

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 III

Part 3: Puritan Education in New England

Historian Richard Greaves called the Puritan dream of “a universally enlightened society” a “heritage” left to future generations.[\[i\]](#) This idea of universal literacy was slow to develop in England and Europe, but had its most immediate fruits in the Puritan colonies of New England. It was in the New England colonies in the 17th century that Puritan ideas were given the freedom to shape a society like never before. While Puritan ideals certainly impacted societal moral standards and church life, it could be argued that they had their greatest impact on education and literacy in the colonies.

Puritan New England had remarkably high literacy.

Perhaps calling Puritan New England a “universally enlightened society” is an overstatement. However, when one compares the literacy rates of colonial New England to old England and

Virginia, the differences are striking. Historians that have quantitatively researched literacy rates in England, New England, and Virginia have shown this difference. By the time of the American Revolution, New England boasted a male literacy rate of about 85 percent and of nearly 100 percent in the city of Boston.^[ii] While female literacy was considerably lower (about 60 percent), these numbers are still remarkable when compared to England and Virginia.^[iii] In England and Virginia male literacy was still at 60 percent by 1790 and female literacy much lower.^[iv] With nearly every man and the majority of women being able to read, Puritan New England achieved something no other society had ever found possible.

How did the New England Puritans achieve a literate society? A partial answer to this question is that they did it through legislation. As early as 1642, Massachusetts passed a law calling for parents to educate their children. More famously, in 1647, the colony famously passed what became known as the "Old Deluder Satan Act." This law called for all towns and communities of at least 50 people to establish schools and provide teachers for those schools so that Satan would not be able to "keep men from knowledge of the Scriptures."^[v] Again, one sees the theological purpose behind Puritan education. In the Puritan view, literacy and knowledge of the Bible and theology were foundational to Christian living. Unlike in England where this knowledge was limited to a literate faction, New England established it for all.

Puritans prioritized education for all levels.

It follows, therefore, that education began young and in the home. While schools were established according to the law, good Puritan families did not wait for the school to educate their children. Children needed to learn to read the Scripture, to know God's word. In Puritan New England, families sought to teach their children to read and write and to memorize their catechism as early as possible (usually five

or six). There was a sense of urgency embraced by the Puritan community in New England. Early death was a regular occurrence. Children, because of original sin, were sinners by nature. They must learn to read and learn of God as young as possible. As Cotton Mather said when asked when children should learn to read, "BETIMES! BETIMES! Let the Children have the Early Knowledge of the Holy Scripture." [\[vi\]](#)

Sometimes historical dates seem like arbitrary numbers malevolent teachers force their ~~victims~~ students to memorize. In this case, dates tell the story. In 1620, the first group of Puritans arrived in New England aboard the famous Mayflower. In 1630, Puritan immigrants from England founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1636, the theocratic government of Massachusetts founded Harvard College to train its ministers, doctors, and lawyers. Within 16 years of any settlement and with 6 years of founding Massachusetts, the Puritans had erected an institution of higher learning. While they were still taming the wilderness and erecting their modest homes, education—specifically religious education—was a priority. This is perhaps even more remarkable when compared to the foundation of the College of William and Mary in Virginia. Founded in 1693, William and Mary was established 86 years after the first settlers arrived in Jamestown colony.

The New England Primer gives us insight into the Puritan classroom.

As they established community grammar schools and Harvard College, New England Puritans began to publish educational curricula that better fit their perspective. The most popular of these materials was the *New England Primer*. First published around 1687, the *Primer* was the chief tool used in the American colonies for students to learn the alphabet.

The *Primer* used pictures and poetic couplets to teach both the alphabet and biblical lessons. It begins, "In Adam's fall, We sinned all" and continues to teach about biblical figures such

as Job, Peter, Esther, and David, as well as lessons about cats, dogs, eagles, lions, and the King.[\[vii\]](#) This section is followed by a series of statements that every child was to commit to memory. After twelve sentences on the child's duty, the *Primer* adds another "Alphabet Lesson for Youth," this time using Scripture verses to illustrate every letter of the alphabet.[\[viii\]](#) Some editions of the *Primer* conclude with the Story of John Roger, a Marian martyr and example of Christian virtue.

The *New England Primer* may show the overwhelming importance of theological instruction in the education of youth, but Puritan education in New England was by no means limited to the study of Scripture. Rather than limiting themselves, New England Puritans, much like Milton and other English Puritans, saw biblical instruction as the foundation of a good education. Education in New England, especially the higher education offered by Harvard College, was very receptive to experimental science.[\[ix\]](#)

Puritan Education was broad in content but strict in discipline.

New England Puritans were also known to be students of ancient languages, pagan literature, and philosophy. They placed a high importance on reason and on logical thought. While this emphasis is a product of Renaissance humanism, it was also theologically guided. One scholar notes, "New England humanism had a moral and a theological purpose: men studied the ancient classics in order to become familiar with the ancient tongues, and men needed a knowledge of the ancient tongues in order to interpret the ancient text of the Scriptures."[\[x\]](#) While they held the classics in high esteem, they saw that the purpose of education was not just to gain knowledge, but mostly to gain knowledge of God. It is clear that English Puritan educational theorists, like Milton, had a profound impact on Puritan society in New England.

It is certainly well established that discipline in Puritan education was strict and corporal. The *New England Primer* even says: “An idol fool, is whipped at school.”[\[xi\]](#) Cotton Mather’s famous dictum to parents “Better whipt than dam’d” is often seen as the essence of Puritan education.[\[xii\]](#) As we have seen, this is clearly not the whole story. In his extensive study of Puritan families and their education, Historian Edmond Morgan concluded: “Puritan education was intelligently planned, and the relationship between parent and child that it envisaged was not one of harshness and severity but of tenderness and sympathy.”[\[xiii\]](#)

The Puritans desired a society of lay intellectualism, a society where everyday people could read and think not necessarily for themselves, but the way God intended them to think. In New England, they built that society. They read more than any society that preceded them. More of them read than in the majority of countries to this day. They read the Bible, but not only the Bible. They read Homer and Plato, and their own authors like Milton and Bunyan. They studied both the supernatural deity that they believed gave them salvation, as well as the natural world He had made. Their philosophy of education was broad, not rigid and narrow like many believe. While it was broad, it was also focused. It had a unifying theme, a core value, and a purpose behind it—the knowledge of God.

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

[\[i\]](#) Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and Educational Thought: Background for Reform* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 146.

[[iii](#)] David D. Hall, "Education and the Social Order in Colonial America." *Reviews in American History* 3 (1975): 179; Gloria Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England" in *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 585.

[[iii](#)] Main, 581.

[[iv](#)] Hall, 179.

[[v](#)] Joel Spring, *The American School, 1642-1985* (New York: Longman, 1986), 3.

[[vi](#)] Quoted in Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth Century New England*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 96.

[[vii](#)] *The New England Primer* in Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer, eds. *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 294.

[[viii](#)] Ibid., 295.

[[ix](#)] Raymond Stearns, "Assessing the New England Mind," *Church History* 10 (1941): 257.

[[x](#)] Ibid., 258.

[[xi](#)] *New England Primer*, 294.

[[xii](#)] Quoted in Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, 103.

[[xiii](#)] Ibid., 108.

“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.” [\[i\]](#) 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.

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

Part One: Who were the Puritans?

Historians differ considerably on their usage of the term “Puritan.”

Along with the growing popular appeal of Calvinism among twenty-first century evangelicals is a growing interest in Puritans. What used to denote a joyless legalistic form of Christianity is now often understood to be a gospel-focused, God-centered intensity of faith. As a Christian historian, therefore, I find trying to understand the Puritans a fascinating process. Moreover, as a Christian educator I have come to understand the Puritan philosophy of education to be one of their greatest gifts to posterity. We are all the benefactors of their love of learning.

The Puritans are as difficult for twenty and twenty-first-century scholars to understand as they were for their contemporaries. Some historians have seen the Puritans as radicals who overthrew the traditional structures of monarchy and episcopacy by means of revolution. In this way, they are the forerunners of the American, French and even Communist

Revolutions.[\[i\]](#) Others have portrayed the Puritan movement and its work ethic as the seedbed for eighteenth and nineteenth-century capitalism.[\[ii\]](#) This interpretation is a far cry from Communist revolutionaries. A more common approach to Puritans presents them as overly pious zealots who squelched individual liberties for the dream of a holy society or Calvinist theocracy. Those from this perspective have even coined the adjective “puritanical” as a synonym for strict, rigid or authoritarian. Still, others believe the Puritans to be the founders of American democracy, the champions of religious liberty, and the reformers of the Church of England. If one word can mean all these things, then how can it mean anything?[\[iii\]](#) If one is to learn something from the Puritan approach to education, one must first understand who he is talking about when he talks about Puritans. This three-part series of essays seeks to define what Puritanism means, and then show how these men and women reformed education first in England and then in New England.

What the term meant in the seventeenth-century.

The problem with all of these competing understandings of Puritanism is that they place seventeenth-century people into modern terms. Rather than being concerned with revolution, capitalism or democracy, the Puritans were concerned with the issues of their time, the chief of which was the reformation of the English Church. The movement grew out of the larger movement of Protestant reforms sweeping Europe in the sixteenth century. England was brought to Protestantism by Henry VIII's desire to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, led back to Catholicism by his daughter Mary Tudor, and brought to a somewhat peaceful Protestant compromise by Elizabeth I. It was this compromise of Protestant theology and Catholic influences that gave rise to the Puritan movement. In short, Puritans believed that Protestant England was much too Catholic. They opposed the liturgy, feast days, clerical vestments, and the episcopal organizational structure of the

Church.

At this point, it is important to point out the original usage of the term. For the most part, "Puritan" was used in a derogatory sense. Elizabeth's successor James I was particularly antagonistic toward the Puritans as they were particularly disapproving of his insistence on an episcopal church government. James categorized the Puritans as those who were "trusting the private spirit of Reformation" rather than accepting the authority of the Church.^[iv] James' usage of the term, in many ways, gets to the heart of Puritanism—a movement dedicated to the authority of Scripture over against any other considerations. It was a movement that despite its certainty in the doctrine of human depravity believed that the Bible was powerful enough to change any man. It must be read and understood by everyman.

While the Puritans sought reform of the Church, they also sought to reform society. They wanted to eradicate sins that brought England further from its role as a Protestant kingdom, such as Sabbath-breaking, swearing, adultery, and drunkenness. They even outlawed Christmas because of its pagan associations. In their desire to reform the church and society, they were influenced by the model of John Calvin's Geneva. Eventually, the Puritans had the opportunity to implement their reforms. In England, after the defeat and execution of Charles I at the end of the Civil War in 1649, the Puritans established a short-lived republican government under Oliver Cromwell. In New England starting in 1620, they established colonies built on principles drawn from their belief in the righteousness of God, the wickedness of humanity, and the authority of the Bible.

The Puritans, however, were not a political party or a united group with central leadership. They were loosely organized and many times very diverse in their beliefs. Most were Calvinistic, some were not, many attempted to balance the extremes in various ways. One issue that illustrates this

diversity is separation from the Church of England. Many historians reserve the term Puritan only for those that stayed within institutionalized church. Those that separated are labeled Separatists. This distinction, while sometimes helpful, is of little use when discussing Puritanism in New England where they all in a sense separated. Many of those Separatists who left the Church of England also left England. Since they are known as Puritans in New England, their fellow Separatists will also be seen as Puritans. Separatism, therefore, is a branch of Puritanism. Admittedly, this definition may be broad, but it does provide a framework for a discussion of Puritan reforms in education.

Puritans were more educated than average.

In attempting to define Puritans and discuss Puritan education, the educational background of the Puritans must be taken into consideration. Protestantism in general and Puritanism, in particular, had a special appeal to the literate lay people in towns and cities. In studying Reformation-era Germany and Switzerland, historian Steven Ozment demonstrated successfully that the message of the Reformers appealed primarily to this demographic.[\[v\]](#) Who else would read the tracts and sermons of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin?

Similarly, Puritanism grew among the more literate city and town folk. One historian points out that: "Though Puritanism appealed to men and women of every walk of life, it flourished in towns especially among the 'industrious sort' – those who had succeeded by effort which they attributed to grace."[\[vi\]](#) In less secular and caustic terms, the Puritan message appealed to the successful, the middle class, and the professional people of London and other urban areas. It appealed to the already literate. These men and women regularly read tracts, owned Bibles, and thought their way through lengthy sermons. These were not typical Englishmen of

the late 16th and 17th centuries; they highly valued education for themselves and their posterity.

When it comes to literacy and education the colonies established by Puritans were also not typical English colonies. They certainly weren't typical of Spanish, French, or Portuguese colonies. As we will see in Part Three, the literacy rate in New England around the time of the 1776 Revolution was higher than any other place in the world!

Puritans wanted to radically change their society for the better.

While Puritanism was born out of dissatisfaction with the Elizabethan Settlement and the reign of James I, it began to prosper during the reign of Charles I. Many scholars have called this time the Puritan Revolution (1641-1660), the time where Puritans came to power in Parliament and used the New Model Army to defeat Charles I, execute him for treason, and establish a Puritan government under Parliament and Oliver Cromwell. War is a time of turmoil, even for those on the winning side. This period was also one of change and new ideas. In this context, the Puritans saw an opportunity for reshaping society, an opportunity to establish a holy republic.

In building a new society, they thought it a priority to reform education. As historian Richard Greaves points out, "No Puritan of any kind could envisage a Holy Commonwealth without a reformed church and piously oriented schools." [\[vii\]](#) While much is known about Puritan attempts to reform the church, their emphasis on education is underappreciated. The Puritan Revolution was a time of new government, new ideas, and new opportunities. The Puritans saw it as a time for educational reform. These ideas on education will be examined in Part Two.

Were the Puritans really puritanical? Is the reputation for joyless and thoughtless authoritarianism zeal deserved? The

answer depends much more on the presuppositions of the one answering the question than on the historical record. Certainly, the Puritans had high moral standards and desired to implement their beliefs in society that makes most modern people bristle. Of course, they went too far in outlawing Christmas. The Puritans were, however, a people committed to one consuming idea—the knowledge and worship of God through the Holy Scriptures. Because of the need to read the Bible, this consuming idea led to the greatest educational reforms the world had yet seen.

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

Notes:

[\[i\]](#) For an example see the works of Marxist historian Christopher Hill. Especially *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

[\[ii\]](#) For an example of this view see that classic work by Max Webber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930).

[\[iii\]](#) Commenting on contradictory meanings of Puritan, Raymond Stearns writes, “The Puritan was a jealous bigot but he somehow gave us religious freedom; he was a gloomy snob but he gave us democracy; he was a tight-fisted, hard-working Calvinist with a feudal background but he developed the capitalists system!” in Raymond Stearns, “Assessing the New England Mind,” *Church History* 10 (1941): 246.

[\[iv\]](#) King James I, *Meditation upon the Lord’s Prayer* quoted in Keith Durso, *No Armor for the Back: Baptist Prison Writings 1600s-1700s* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 46.

[v] Steven Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities: The Appeal of Protestantism to sixteenth-century Germany and Switzerland* (Hartford: Yale University Press, 1980).

[vi] Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed, Britain 1603-1714* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 31.

[vii] Richard L. Greaves, *The Puritan Revolution and Educational Thought: Background for Reform* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 6.

We Have This Hope

Another day, another mass shooting.

Another day, another senseless act of violence and unspeakable evil.

How do we respond when the world around us feels like it is collapsing in front of our eyes? How do react when evil seems to triumph every day? Every hour? Every minute?

We are confronted with an almost unrelenting surge of evil – a tidal wave of horror stories and despicable acts. Acts that pierce our hearts with a bone-wearying sadness. Acts that just keep coming, over and over. We feel so overwhelmed, so broken, and so alone, that we feel nothing at all.

Or maybe that is just my response. I hesitate to speak for anyone else because we all process things differently, but based on conversations I have had, most of us fall somewhere within that range of emotions. We are horrified, sad, angry, and confused. We feel the onslaught of evil and we grieve. We grieve for those suffering the fullest effects of these profound demonstrations of depravity. We grieve because we

feel helpless in all of it. We grieve because we know this level of wickedness is not something that can be contained by laws, regulations, or rhetoric. We grieve because our ability to grieve is slowly dying.

Where does this leave us? As the church, what should our answer be to the question of this great evil? From what I can see, we feel so very small in all of this. We feel alone and isolated. We are islands surrounded by darkness and death. To paraphrase one of my favorite films, *The Two Towers*, "What can we do against such reckless hate?"

I have many more questions than I have answers. I have no perfectly crafted words that will allow any of this to make sense, to hurt less, or to move us more. What I have is likely insufficient, but as I have thought about all this over the past few days, and at various times prior to the most recent tragedy, I keep coming back to a few truths that have helped me. Perhaps they can help others as well.

I should seek the heart of God and respond as He responds.

I never want to tell someone how they should react to anything and I hope I am not doing that now. That said, when the next random act of wanton violence occurs, even if I am numb from all the previous atrocities, I know I should be moved in some manner. Now, that will likely look different for me than it does for anyone else, but as a child of the King, it is my call to be like my Father and my Father is deeply moved when evil seems to rule the day. God grieves for the broken, the hurting, and the neglected. He champions the orphan and the widow (Psalm 147:3, Psalm 34:18). His example should move me to care, to respond, and to grieve, even when I don't feel like it. Even when I have been desensitized to the evil in our midst. I should seek the heart of God and respond as He

responds.

Perhaps you are like many I have spoken to who feel so battered by the constant stream that you cannot seem to really care anymore. I've been there and in some ways, I am still there. One thing that I have noticed with my response, is that it is much more spiritually rewarding to avoid finger-pointing in the wake of a tragedy. I feel less and internalize less when I spend all of my energy blaming this person or that, this group or that, this worldview or that. I'm not saying there are no people, groups, or worldviews responsible for many of the most heinous acts we are witnessing. I'm simply stating that when I only point fingers at the monsters outside of my gate, I cloak myself in self-delusion and self-righteousness. For each of us, "there but for the grace of God go I" should be a constant refrain. We are all capable of great evil. We are all susceptible to giving in to our fallen nature. That knowledge should spur us to repentance, thanksgiving, and grace. We shouldn't hate those that do evil. We should mourn that sin has disfigured the image of God in their lives almost beyond recognition. We should long for renewal – of those that do this great evil but also of the world itself. These tragedies are stark reminders how far from the Kingdom the fallen world truly is and it should be our ever-present mission to bridge that gap.

Prayer should be our first response.

Secondly, we need to pray. In today's culture, that sounds so weak and inadequate and there are many who have responded with animosity and derision to calls for prayer. To the world at large, prayer is synonymous with naïveté and inaction, when the opposite is actually true. To a believer, prayer should be our first response. Our first defense. Our greatest and most powerful weapon. (I Chronicles 16:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14,

Jeremiah 29:12, Matthew 5:44)

Prayer does not always come easily to me. Or better said, my prayer life is too self-focused and too limited. If you are like me and are active in your local church, you hear prayer requests often. I commit to pray for these requests and I almost always follow through. But my prayers are usually quick, little, one-and-done affairs. I fail, time and again, to go boldly to the throne of God with those requests. These times of tragedy remind me how flawed and undisciplined my prayer life usually is. I am convinced that if the body of Christ would commit to seeking the face of the Lord in an intense and focused manner, we would see God move in ways we cannot imagine. I am also convinced that we don't pray that way. If anything good can come from a tragedy like a mass shooting (and if you believe in an Omniscient and Omnipotent God you have to believe that He can use it for good) then perhaps believers falling on their knees in committed and fervent supplication will be the first step towards that.

We are never alone.

Finally, we are never alone. A few paragraphs back, I mentioned how isolated these events can make us feel. We see example after example of humanity hurting, killing, and destroying and it convinces us that we are alone. That there is no remnant in the land to stem the tide. That is a lie from hell itself. A dangerous and powerful lie. Do not believe it. Regardless how you feel, how things appear, you are never alone.

I Kings 19 tells us the aftermath of the Mount Carmel story. The prophet Elijah has just experienced one of the most amazing and powerful displays of God's power. Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and the LORD answered by

sending fire from heaven to show the land who the true King of Israel was. A short time later, Elijah is by himself, hiding in a cave, and he prays to God, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." He was convinced that he was the only faithful person left. Without reading too much into the passage, I've always wondered why Elijah felt this way. The Lord responds to him and tells him that there are 7,000 others that never bowed the knee to Baal. 7,000! I don't want to sound flippant, but it sounds like Elijah needed to find himself a good church home! He felt isolated in part because he had isolated himself. There are too many in our society that do this as well. They do not connect with a local body of believers. They do not feel the need or importance of putting roots down in a local faith community. So when tragedy strikes, of course they feel alone.

But even bigger than that, when we are disconnected from the worldwide church, we do not see how God is moving outside of our small sphere of living. We might be plugged into our local body, but we still feel cut off from the larger body of Christ. In some ways we are islands, but each of our small islands are joined together by the life-stream of the blood of Christ. These horrific acts should spur us to stronger connections, clearer focus, and more passionate action. Our light should shine brighter. Our prayers should be bolder. The importance of building the Kingdom should stand in stark contrast to the darkness surrounding us. Our lives should be a constant and unified declaration of grace, hope, and love to a broken and fallen world.

That's all I have so far. I wish I could write something that would help make sense of things. I can't. I'm still trying to figure out how to respond to the constant barrage myself. But

these few things have helped me, so hopefully, they can help you. I'll leave you with the words from the writer of Hebrews. It's a powerful reassurance of our position and value to God. When life is chaos we have hope – a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Let that be a comfort to you.

So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us. This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. Hebrews 6:18 -19

Peter, Walking on Water, and the Trust of a Drowning Man

I've been thinking a lot about Peter and trust. Not faith necessarily, but trust. And it all stems from a thought I had when I read the story found in Matthew 14:22-33.

My guess is, most of you know the story and know it well. It is a favorite for Sunday School teachers. Preachers love it as well. There is a lot to be gleaned from the story of Jesus walking on the water. There are the various dynamics at play: fear, doubt, faith, and trust. There is Jesus, walking on the wind-swept waters in a display of power that rivals almost any miracle recorded in Scripture. There are the disciples, cowering in the boat, terrified of the "ghost" that is approaching them. There is Peter, touched by the presence of Jesus, trusting enough to take a step of faith out of the boat. And then there is Peter, overcome by his fear of the winds and waves, sinking into the water.

This most recent time I encountered the story, I was struck with a moment that I have never really noticed before, and it dramatically altered how I view this story.

In my experience, Jesus walking on the water has always been used to teach about doubt and faith. There they were, sitting in the boat, surrounded by the storm, and they see him – Jesus, walking on the water and coming their way. Let me repeat that. In the middle of a storm the disciples see Jesus, their teacher, literally walking on the water. By this point, they had already witnessed various miracles. They knew Jesus had power over the natural world. They had to – they had just seen him multiply the fish and the bread to feed thousands. And now, here he is, walking on the water as if on land. Yet they are still terrified of the winds, the waves, and the “ghost” walking towards them on the water.

And then he calls to them with words of comfort and peace. At this point in his spiritual walk, Peter’s words were far bolder than his actions, so he asks Jesus to command him to walk out to him. Jesus simply says, “Come.” Peter then does something that should both inspire and shame all of us: He steps out on the water and walks towards Jesus. That is faith. That is complete trust in Jesus. I am moved and my spirit is piqued when I read that. Peter knew the sea, it was his life and livelihood. He knew that man was not made to walk on the water. But he saw and heard Jesus and he trusted fully.

Then he took his eyes off Jesus and focused on the storm. This is the moment in the story that most teachers make their big point. And it is a very good point. We should always keep our eyes on Jesus. We should take him at his word. We should trust completely. We should have that mustard seed faith and move whatever mountains are in our way.

We don’t live in that reality though. Most of us don’t, at least. I have never moved a mountain and I don’t know of anyone who has. We struggle with trusting fully and living by

faith. We are more like the other disciples, huddling in the boat waiting to see what happens.

So the contrast is simple: We should be like Peter before he took his eyes off the Lord. We should not be like Peter who allowed fear to guide his actions. That is a good lesson. It is a simple, yet powerful truth. But I see another kind of trust in that passage.

I see Peter sinking deep into the stormy waters, knowing death was quickly coming to take him. I see Peter realizing that his faith was not strong enough to continue walking on that water. That could have been the end of the story. But that is not how Jesus let it end. As Peter is flailing in the water, he calls out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Jesus walks to Peter and takes his hand. Peter could have looked at that hand and thought to himself, "Thanks but no thanks Jesus. I don't see how it's possible for you to keep me from drowning, seeing as how you are literally standing on water. Why don't you get the boat to come over here and then I can hold on to that. I know that boat is made to float, unlike us." But Peter trusted in the power of Jesus. He didn't trust in that power to work in his own life, not yet, but he knew without hesitation that Jesus could and would save him. He knew that Jesus could reach down and pull him out of the water, even though that made no earthly sense. His faith was small, but it was enough to trust in his Saviour.

Most days, that kind of trust is all I can muster. I hope and yearn for the other kind, the fuller kind. But on days where that trust is a faint glimmer, I hope I trust enough to simply take the hand of Jesus when he offers to help me. Most days, I am okay with having the trust of a drowning man.

Sometimes He Calms the Sea

African-American pastor and songwriter of the past century, Charles Tindley, used a common metaphor of the time to reference the trials, tribulations, dangers, and snares of the Christian life: "When the storms of life are raging, stand by me...when the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea, thou who rulest wind and water, stand by me." [1. "Stand By Me" Charles A. Tindley]

Another song writer-poet expressed similar sentiments: "Jesus Savior, pilot me, over life's tempestuous sea, unknown waves before me roll, hiding rocks and treacherous shoal, wondrous sovereign of the sea, Jesus Savior, pilot me." [2. "Jesus, Savior Pilot Me" Edward Hopper]

Songwriter Scott Krippayne, echoed these thoughts in a song he wrote in 1995:

*All who sail the sea of faith
Find out before too long
How quickly blue skies can grow dark
And gentle winds grow strong
Suddenly fear is like white water
Pounding on the soul
Still we sail on knowing
That our Lord is in control
Sometimes He calms the storm
With a whispered peace be still
He can settle any sea
But it doesn't mean He will
Sometimes He holds us close
And lets the wind and waves go wild
Sometimes He calms the storm*

And other times He calms His child"[3. "Sometimes He Calms the Storm" Scott Krippayne]

Traveling by boat or ship, or being out on the ocean, rivers, or lakes was a dangerous thing for many centuries, since ancient times. Storms could arise without notice, and the wind, strong waves, thunder, and lightning menaced travelers, and could capsize a ship and cause many deaths. This has been symbolic of trouble in the Christian life. Storms symbolize illness and disease, financial disasters, broken relationships, and anything else in life that threatens us, either physically or emotionally. Can God not step in and save the day? Can he not send a miracle our way?

In Mark 4, the disciples on the Sea of Galilee found themselves caught in a sudden storm, helpless and in grave danger, while Jesus was asleep in the boat. They woke him, frightened out of their wits, and He stood, extended His hand, rebuked the wind, and said "peace, be still." Immediately the storm ended. Instantly. There was a "great calm." Jesus then rebuked his followers for their lack of faith. Sure, He can calm storms. He's God.

A few years later, Paul was traveling as a prisoner to Rome, on board a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. Suddenly, a Euroclydon, a powerful, cyclone-type wind arose, and for the next two weeks the ship was tossed and battered until all hope of survival was gone. But suddenly Paul appeared and said to all on board with him: "The God whose I am, and whom I serve, has appeared to me." He gave Paul the peace he needed, and the assurance that all would be well (Acts 27:23). But they had to ride out the storm and suffer shipwreck. Life's like that sometimes.

Yet another song repeats for us the same truth:

*Sometimes He calms the storm sometimes He calms me
Sometimes the storm still rages on but I feel the sweetest*

peace

*It's such a joy to know that my Lord knows just what I need
Sometimes He calms the storm sometimes He calms me*[4. "He Calms me" sung by the McKameys]

Here are some lessons we can learn.

God is sovereign over every storm life brings our way. He is capable of doing the miraculous; healing, provision, removing obstacles, and certainly doesn't mind His child asking for those things. He may not do what we wish He would, but He always, always, always, will be with us, and will speak peace to our heart if we call upon Him. "Therefore, we will not fear..." (Psalm 46:2) At the end of the day, He will "get us to the other side."

Here's the point. We all face storms. God can miraculously still them, and sometimes will, but often we will have to go through them. However, even in the storm He is with us, can speak peace to our heart. The loss of our beautiful daughter-in-law two years ago – my health challenges the past few years – standing with friends and family during severe trials. I'm so glad He is there. The song by *Casting Crowns*, "Praise You in This Storm," states it beautifully:

And I'll praise you in this storm

And I will lift my hands

That you are who you are

No matter where I am

And every tear I've cried

You hold in your hand

You never left my side

And though my heart is torn

I will praise you in this storm[5. "Praise You in This Storm"

Mark Hall and Bernie Herms (Casting Crowns)]

Prayer: Father, even now be with your dear children who are caught in one of life's raging storms, whatever it might

be. Please calm the storm, according to your will, or please calm them, and assure them of your love and presence. In the powerful name of Christ, Amen.

Doubting Faith

True or False: I believe in God.

Absolutely true. Every fragment that makes up the whole acknowledges this truth. The flesh, the soul, the body, the mind, the spirit: my entire existence accepts and proclaims that God is real.

True or False: I believe in the Truth as revealed by the Bible.

True. At least on most days. There are some days that I am bombarded with questions, and it is on those days that my confidence wavers. Those days are rare, but I would be dishonest if I did not admit they were as much a part of my life as the days where I accept every word of Scripture as inspired by God Himself.

True or False: I believe that Jesus is who He and the rest of Scripture say He is.

True. I believe that Scripture and history are in agreement. Jesus lived and breathed 2,000 years ago. He taught. He was followed by many. The Bible says that he died on a cross and rose again on the third day after his death. Awesome story there and one that has moved my heart more times than I can recall, but it has also been the source of many sleepless nights and totally unproductive days. God in the flesh dead? God in the flesh raised to life? Any adult that claims that

those truths are easy to accept is a liar. Scripture speaks to it. History speaks to it. But sometimes, my mind cannot fathom it. Sometimes my unbelief is too strong to ignore. It is at those times that I think about faith.

I have frequently wrestled with the idea of faith.

I have frequently wrestled with the idea of faith. There are times, frankly, too many times, that I get the impression that Christians are supposed to go through life with unwavering confidence in what we believe. And if we do not we are not spiritual enough. Sure, you hear preachers and teachers say that it is okay to have doubts, but when they say that they are referring to things like uncertainty about God's will for our lives or not understanding why God allowed a loved one to die. Those questions are acceptable. If we ask the wrong questions, like "is Jesus really the only way?" and "is the Bible true?" well, let's just say that questions of that nature are not only discouraged but are labeled as weak and unspiritual. I am convinced this is why so many Christians live very frustrated, disappointed lives. We all know what the dirty, ugly, secret is. We all know about the giant elephant in the corner of the room, but we refuse to admit it to ourselves and we definitely will not admit it to anyone else: **We doubt.** Our belief is not complete. Or strong. Or perfect. It is flawed and deeply human. Our belief is easily shaken. At times, it is easily broken.

We doubt. Our belief is not complete. Or strong. Or perfect. It is flawed and deeply human. Our belief is easily shaken. At times, it is easily broken.

There are times that my intellect, my emotions, and my heart are telling me that there is no way that Jesus fed 5,000 men with one child's lunch. Or that God became man and lived and

died in my place. The Gospels say those things happened. If we accept that Scripture is reliable, that means that God says it happened. If I doubt one part of that, I in effect doubt that the Bible is truly the inspired Word of God. If I doubt that, then what do I actually believe? If I have nothing authoritative to hold on to, then on what am I basing my beliefs?

I grow frustrated when I hear other Christians sigh and postulate why more people do not embrace our beliefs. As if it is easy to embrace what Christians believe. Unfortunately, many Christians do feel that our belief system is easily understood and that it should make perfect sense to everyone, all of the time. Let me be blunt: That is insane! Scripture is full of examples of people of faith struggling with their desire to believe and their inability to actually do so. The disciples were not completely convinced that Jesus was the Messiah until they saw Him in His resurrected form. They spent three years traveling with Him and watching Him raise people from the dead, heal the blind, lame, and diseased, feed thousands with one small meal, and control the elements. They did see all of that and yet they doubted.

And then there are those that have lived after Jesus ascended to heaven. We have not seen the miracles. We have not heard the words issue from the very mouth of our Savior. Yes, we have the biblical accounts. Yes, we have the historical record and tradition. Yes, we have the previous 2,000 years of human history to show us the power of Jesus' life and message. Yet to expect Christians from any age or generation to live without doubts is unrealistic and damaging. It is damaging because it implies that to have doubts is to sin. So when we doubt, and we all do, we feel guilty and defeated, which of course leads to even more doubting and more guilt. You see the pattern? It is vicious and it is unforgiving. That is not the life that Scripture speaks to. That is not the life that Jesus calls us to.

Where does all of this leave us? I am not entirely sure. I do know a few things that have given me great comfort, though. First, questions are acceptable ways of interacting with God. Scripture is full of questions, many of them unanswered. Questions do not make us sinful, or immature, or even unspiritual. Questions make us human and they show that we are actively engaging our beliefs in a way that is healthy and God ordained.

Questions do not make us sinful, or immature, or even unspiritual.

Second, we do not have the ability to understand everything about God or His plan. We are human after all. Scripture promises that “God has given us everything we need for living a godly life.” We are not promised answers. We are not promised complete clarity. We are told to seek, knock and ask. We are commanded to work out our faith with fear and trembling. Do those descriptors sound easy? Do they sound safe and comforting? On the surface, no, they do not. Look deeper though and you will see a comforting truth underneath. God is intimately aware with the challenges of faith. He understands the struggle, so much so He tells us that our faith will not come easy. As Ben Plunkett mentioned last week in his [article](#) on the dual nature of Christ, even our Lord struggled with God’s will in the garden of Gethsemane. God knows and He understands. He does not demand perfect understanding from us. He asks only for our trust. The craziest part of this whole thing is that I struggle more with the insignificant areas of life. My faith wavers more when confronted with trusting God to provide or believing that God truly cares about me. When my faith has been assaulted by something more challenging, the untimely death of a loved one, I have unreservedly been able to trust that God knows best, even when I can not possibly comprehend His methods or His means.

Lastly, sincere doubt can lead the way to a fuller and more vibrant faith. My wife put this in a way that has resonated with me ever since – sincere faith is running to God with our questions, like a child would run to their mother or father. Sincere doubt is not running away from God when we have questions. That leads to a hardening of our hearts. True faith is not the act of believing in something that we already know to be true. True faith is believing in something that defies our experience. True faith is believing when all evidence points to the opposite conclusion. True faith is living a life that makes no sense from a human perspective, but is exactly what Jesus instructed us to do. True faith has all sorts of room for doubts. If it did not it would not be faith. We are not saved by assurances and truths. We are saved by grace, through faith. So, I believe, albeit hesitantly at times. And when I cannot believe completely, I cry out to God, “I believe, help me overcome my unbelief!”

The Bible: After all the Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still The Book For Me? (Part 1)

“In both the domains of nature and faith, you will find the most excellent things are the deepest hidden.” [Desiderius Erasmus, “The Sage”]

I STAND ALONE, ON THE WORD OF GOD...

Is there anything more controversial in our culture than the Bible?

Maybe, but this book is up there for most arguments started and longest spectrum of views one can hold about it. Is it entirely "God's Word"? Is it inerrant? Does it have some value but parts that must be discarded due to how they conflict with things like science and modern morality? Is it a series of disjointed fables to be ignored entirely? None of the above? Which parts are history? Which are literal? Which are figurative? The range of answers to these and other questions is innumerable in the present world.

The version of Christianity that I adhere to does not treat the Bible as if it were God. But make no mistake, I unashamedly believe that the Bible is historically reliable. I believe that it contains the words God wants us to have. I believe that it is the unique source for knowing God through Jesus Christ. I believe it alone is authoritative in the area of morality. The basis of my faith is in the resurrection of Christ. But there is no resurrection to be truly known outside of the Holy Bible.

There are so many angles in which the Bible nearly always has been, is and always will be attacked. I cannot imagine trying to cover them all, but in this short series of essays I will try to cover what I consider to be the main ones, and the ones that are most important for Christians to defend.

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“WHAT IS TRUTH?” (PILATE, TO JESUS)

I have researched this topic for decades now because like many people, *I have to know*. I have to know if I believe the truth. If what I've been taught is correct. If I'm leading others to the same lie. I hope my Christians readers feel the same. I regularly see Christians—often on the internet—have their faith attacked and seem unprepared. Especially in this area.

So my goal is to get your interest piqued. I do not presume to be able to write a full length, scholarly type work on this topic. While I will cite numerous scholars who are experts in the areas I will cover, I aim to keep this at seven parts with each essay under 2,000 words. This is for social media, after all, and I know people are not on websites like ours to read a full length book. I hope that you will check out some of the books I cite and learn more. One of my goals as a pastor in my sermons and writings is to be the bridge between the deep scholarship and the people who are new to the Bible, or just want to learn more.

So what is the plan? Well here is what I want to do over the next six articles:

[In Part Two of this series](#), I will talk about why my Old Testament has 39 books, and why I believe this is the right number. I will speak to why I do not think our Bibles should contain the Apocrypha or the Pseudepigrapha or anything some branches of Christianity consider to be deuterocanonical (if you don't know what any of these words mean, please come back next week!) We will also talk about certain books that are in my Old Testament, but were put in despite great controversy.

[In Part Three](#), we will examine the 27 books that make up the New Testament. We will talk about its formation over time, why Christianity needed a canon of Jesus' and the apostles' teachings and which criteria for acceptance rose to the top. We will talk about why we only have four Gospels instead of

more, since there are popular works that have tried to convince us that there were way more than four Gospels, and why I don't believe the alleged "Lost Christianities" are writings the early church should have considered Scripture.

One of my goals as a pastor in my sermons and writings is to be the bridge between the deep scholarship and the people who are new to the Bible, or just want to learn more

[In Part Four](#), we will examine why I think our Bibles today have the same content as the original copies of the Bible had in spite of the fact we do not have the original autographs (the original writings, i.e., Paul's original letters to Timothy) and that copyists did make errors when copying the manuscripts we do have. We will talk about how far removed from the originals copies are our present copies, examine the area of textual criticism and why I am firmly convinced not having the originals of any Bible books is not a problem for my faith.

[In Part Five](#), we will talk about translation. Since the Christian Bible was written entirely in Hebrew, Greek, and a few passages in Aramaic, to read it in English or any of the thousands of languages in the world that are not those three, we have to translate. And make no mistake, translation of Scripture has been an issue in Christianity for millennia, and especially for the last 400-500 years. We will answer questions about things like translation theory and which versions of the Bible Christians can trust.

[In Part Six](#), we will talk about Biblical Interpretation. What does the Bible mean? No doubt this has confused legions of people down through the centuries and caused many to bristle at Christianity, because they see the Bible as misogynist and racist and God as a cosmic bully and bloodthirsty for vengeance. We will look at what I believe to be reasonable ways for interpreting a book written to a different language,

culture and time period than my own. We will learn how to read it the way it was meant to be read and why I do not abandon the Bible even when its stories and teachings come across as offensive.

[Finally, in Part Seven](#), we will look at the issue of applying the Bible and why, according to some, preachers commit more heresies applying it than they do interpreting it. We will talk about which parts of the Bible were meant only for the original audience it was written to and which parts are applicable for us today. Why do I believe sex outside of marriage is always a sin but I don't always kiss people as a greeting?

So, it is my hope that you will join me for every step of this venture. We will be hearing from a lot of different historians and teachers and a lot of different resources, all from different Christian denominations, time periods, countries and cultures. It is my hope to utilize a broad scope of evidence sources, so that we can see clearly how Christianity is true for all people everywhere and not limited by culture or time.

Read Part Two [Here](#).

Read Part Three [Here](#).

Read Part Four [Here](#).

Read Part Five [Here](#).

Read Part Six [Here](#).

Read Part Seven [Here](#).

The Bible: After All The Canon Debating, Copyist Errors, Translation Issues and Subjective Interpreting, Is It Still The Book For Me? (Part 2)

“Finding out how the Bible was formed is like watching a hot dog being made. You may like the result but the process is disturbing.” (Anonymous)

Read Part 1 [Here](#).

PART TWO: THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

It's Not Quite My Last Name

How did the books of the Bible get to be in the Bible? The scholarly word is “canon,” used to describe the standard to decide which books should be in our Bible and which should not^[1]. For an etymology and more detailed definition, see F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 17-18]. For a book to be “canon,” it means that God wants us to have it as an authoritative source of the truth He communicated to us.

First, I will say that while we can know God through nature and creation as well as through our own morality and human reason, the most essential knowledge of God comes through how he has revealed himself to men through stories, prophecies and other writings, even poetry and prose. Much of the Bible claims explicitly to be from God and is recorded so his people could know Him, how to relate to Him and how to live in

response to that.

Additionally, I think it is rational to conclude that if there are genuine writings that God used to communicate to his followers, then there are also writings that could be considered as inspired by God when they really are not. Any time you have a 'right' group of anything, there will often be a competing 'wrong' group. As with currency, there are true valuable paper bills and coins and there are counterfeits.

How do we know the difference?

The Old Testament's 39 books

The traditional reckoning of the Jewish Hebrew Bible, which corresponds to the Protestant Old Testament, is 24 books, or by some counts 22 books[2. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, 235-241]. The difference in numbering between the Protestant Bible and the Hebrew Bible lies in the fact that the Hebrew Bible combined books that our Old Testament separates: the 12 minor prophets are one book, Samuel and Kings were each one book, etc.[3. Paul D. Wegner, *Journey from Text to Translations*, see chart on pg. 44-45]. The 1st Century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus wrote around 90 A.D. that the Jewish canon included 24 books, that they were universally accepted by the Hebrews and that the canon (although he would not have understood that word as we use it) had been closed for a long time[4. Beckwith, 235]. The appeal to the Jewish tradition matters because the first Christians were Jews and Jewish history is Christian history until Christ divided it. Which was after the Old Testament was completed as far as writing and mostly confirmed as far as canon (not everyone agrees that the Old Testament canon was settled by 90 A.D. as Josephus asserts[4. Ibid, 274-77]).

Jerome in the 4th century A.D. mentions an alternative 22 book count where Lamentations is added to Jeremiah and Ruth added to Judges[5. Ibid, 240-41]. Other sources, such as 2 Esdras

in the first century, agree with him[6. Ibid, 240].

Additional early Christian sources that endorse, either certainly or probably, the traditional Protestant books as canonical include: the prologue to Sirach (132 B.C.), Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. – A.D. 50), 2 Esdras 14:45 (1st Century A.D.), Melito (A.D. 170), a Jerusalem list (A.D. 170), Origen (A.D. 185-203), the Babylonian Talmud (3rd to 6th centuries A.D.), Rufinus (345-411 A.D.), and others[7. *In Defense of the Bible*, Cowan and Wilder, eds, 396-400; see also Wegner, 108-113]. These sources have weight to their authority and add credibility to the (now) 39 book list. To be noted is that a couple of these sources are missing Esther.

But one source trumps all the rest...

Jesus himself is the crucial voice on this matter to me. Being God himself by my understanding of the New Testament writings, he has the supreme authority to determine what is from God and what is not. And while I cannot prove beyond any doubt that Jesus considered Esther to be Scripture and not the Wisdom of Solomon (an Apocryphal book), I think it is extremely reasonable to conclude his references to Scripture were the same 39 books I call the Old Testament today.

First, Jesus seemed to consider Scripture what he referred to as “The Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12) but most specifically on at least one occasion referred to Scripture as “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44)[8. Bruce, 31-32]. This corresponds to the typical threefold division of the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament), possibly mentioned as early in the prologue of the 2nd century B.C. work Ecclesiasticus: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (sometimes known as the Hagiographa)[9. Ibid, 31]. By any book count you can see the traditional Protestant Old Testament divided into these three groups:

- “The Law” included the first five books, the Books of

Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

- “The Prophets” included Joshua, Judges/Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah/Lamentations, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets.
- “The Writings” included Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Daniel, Chronicles, Ezra/Nehemiah and Esther[10. Ibid, 29].

Now, we must note that Jesus said “Psalms” and not “Writings” but it is safe, I think, to assume that he meant all of the books listed above in the “Writings” by referring to that group’s longest, most prominent, and in some cases first chronologically book—Psalms—as a representation of all the books in the grouping[10. *In Defense of the Bible*, 399]. He certainly considered Daniel, another book in the “Writings,” to be Scripture (Matthew 27:9) and indirectly referenced Chronicles as a bookend to Scripture (see below).

Additionally, Jesus once said in condemnation of the Pharisees, “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah...” (Matthew 23:35; Luke 11:51). By doing so, he seemingly is making reference to the beginning of his Scripture (Abel murdered in Genesis) and the end (Zechariah murdered in Chronicles, which is probably the last book in the Hebrew Bible by order)[11. Bruce 31]. While not absolutely clear, I think it is reasonable to conclude Jesus is endorsing the typical Jewish canon, which is my Old Testament.

The Controversial Five: You mean Song of Solomon in on this List? No way!

Even though Jewish history seems to have a firm grasp on which books belong to their canon, it is true that throughout Jewish history and into Christian beginnings in the first century,

the issue of the canon being closed was not unanimous and was not even settled with finality by the Council of Jamnia in A.D. 90. Five of the 39 Old Testament books were long considered controversial to varying degrees. Criteria for Old Testament canon were likely answering questions like "Does the book have contradictions?" and "Is it clearly in harmony with what we know about God from undisputed messages from God, as in the Law of Moses?" and "Was it written by a prophet or someone who could speak for God?"[12. Wegner, 117, taken from Josephus's *Contra Apion*] And so historically these five books were debated by rabbis and not settled for good until well into Christian history in the first few centuries A.D.

Proverbs

It seems to have a contradiction in Proverbs 26:4-5. The harmonizing of these two verses became to be seen as rather simple in that you sometimes answer a fool and sometimes you do not. It also has Solomon as its author, who is confirmed in canonical books as authoritative[13. Beckwith 318-19].

Ecclesiastes

It seems secular in parts, contradicting God's clear message of hope and also seems to contradict itself in places like 2:2 and 7:3. But it may have been written by a man with God's authority, Solomon, and if understood as a man who messed up his life the way Solomon did, then his conflicting and anti-hope messages make sense. It is not a doctrinal book as much as a "Here is what happens if you do not follow God's plan" testimonial[14. Wegner, 116].

Esther

Does not mention God by name. But was eventually unanimously accepted as canon due to the faith of Esther and Mordecai and how the providence of God clearly rescues his people[15. Ibid, 116].

Song of Solomon

Possibly no mention of God (8:6 may be the one place it does), definitely does not have a message that is similar to any other Bible book, Old or New Testament. Could be interpreted as an allegory of God's love for Israel and is mentioned in Revelation in the New Testament[15. Beckwith 318].

Ezekiel

Chapters 40-48 seem to contradict the books of Moses in regards to the temple and the Law. A man named Hananiah is generally given credit for spending a great amount of time trying to harmonize Moses and Ezekiel and did so successfully[16. Wegner, 115].

Let me be clear that for all five of these books (Esther excepted in a couple of instances), they were accepted by all the sources I listed above. They had significant backing as far as canon from a variety of sources and from very early in Christian history.

What about the Apocrypha and other Deuterocanonical writings?

Some Christian sects have historically had more books in the Old Testament than Protestants. From Augustine in the 4th century to Martin Luther's opponents 1200 years later, leaders throughout church history have argued that the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha should be canon. While they were not canonized at the same time as the 39 Protestant OT books, they were canonized after, hence the name "deuterocanonical" (meaning "second canon" similar to how Deuteronomy means "second law"). There are several reasons why Protestants have in response not accepted these books:

1. Jesus and the other New Testament authors almost certainly never cite the Apocrypha and Deuterocanonical as Scripture or authoritative. Jesus, as mentioned above, seems to be clear on the content and parameters of his canon. I would have an

easier time believing that Jesus did *not* consider Song of Songs to be canon than to believe that he *did* accept any of the Apocrypha. There are likely allusions to the Deuterocanonical books in Jesus' words and the NT on the whole, and we will deal with that below[17. *In Defense of the Bible*, 403].

2. None of these books claim to be from God, as do many of the Protestant OT books[18. *Ibid.*].

3. There are historical and theological inconsistencies in these books[19. *Ibid.* For a detailed list of examples, see Wegner, 125].

4. Jewish tradition only accepts the canon mentioned above and states that prophetic messages from God ceased around 400 B.C. All of the Deuterocanonical books were written after that time[20. Beckwith, 370].

Didn't the Septuagint (LXX) contain the Apocrypha?

Greek speaking Jews needed a Bible in their language and thus, the LXX (written between 250 and 100 B.C.), was born. This translation was not used by Christ, who would have used the Hebrew Scriptures, but was used by the early church after him, including the writers of the New Testament.

The earliest extant manuscripts we have of it are from the 4th century A.D. and they do contain the Apocrypha, but there is no real way to know for sure what the LXX contained when it first started, as these manuscripts are late[21. Wegner, 109]. The New Testament writers when using the LXX do not refer to its parameters so it is probable that they followed their Lord, Jesus, in adhering to the Jewish canon[22. Bruce, 50].

First century B.C. Greek-speaking Jews likely wanted the Apocrypha with the LXX because they wanted access to all important Jewish writings. *But they did not consider these additional writings to be canon.* It is also possible that some

first century A.D. Christians who used the LXX, and were therefore unfamiliar with the Jewish canon as found in the Hebrew Bible, became confused over time about which books were canon and which were not and included the Apocrypha as canon. If so, they were mistaken to do so[23. Jeremy Royal Howard, *The Origin, Transmission and Canonization of The Old Testament Books*, taken from the HCSB Study Bible, x-xii].

But what about the Jesus and the New Testament citing the Apocrypha?

I have seen lists of supposed times where the New Testament authors and Jesus reference the Apocrypha[24. Like this one: [Did Jesus Quote From the Apocrypha?](#)] as proof that they found it authoritative.

I do not deny there are a few places where it seems the deuterocanonical books are alluded to, Jude 9 as the most notable example, but this in no way makes them Scripture. Paul quoted secular poets to make a point in Acts. I see no clear reference where any book outside of the Hebrew Bible is referenced as Scripture. I do not deny the Apocrypha was important to Jews and Christians early in church history. They read it. But they did not quote it as their Bible.

Additionally, the evidence of these references is exaggerated in lists I have seen. For example, it is alleged that when Jesus says “sheep without a shepherd” in Matthew 9:36, he is quoting Judith 11:19. But that exact phrase is also found in Numbers, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles and Isaiah—books we know for sure Jesus considered Scripture. He is likely citing those passages. Similarly, “Lord of Heaven and earth” is alleged to be a quote from Tobit 7:18, but that phrase (or similar forms) is used repeatedly in the canonical OT books. And I could go and on, breaking each example down, and showing how most are more likely the Apocryphal books using Hebrew Bible phrases and NOT examples of how Jesus “cited the Apocrypha.”

God's Canon

In closing, I will say I find it fascinating and comforting that for both the Old and New Testaments, there is no one point in time where you can say, "This person or group of people decided which books to put in." I think that is important and by no means discouraging. It shows that God used many men and a process to get it done, so that no one could take credit. The credit for the Bible's canon goes to God and God alone.

Read Part Three [HERE](#).

Read Part Four [HERE](#).