of the passage.

The commentary on persecution, in my opinion, continues through vs. 16 and this can also be seen in my highlights by use of “You are” and other forms of “you” from vs. 11 to vs. 16. In fact, if I play around with the English a little, you can see it even more clearly in English than Greek:

3 *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

4 *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

5 *“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.*

6 *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*

7 *“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

8 *“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

9 *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*

10 *“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *“Blessed you are when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.*

12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

13 *“You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.*

14 *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; **15** nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. **16** Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.*

Now you may ask, “What difference does it make?” Well maybe not much. But as a preacher I have to confess, knowing that verses 13-16 should not be separated from vs. 11-12 (or from vs. 1-10) then it affects my interpretation of verses 13-16. How often do you see a new subheading in Bibles over vs. 13? What if I told you that shining your light before men, in context, was directly linked to being persecuted? Does it change your understanding of the verse? Or its application?

One more thing I want you see this, this time only in verses 3-6:

3 Μακάριοι οἱ **πτωχοὶ** τῷ πνεύματι, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.

4 μακάριοι οἱ **πενθοῦντες**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.

5 μακάριοι οἱ **πραεῖς**, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσι τὴν γῆν.

6 μακάριοι οἱ **πεινῶντες** καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται.

Notice that the four words are alliterated, beginning with the same Greek letter you may recognize from math class as Pi (though I was taught to pronounce it with a long 'e' instead of a long 'i'). I know some people find outline alliteration annoying in modern preaching but it's used here. What does that mean? Perhaps nothing. After all, vs. 7-10 are not alliterated. Yet, I think it probably means that vs. 3-6 are one subgroup of the Beatitudes and vs. 7-10 are a second group. Even further, I think if you study them you will see that it could be that vs. 3-6 deal with man's relationship to God and vs. 7-10 deal with man's relationship to other men. This follows the pattern of both the Ten Commandments and The Great Commandment given by Jesus.

And this absolutely changes how I interpret the Beatitudes, especially vs. 8 which I interpret differently than you probably have ever heard. If you want to read more about that interpretation you can read the article the I linked at the beginning of this article or you can go [here](#). Note that I don't think that my interpretation is undoubtedly correct or beyond reproach, but that I got there by study and not some crazy, baseless theory.

Again, it has been my aim to be informative without being pedantic and helpful without being condescending. I am no Greek expert and never will be. But I have benefited from it and I hope that I can help others see its benefit. God did, after all, reduce himself to human language to give us the

main source of truth we have.

Questions? Comments? Let us know below!

What Has Valentinus to Do With Christianity?

The title is a play on the most famous quote by the second century heresiologist, Tertullian, who said, “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Tertullian said this because during that time there was much errant Greek thought invading the church. One of these Greek ideals was probably Gnosticism. “Probably” because although Tertullian definitely battled it, there isn’t 100% surety that Gnosticism originated from Greek thought. It is only thought to have been born at the beginning of the first century influenced by this Greek thought.

The two main strings of Gnosticism have been classified as Iranian and Syrian. These strings trickled into other areas of thought and religion, chief among these being Christianity. In fact, this was one of its earliest areas and would sadly have a successful run at it. The kind of Gnosticism that invaded the church came to be known as Gnostic Christianity. It became so prevalent that many people both inside and outside the church thought it was just normal Christianity. This false teaching was adopted by several different Christian teachers and turned into one of the most problematic heresies of early

Christianity. There were several main teachers of Christian Gnosticism who developed their own branch of this heresy. The two Christian Gnostic teachers that had the biggest influence were Marcion and Valentinus. And probably the most influential of these two was Valentinus, who became so influential in the church that he very nearly became bishop of Rome.

It might be uncomfortable to think of heretical teachers like Valentinus having a profound *positive* impact on Christianity, but in a way he and other heretics did. These false teachings had some very positive results. They were instrumental in goading the church to collect an authoritative canon that likewise goaded it to more fully and authoritatively evaluate and form orthodox Christian doctrine based on that canon. But this collected canon of the New Testament would not become reality until the third century. For the many years prior to that, it was much harder to maintain a consensus throughout the worldwide church about the actual teachings of the Gospel. Until then there were primarily only letters and writings claiming divine authority floating about. The fact that this was the case and that there was no definite canon during these years made it so much easier for false teachings to creep into and thrive in local church doctrine. So who was this man who introduced such falsehood to Christian doctrine and what did he teach?

Valentinus and His Gnostic Christian Doctrine

Valentinus was born in Egypt sometime in the end of the first century and was educated in Alexandria. It was during these Alexandrian years that he set up the Eastern branch of Valentinian thought. He would later set up the Western branch after he moved to Rome. The primary difference between these two branches is how they viewed the body of Jesus and this was a big issue with them since anything of the flesh is evil and exactly what the "spiritual" needed to be saved from. The Eastern branch resolved this by saying that Jesus had to die

to save Himself as well. The Western branch resolved this with the docetic view, which said that Jesus only *seemed* to be a man and he only *seemed* to suffer and die.

Basic Valentinius doctrine says that the first eternal being was First-Being or Profundity. He eventually united with Thought to produce the emanations (aeons) called Mind and Truth. And this production process kept on going with Mind and Truth producing two more emanations, and then those two emanations uniting to produce two more emanations, and so on and so forth. This went on until 26 emanations had been produced after First-Being and Thought. This genealogical strand of First-Being, Thought, and their 26 offspring was called The Fullness. Every one of these succeeding pairs along The Fullness grew more and more discontent, each succeeding emanation more so than the one before it, because each had less knowledge of and contact with First-Being. This discontentment come to a head in Wisdom (Sophia), the 26th emanation. Her prideful decision to fight to build her way back up to First-Being only resulted in her fall from grace. First-Being tried his best to restore Wisdom to her correct place in an attempt to keep the perfection of The Fullness. It didn't work and therefore the entire line of The Fullness was compromised. As the first phase of a strategy to restore the former holiness of The Fullness, First-Being also produced directly from Himself the emanations of Christ and Holy Spirit. Together the two brought a joy to The Fullness that resulted in the emanations collectively producing Jesus.

In the meantime, Wisdom's passion remained below the Fullness and produced the evil Demiurge who created earth. The Demiurge is the God of the Bible who is actually and unknowingly much lower than the lowest emanation of The Fullness. To save us from him, Wisdom's passion, with the help of Savior, produced the spiritual seed of earth. They intended for the committed goal of this spiritual seed to ascend above this evil Earth to The Fullness with the help of Jesus.

The Disciples of Valentinus

Valentinus taught his false doctrine until his death in A.D. 160, after which his students continued to spread it. These students clearly made their own tweaks to their teacher's doctrine. You can see these tweaks in a set of Gnostic writings called the *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. They are called this because they were discovered buried near the town of Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It is believed they were buried by Egyptian monks around AD 367 after Athanasius ordered the monasteries of Egypt to rid themselves of all apocryphal works.

The Nag Hammadi contains 13 codices (a codex is an ancient book), each of which have a number of different writings. There are slightly over 50 writings in all. These writings clarify and expand on Valentinian doctrines to some degree and offer some of the aforementioned interesting tweaks. Probably the most famous of these writings is The Gospel of Truth, which some experts think was penned by Valentinus himself. Irenaeus, perhaps the greatest heresiologist of all time, first mentions this writing in his five-volume work *Against the Heresies* as an example of the great Valentinian threat to Christianity. Irenaeus was just one of a group of Christian heresiologists who arose during the second century to dispute Gnostic Christianity and other heretical teachings in the church. Irenaeus focused his war largely on the Gnostic Christians and primarily the Valentinians. Concerning Gnostic Christianity, Irenaeus concluded that "Against them one might justly exclaim: 'Oh you nonsense-blabbering pumpkins! You blameworthy and untrue sophists!'"

No, Valentinianism was not the only heresy or even Gnostic line to encourage the church to collect a final New Testament canon and to fine tune its orthodox doctrine, but it did have a huge role in that inspiration. And for all of its supposed knowledge, Valentinianism mimicked its own doctrine by itself being a definite fall of wisdom.