

Challenging Men to David-Jonathan Friendships

In trying to keep up with cultural trends that affect the church, I have heard on more than one occasion that the American church struggles to reach men because our worship services are so geared to women. Notably the music.

What I do not want to do here is to contribute to the issue of men feeling that Christianity, as practiced in the U.S., is not manly enough. And I do believe firmly that men and women are different in many fundamental ways, and that the Bible testifies to this. Being equal does not mean being the same (Genesis 5:2).

But I also want to wonder aloud if sometimes this issue isn't an excuse for why men do not get more involved in the church. The church is far more community-daily, relational discipleship ("as you're going" according to Jesus in Matthew 28:19)—than it is music and atmosphere on Sunday morning.

As such I think Christian men in my culture need something more profound than tweaks to the worship service. They need friendships. And I don't just mean "watch the game on Saturday night" or "play golf together" friendships, though these things could be part of it. I'm talking about the type of friendship that David and Jonathan had in the Old Testament in the Bible.

Here are some of the distinguishing marks of their relationship, as taken from 1 Samuel 18-20.

Jonathan and David's friendship was so deep and intimate it was called a Covenant.

“Covenant” is a word used often in the Bible to describe how God relates to us and in my opinion the best word to describe marriage between one man and one woman. It’s a word that conveys serious commitment and deep intimacy, which are phrases that we do not use often to describe male friendships in the U.S. And that is why I do not want to advocate for the feminization of men in Christianity. But the Bible is countercultural and can be uncomfortable, yet very much worth it, to practice. Perhaps women understand this better and it is unbiblical cultural stereotypes of men that prevent us from experiencing biblical covenant with our brothers in the faith.

Regardless, David and Jonathan set the bar high. Men need friendships in the church that makes them as relationally close as possible.

Jonathan sacrificed generously for David.

He gave him his robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt. This was a significant and generous way to honor his best friend. We can do this with gifts, with money and especially with time. Convenience is the enemy of covenant.

Jonathan spoke highly of David when he wasn’t around

It is one thing to speak highly of someone when you are around people who also want to speak highly of them. It’s another when you defend someone to his enemies. Especially enemies with power, as his father Saul had. Men need relationships of that kind of integrity. I want to know other men have my back even if it costs them.

Jonathan verbalized his love to David

Over and over Jonathan did things like reminding David he was for him during this frightening time and he had David reaffirm his oath to him because he loved David so much.

In my opinion, our culture bends so much towards talk being cheap and “Don’t tell me, show me” that we woefully underestimate the power of words. Words matter.

I grew up in a culture where most men never said “I love you” to each other. When I was at Welch College I can distinctly recall three different guys saying it to me. Each time I was so stunned I don’t even think I said it back. But as I’ve gotten older and less self-conscious about these type of things, I have said it to many men. I don’t say it if I know it will make the other man uncomfortable. And I am definitely not trying to communicate this as some kind of benchmark of maturity. Not every man should be expected to say it. But some way, somehow, even if it’s not those three potent words, Christian men should communicate covenant love to each other. It’s not less than manly to do so.

Jonathan was willing to risk his life to protect David

I’m convinced that men are designed by nature to protect women but friendship is a willingness to die for the other person. Jesus said it’s the greatest demonstration of love. Jonathan faced Saul’s wrathful spear for defending David.

Jonathan grieved with David

When they realized how serious the hate was that Saul had for David, they embraced and kissed and wept together. I cannot fathom many moments more intimate between two friends in the history of the world. I have always known that your true

friends are the ones who will weep with you and have recently learned that few things create intimacy in relationships like grieving together. Kissing is almost always spoken of in family contexts in the Old Testament. That is how close David and Jonathan were.

Let me close by saying how blessed of God I have been to have men in my adult life like the ones you see in the collage of pictures with the title of this article. I loved being a part of a group of men called "Southtown" my senior year at Welch College. I love being a part of REO today. I've often said of my friend Josh Crowe that filters were abolished long ago and we speak freely to each other and if he has criticism for me I will listen without being defensive (which I can't say is true in other relationships). My friend Yeomans has listened to me bare my soul dozens of times and offered correction and encouragement without judgment and has visited me in Chicago many times, at great personal cost. When my friend Andy and his wife announced to my church they were expecting their first child I ran on stage where he was playing bass and gave him a huge hug, as excited as I've ever been for someone. When my best friend Matt left Chicago a few weeks ago, I cried several times over a few days. And even though he is more of a mentor than a best friend, all of the above points apply strongly to my pastor, David.

All of these men have been Jonathans to me in some way and I have told many of them that I love them. Without any shame. Yet I don't offer any of this from a place of expertise. As I read about Jonathan and David I realize there is so much more I could be doing for the men in my life.

And as a preacher and a writer, God rarely gives me something he wants to transform in me where he doesn't want me to share with others. So that is my hope today. Be a Jonathan. Be a David. Don't let culture completely dictate how men are

supposed to treat each other. May we be countercultural in the ways the Bible teaches.

Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting (Part 2)

Not long after REO was created, while it was still cooling on the window sill, I wrote an article on [Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting](#). It created quite a bit of response. In the vein of much of modern Hollywood, I have written this sequel years later.

The point of it, I will repeat from last time, is to challenge how we think about the Bible. I want to push against our preconceived interpretations that perhaps we have never thought much about, the popular ones that do not often get challenged.

I give two disclaimers, though: First, I am not saying that I am positive that the alternative interpretations below are correct. Just that, according to some students of Scripture, they may be. And we should think through them in humility and wisdom, aiming to rightly divide the word of truth. Even if it means saying, "I was wrong." Secondly, I am purposely avoiding

passages like Philippians 4:13, Jeremiah 29:11 and the “Where two or three are gathered” verse because they are commonly picked on. These, in my experience, are not. Let’s look at them.

Exodus 14:14

Moses answered the people, “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”

Traditional Interpretation: When faced with daunting circumstances, we need to be still and let God fight for us.

Alternative Interpretation: God may want us to move instead of crying out to him.

The next verse is absolutely why I believe this:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.”

I hasten to add that I have heard wise, biblically sound Christian pastors and teachers cite this verse on social media. So maybe I am overthinking it. But at this point, Exodus 14:14 is not a verse I would use to teach people to be still. Psalm 46:10, yes. Instead, I use this pair of verses and their greater context to teach that there is a time to pray but there is also a time to get moving. Prayer is not a substitute for action.

Matthew 27:46

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” that is, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”

Traditional Interpretation: God turned his back on Jesus (or

abandoned him, or some verb of relational separation) to judge him for the sin of mankind since God cannot look upon sin.

Alternative Interpretation: Jesus, using a rabbinic practice of quoting only the first verse of a Psalm to communicate the entire psalm, is telling the audience that God will save him from this horrific circumstance. As Psalm 22 teaches.

I think "How Deep the Father's Love For Us" has contributed to the understanding of this verse, as it says, "The Father turned his face away." But even without the hymn, I have heard the traditional interpretation over and over in my life. I have always assumed it to be true. Yet read the words of Jeffrey Crabtree in the Randall House Commentary on Matthew:

Was Jesus actually abandoned and calling on God from His sense of that? Or was He primarily saying this for the benefit of His human audience? Some interpreters understand Jesus' question to mean that the Father did in some sense forsake His Son as He hung on the cross as the atonement for the sin of the world (Hendriksen 971; Hagner 33B:844). Others understand Jesus to have been implying, "Read the twenty-second Psalm. It tells you what this crucifixion is about. I may look forsaken (Mt. 27:43) but I am not" (Ps. 22:24). This makes Jesus' quote and question mainly rhetorical...

...It seems probable that Jesus was not forsaken (Ps. 22:24)

even though it appeared to those on the ground that He was and even though He Himself felt forsaken (Evans, Matthew 514). He had suffered forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry and endured extreme loneliness in the Garden the

previous night in prayer. In like manner, on the cross at the time of His greatest suffering Jesus again felt isolation, only this time the sense of isolation was the most intense of His entire human experience—because He bore the wrath of God for the sins of the entire world.

The interpreter will want to consider the implications of the position he determines to be Scripture's intent. Can the Father and Son really separate in their beings (Jn. 10:30)? Would such a real separation agree with Psalm 22:24?[1. Jeffrey Crabtree, *The Randall House Bible Commentary: Matthew*, 466-67]

I find Mr. Crabtree's explanation nuanced and balanced and it causes me to consider it. Yet I add that I am still struggling through this one. And I have not bought the alternative interpretation completely yet. This is not a major doctrinal issue to me but it's still something worth thinking through and wrestling with. Verses like 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 8:3 give me pause in abandoning the traditional interpretation.

John 3:30

“[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.”

Traditional Interpretation: We must increase Christ with our lives and be humble.

Alternative Interpretation: Christ must increase by the very nature of things no matter what we do or don't do.

The word “must” works one of two ways, illustrated by the two

interpretations above. We can say, "If you want to take English classes, you must register." You control that. But we also say, "What goes up, must come down." You don't control that. You cannot do anything to affect it, start it, stop it or alter it. It's something that happens *by the very nature of things*. The latter definition is what I think John means.

There are several reasons I believe this but here are three: First, it fits with how John the Gospel author used the Greek word "must" (δεῖ) earlier in the same chapter when he said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up."** Based on verses like Acts 2:23 and 4:28, we know that the death of Christ was something God determined should happen and that humans could not prevent it or cause it. It is God's—and Jesus's—nature to save, just as it is gravity's nature to bring objects to the earth.

Secondly, this fits with Jesus in Luke when he said, **"If [my disciples] keep quiet the stones will cry out."** Christ will be worshipped because His nature as God demands it and not because we must do it.

And lastly, the context before John 3:30 leaves the interpretation up in the air, but in the verses after he says, **"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all."** This speaks to Christ nature as above us, which leads me to believe John is explaining why Christ must increase by the very nature of things more than Christ must increase because we must do it.

All of this matters because it helps me understand how Christ as God is bigger than my worship. He must increase as God in the sense that he must be exalted, praised and magnified. And even if free will beings refuse to do so, there are still billions of created voices doing it around the clock.

John 11:33-35

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

Traditional Interpretation: Jesus was saddened by the death of his friend and cried as a result.

Alternative Interpretation: Jesus was angry because of the reaction of the people and was overcome with emotional distress.

I suppose it's possible both are true but at the very least I think this passage needs to be taught as Jesus was angry as much as sad. "Deeply moved" in the verse above is open to interpretation over a range of stressful emotion but it definitely bends to anger in my opinion. And this can be seen in how some prominent translations render it (NLT, HCSB). The people doubted him (vs. 37) and lack of faith often made Jesus angry (Mark 16:14).

Revelation 3:16

So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

Traditional Interpretation: God wants you to be for him or against him, but not on the fence.

Alternative Interpretation: God wants you to be for him and hates lukewarmness.

This doesn't change the main meaning of the passage, but it is possible that when God refers to hot and cold water he means that both hot and cold have a purpose. Cold water is good to

drink and hot water is good for cooking, among other uses for both. So God wants us to be useful. Lukewarm water is good for nothing. It's nasty and worth only spitting out.

Let me conclude by saying that when I did the last article, the discussion in the comment section below was very edifying and I actually adapted my opinion of Proverbs 22:6 as a result. So we strongly encourage feedback and interaction, even respectful disagreement.

A Theology of Greeting People

If you want to be inspired in one minute, watch this:

I'll never forget spending a month in Peru in 2007 and having to kiss "hello" several times a day. Having lived in Chicago for a few years at that point I was aware of the cultural greeting but I had never been obliged to participate in it so much. I wasn't one to give intimate greetings to people I didn't know and I especially did not seek out physical contact but down there I figured it was prudent to conform. It was quite a month.

And for years I have considered exuberant greetings a cultural

thing. Some people kiss or hug, others shake hands, others just nod. And while I still believe that is true, I have begun to wonder if my culture has devalued the impact greetings can have on others. No doubt there are things my culture does well, but this is one where I have been convicted to learn from others. Not just because I live in a predominantly Hispano neighborhood in Chicago, but also because there are clues in the Bible about how important greetings can be.

Here are a few examples of what I'm talking about:

First, in the book of Ruth when Boaz approached his workers, he greeted them with a sort of Gospel phrase: "**The Lord be with you!**" And they responded in kind, "**The Lord bless you!**"

In the book of Luke, we read that just the "**sound of [Mary's] greeting**" caused John the Baptist to leap for joy in Elizabeth's womb.

In Colossians 4:18, Paul says he writes the greeting "**with my own hand**". Of all things he could have written himself, it's the greeting.

In several of his books, he makes greetings a huge deal, as in Romans 16 and Colossians 4, taking almost entire chapters of our Bible to simply greet people.

And more than once he gave the command to "**greet with a holy kiss**". Which, again, I realize the form is cultural but I think the significance of a meaningful, intimate greeting transcends time.



This is something I perceive a new wave of church planting has figured out. When I see pictures of thriving church plants, I see energetic, smiling people outside with huge signs that say “We’re glad you’re here!” and like things. Some go so far as to cheer as people enter the building, which is something my church does for each child that enters during our yearly VBS. I think we know that people can and do form opinions very quickly when encountering someone or something for the first time. In fact, while I am not saying I am convinced this is true always, consider the following from Malcom Gladwell’s book *Blink*:

Research over the past two decades has confirmed that...a handshake may be all it takes to create a memorable first impression. But what we also know now is just how significant the first few moments of an encounter can be, and to what extent they determine the friends we’ll make, the career path we’ll pursue and the people we’ll fall in love with.

Tricia Prickett, a psychology student, collected a series of videotaped job interviews to test whether it was possible to guess the outcome simply from observing the interaction

between the interviewer and interviewee. She found that an observer could predict whether or not the interviewee would be offered the job from watching just the first 15 seconds of the tape – the handshake, the “hello” and very little else. What happened in those few, brief moments was enough to determine the candidate’s future[1. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink*, 87].

There are a handful of reasons why I think the Bible’s emphasis on greeting well coincides with this research.

One is that I think the way we greet can be (though doesn’t necessarily have to be) an issue of character. If you knew nothing about that teacher in the video above, do you think from the minute clip you saw of him that you can glean what kind of teacher he is? Probably. For me, I do not like to look people in the eye and I am not a big hugger but since I have been learning this, the number of men I hug as I greet them on Sunday mornings has more than doubled. Because I am convinced this is important enough that in my context I need to be stretched.



Once when we talked about this in our Spanish Bible study, as soon as the topic came up I could feel an energy enter the room in a way I do not think would have occurred in most English studies I have been in. Some expressed that when they moved to the U.S., getting accustomed to less enthusiastic greetings was difficult because in the countries where they come from, greeting is a huge deal. Not just in the hug and

kiss, but in the eyes, the smile, the joy, and the whole of nonverbal communication. In fact, the Spanish verb that literally means "to greet" (saludar) seems to have much more potency than its English translation.

It is extremely common for someone to arrive late to our Spanish study and go around the table and greet every single person, even if it pauses the study for a few seconds. This is not something practiced often in my culture and I am learning that it is worth losing a few seconds of study to participate in something that can also be an issue of theology, as Boaz modeled. For me, it is an issue of character.

Secondly, I think greeting people well is a way to communicate to them "I see you. You matter." In some cases it can communicate, "Whatever I was doing when you arrived is not as important as you are so I will pause and express that enthusiastically." Any time I go to somewhere for the first time, I absolutely want someone there to help make it less confusing about where I am supposed to be. I want someone to see me and to make me feel secure and taken care of. As a result, every Sunday I am able, I go and stand at the door of my church and greet people as they enter. I think it matters to morale.

Perhaps nowhere is this more important than how I respond to my wife when she comes home. While I will not say all husbands everywhere must greet their wives well to be good husbands, for me I know it is one of the intentional little things that is a big thing (and, in full disclosure, some days I do not practice this well).

Similarly, a greeting can be a means of building intimacy and encouragement. One of the best friends I have had in my time in Chicago was one of my roommates years ago before we both got married. Our landlord at the time had a hard time remembering our names. He at one point called my friend "Tiger" and at a later point called me "Slugger". To this day

we greet each other with those names instead of our real ones. It manifests a depth to our friendship few other things do. There's another young man at our church, a star basketball player, with whom I share a "Cleveland Cavaliers" type handshake, as seen below. Because it means something to him. (The Cavs were the inspiration for the teacher in the opening clip, by the way.)



Also, there have been many times I have shown up to church in a terrible mood and the greetings of one of the other members will be so exuberant, it melts my attitude a little. That is a huge benefit of church community.

I do not want to over-spiritualize this but as I think the Bible and greetings, I cannot help but think of the Prodigal son. The story details the reaction of the Father to the son coming home:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

How soon from the moment their eyes met do you think the son knew the Father forgave him? To what extent do you think he understood just from that verse above? Is it possible to

preach the Gospel in a greeting? I think it is. My favorite professor at Moody, Dr. Wong Loi Sing, taught us that every gesture we make, from a smile to holding a door to kissing hello, can communicate grace. I think Luke 15 proves this is the most glorious way possible.

What do you think? How important are greetings to you? Let us know your thoughts below, even if you disagree.

REO Pays Tribute: F. Leroy Forlines

I have lost count of the great Free Will Baptist leaders and individuals I have heard say Leroy Forlines had a profound impact on their Christian life. Teacher, writer, speaker, thinker, and short-term missionary, all of these were chapters in one of the greatest books in Free Will Baptist history. God continues to use his spiritual legacy in all of these roles, educating and inspiring many generations of Christians. His passage through the brief span of time given to all men and women has left a lasting and extremely significant footprint for many generations of disciples who have followed and are following his lead.

Forlines had felt a call to the ministry as a teenager. He was born in 1926 in Greenville, North Carolina, the eldest son of John and Leta Forlines. Early in his life, he worked as a mechanic at Elbert Smith's Esso Station. In October 1944 at the age of 17, he converted to Christianity. Two years later he decided God was calling him to preach. So, in 1948 he moved to Nashville to begin his education for the ministry at Free

Will Baptist Bible College. During his time as a student, he preached his very first sermon on a downtown Nashville street corner. It was also during his early years that he was deeply impacted by L.C. Johnson's class on Arminian Theology. Throughout these college years, he had a strong role in student body leadership, serving as the president of his 1952 graduating class.

After graduation, he immediately entered the ministry, serving as pastor of First Free Will Baptist Church in Newport News, Virginia from June 1952 to August 1953. He resigned this role and returned to Free Will Baptist Bible College to join the teaching faculty, a role which he would continue to hold full-time for almost 40 years. In 1957 he met and fell in love with Carolyn Le Fay Gilbert. They married and had two sons, Jon and James.

During those early years in the professorship, he was continuing his own education. In 1959 he attained his M.A. from the Winona Lake School of Theology. In 1962 he earned his B.D. from the Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 1970 he earned a Th.M from the Chicago Graduate School of Theology.

In 1963, he began working with the Commission for Theological Integrity and was made its chairman. He would remain highly involved in its leadership for the next 50 years. He officially and publicly stepped down as its chairman at the 2012 National Convention.

Although Forlines retired from a full-time position from FWBBC in 1992, he has remained involved in its work, being granted the honorary title, Professor Emeritus. In this capacity, he continued to teach at the college until five years ago. But he kept fairly regular hours in his Welch office until the college campus moved to Gallatin. He has also taught overseas throughout his retirement. Beginning in 1996, with the assistance of Free Will Baptist International Missions he made numerous trips to lecture in Ukraine and Russia to Baptist

pastors.

Forlines's ministry has spanned six decades. He has written multitudes of great Christian articles and books during his long ministry. Among his best and most influential may be Biblical Ethics, Biblical Systematics, Morals and Orthodoxy, The Doctrine of Perseverance, The Romans Commentary, Classical Arminianism, and The Quest for Truth. His entire career has been characterized by writing book after book. He just finished another one for which he is now seeking publication. For his hours of writing and study, he uses an office which Sylvan Park Free Will Baptist Church graciously provided after the school's relocation. Welch has an office waiting for him in its Gallatin facilities into which he will soon relocate once again.

Today, Leroy Forlines is a healthy 91-year-old, having celebrated his most recent birthday in November. He and Fay continue to reside in the house they have lived in for almost 55 years.

5 Truths About the Diversity of the First Christmas

0 Christmas, do you ever remind us that people think their way of talking, writing, and celebrating is *the* way. Christmas starts quarrels over minutia more than all of the rest of the holidays combined. From what phrases to say to when to listen to music, we ironically turn this allegedly peaceful time of the year designed to put our focus on the birth of the most signifiant person ever into a self-aggrandizing time of opinions and disagreements. I realize many of these things are

not meant to be taken too seriously (I honestly do not care if you consider *Die Hard* a Christmas movie) but if we are honest, we know that we get disproportionately passionate in defending some traditions.

If we study the first Christmas, we find that it was quite diverse. And I have no doubt an application to this is that we really need to realize that diversity matters to God. Much of (and dare I say most of) our way of “doing” Christmas are not absolute truths to be followed and argued. And it may be that these silly differences of opinion about Christmas represent bigger and more serious issues we have with a lack of diversity in things things that do matter. Like worship and community life.

With that in mind, here are five things about the first Christmas and its diversity that can teach us to embrace the differences we have with others.

The worshippers were diverse

Mary was a young virgin. Joseph was a carpenter descended from King David. The Magi were astrologers and may have been kings. The first group of people commanded to go see Jesus were laity shepherds. Zechariah was a priest and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Anna was a very elderly prophetess. Matthew, an author, was a Jewish tax collector. Luke was a Gentile doctor. The messengers from God to man about Jesus were angels and not even human. And I'd even include the animals as well, since their feeding trough is mentioned by name in the story.

The voices of Christmas are far more diverse than were are accustomed to in our lives. Perhaps Christmas should awaken us to this fact and motivate us to long to hear from a variety of sources on how to understand and serve Jesus. And it could be very edifying to worship with a diverse community and buck

against the typical cultural model of a church filled with people as similar to me as possible.

The reactions were diverse

The Angels comforted Mary and the shepherds, both of whom were terrified. The shepherds told people about Jesus and glorified God. Mary pondered the events deeply and treasured them in her heart. The magi bowed down to worship and brought gifts. Anna, Zechariah and Simeon gave prophecies. Simeon held Jesus in his arms. John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb. Elizabeth gave a glad cry.

How we react to the Christmas season may seem so important to us that we expect others to feel similarly. When in fact there are many ways to react to Christmas and if they do not have anything to do with gift-giving or Santa or even huge family gatherings, they can still be good. As long as they are legitimate reactions to who Jesus is.

The geography was diverse

Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. After his birth they went to Egypt for a while and then back to Nazareth where he was raised. The Magi were from "the East" and while it is impossible to say for sure where exactly that meant, it was a long distance from Galilee.

The lady who leads the prayer time at my church on Sunday mornings before Sunday school often brings requests from magazines that talk about places and people I have never heard of. I appreciate this instead of always just praying for our church, our neighborhood or our missionaries. God is indeed a God of the whole world and even Christmas reminds us of that.

The prophecies of Jesus as Savior were diverse

Jesus's name means "Jehovah is salvation" so centering the idea of Christmas around "Jesus is our Savior" is perfect. Yet even that phrase was broken down theologically that first Christmas. Consider just in Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-80 that he teaches, among other things, that Jesus would be:

A Redeemer

This is a word that in and of itself has layers of meaning. A first century Jew who knew their Scriptures could think of Ruth, Job or even Levitical law and understand that Zechariah meant that God sent Jesus to rescue us from spiritual slavery and that in some way he was going to purchase us for God out of our pathetic circumstances. As a family-redeemer. This explains why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6 that "you were bought at a price" and in Acts 20 he claimed the church was "purchased by the blood Christ".

A Warrior King

The literal phrase Zechariah used was "horn of salvation" which is found in several places in his Scriptures to communicate victory over enemies and security and refuge. Combine this with the fact that Zechariah references David, the general king who led Israel to many war victories, some translations call Jesus "a mighty king" in this prophecy.

The Jesus of the Gospels did get angry and even violent (Mark 11) but he came to die and was a willing sacrifice who did not fight back against his human enemies. Yet to Zechariah's audience, they knew that God was a Mighty Warrior King, as in Isaiah 42:13:

The Lord will go forth like a warrior,
He will arouse His zeal like a man of war.

He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry.
He will prevail against His enemies.

And then Revelation describes Jesus this way:

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His name is The Word of God. The armies which are in heaven were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

We know from the New Testament that our enemies are not other humans. They are Satan, sin and death. And that Christ came to conquer them all. I think the resurrected Jesus is very much an image of the Old Testament Triumphant Warrior God and also of King David the War General, not victorious over the Philistines or Assyrians but over evil forces of darkness and over physical and spiritual death. And I think Zechariah prophecies this. The doctrine of the first Christmas goes much deeper than the incarnation and the image of baby Jesus.

Our covenant.

Zechariah referenced Abraham, which was the covenant he knew at the time, but we now know a covenant that is better and forever in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15).

A light to all nations.

Darkness has a strong association with secrecy and wickedness and confusion. All of these things were true of most nations spiritually before Christ. But he came to bring knowledge of

not mere morality but of salvation to God for everyone.

And there are more I could discuss. But what all of these phrases have in common is that they describe Jesus as Savior in terminology that demonstrates how profound, complex and marvelous that phrase is.

The object of worship was not diverse

And this is the most important thing of all. It is easy in our culture to bow down to diversity so far that we consider all beliefs and religions equal. And while I do not unnecessarily disrespect any belief or worldview, I without shame proclaim Jesus Christ as my Lord and God, the only means to get to God and the unique object of my worship. Christianity is exclusive by its nature because of Jesus, as any monolithic religion is and as all truth claims have to be in some sense. Christianity is significant not for how inclusive it is of all beliefs, but rather how distinct it is. It desires to be inclusive of all *people*, notably all types of people and the New Testament reiterates this over and over. Yet the way to Heaven is narrow. Jesus is the only door.

No matter your traditions this Christmas, the original story is exhaustively about Jesus and his role in human history. It wasn't just a birth. It was a collision of God and humanity that changed everything that matters in eternity.

As always, we welcome feedback in the comment section below.

Five Theological Sounding Words Christians Should Know and Use

In the 15 years of being a pastor and preacher in Chicago, I don't think I have ever one time used the word "Justification" in a sermon. Or "Sanctification". I believe the concepts they entail are necessary to teach but I have always felt that they could be heavy to my audience and I am comfortable explaining them with other words.

That is not the case with all of the "Christian-ese" the American church has. There are some words I do not want to erase from my vocabulary in an effort to make the Bible easier to understand. I believe there are some words that have no good synonyms and are so rich in meaning that the church does well to learn and use them. Because you can't find anything equivalent in secular vocabulary. Christianity has concepts and truths unequaled and unparalleled in the world.

As always I seek balance. I don't want to talk completely in esoteric jargon as a Christian but neither do I want to try to be so hip with my lingo I eliminate all theological terms entirely. And I will say up front that your list may be different than mine. I am not claiming this is the "correct" list on this topic. With that said, here are five I use:

1. Covenant

I have written before that [I do not mind using the phrase](#) "Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship." Yet the word "relationship" can be woefully inadequate when describing the relationship our God wants us to have with Him in Jesus Christ. I have a relationship with my uncle. But I don't have

a *covenant* relationship.

For millennia, through men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, God has used this word to communicate how he enters into a relationship with men. And there are consistencies in all of their covenants: a promise on God's part, a symbol or sign to confirm it and a response of a faithful commitment by the followers. It was a very serious relational pact to be entered into. It was not to be taken lightly. It was like a spiritual marriage.

Now through Jesus Christ we enter into a New Covenant, not from the blood of lambs and goats, but through his blood. And we need to grasp the level and seriousness of the commitment that covenant is. No other word in English really captures it. "Marriage" is close but it carries too much in connotation. Yet man-woman marriage is supposed to be a picture of the God-man covenant commitment.

2. Atonement

I have written about this before for REO when writing about [Leviticus for Good Friday in 2016](#). This word matters to teaching about Christian salvation and how we can enter into covenant with God. No other word (apart from the very similar "propitiation") in English carries so many layers in meaning and truth.

In general, in both Testaments, it has a threefold significance: a substitute is given in place of our sin, our sin is forgiven and God's wrath is satisfied. All three of these facts are crucial to our theology and faith. And God gave us a beautifully concise word to capture them together. We see it in Leviticus over and over, we see it change in the Gospels and we see that change explained in Romans and Hebrews. I love the Bible for how I marvel at how it is both consistent and simultaneously divided by a major

transformation at the same time. Jesus is now the substitution (not animals) but God's wrath is still satisfied and my sins are still forgiven.

3. Evangelism

Phrases like "Sharing your faith" and "Witnessing" are great but the word "Evangelize" literally means to preach or proclaim the Gospel. And that is our message. I would put "Gospel" as one of the five words but it has such a deep, rich and multi-faceted meaning it cannot be treated in a short paragraph. Yet I will mention [I still agree with REO contributor David Lytle](#) when he expands the definition of Gospel to the entirety of the content of four books we have on Jesus's life and not something as simple as "The Gospel is that Jesus died for your sins and rose again."

Regardless of what Gospel means, we are mandated to share it and we have a ready-made verb to communicate that mandate. Phrases like "Preach the Gospel" conjure up ideas of standing on a stage in front of a crowd. "Evangelism" has less baggage, in my opinion (though the word "Evangelical" may have a ton of baggage).

4. Lamenting

I suppose this is a word that we hear in English outside of church, but not very often. Yet the Bible has a form of this word as the name of one of its books, which is significant to me.

Christians should know how to lament. And the importance of it. Jeremiah is called the "weeping prophet" and Jesus was a "man of sorrows and familiar with the deepest suffering". Over 60 of the Psalms can be labeled "Lament Psalms". And in both testaments over and over God's people are commanded to weep

and wail and all manner of similar verbs (Isaiah 22:12, James 4:9).

But I think there is a theological significance to the word "Lament". I believe it teaches us how to process the horror that comes from both the evil in the world and in our hearts in a God-honoring and proactive way, instead of a reactive state that similar English words convey.

5. I AM

This one is different and not just because it's two words. It's because it's not a verb or a noun like the others. It is in some way a name for God that connects Old Testament YHWH (another name Christians should know) and New Testament Jesus Christ.

The significance of Jesus saying in John 8:58 that "before Abraham was, I AM" is monumental. They started to stone him for it because his opponents knew he was claiming what YHWH claimed in Exodus 3:14-15. Outside of how fascinating it is that here Jesus claims to be outside of time and that he cannot be restricted by human logic or the grammar of any language ("before Abraham was, I AM" is linguistically nonsensical in every language I have studied), Jesus saying "I AM" communicates a claim to and self-awareness of his deity. He knew perfectly Scriptures like Exodus 3:14-15 and Isaiah 42:8 and was intentional with his words.

There are many other "I AM" statements by Jesus and perhaps my favorite is in John 18:6 when a detachment of soldiers carrying torches and weapons went to arrest Jesus. He asked them whom they were looking for and they said, "Jesus of Nazareth". And he replied "I AM". Some translations add the word "he" as in "I am he" for clarity but I think it makes the meaning less clear. For when he said this phrase, they drew back and fell to the ground. No army in the world can stand up

to the LORD of Heaven's Armies. I think there is power in this name of God as stated in Exodus. And Jesus being God in the flesh and using this name, humbled these men.

Are there theology words you feel similar about?

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.

What About Those Who’ve Never Heard of Jesus?

“You’re in some remote part of the earth and you never heard the name of Jesus, you cannot get to Heaven, you think?”

[Oprah Winfrey]

According to the Joshua Project, there are about 3,000 people groups in the world that have essentially zero Christian contact. It is nearly impossible to determine the exact number, but based on this we can safely assume there are millions, and perhaps billions, of people who have never heard the name of Jesus.

When you juxtapose this with what the Bible teaches about how a person is saved from eternal damnation, it can cause cognitive dissonance to the Christian mind.

And trying to reconcile basic New Testament theology with the practical reality of where the Gospel hasn't been preached makes for intense discussion and debate. The quote from Oprah above happened [during her former show in a lively conversation between her, her guest speaker and a woman in the audience](#). Oprah presents a "fair" view of those who've never heard, that God cares more about their heart than if they've heard of Jesus. This is a popular view, even within the evangelical church. But is it correct?

I want to tackle this issue, but not in a "Here is the final and authoritative answer to problem" way. The Bible speaks to this, but not in an expositional manner. In other words, I can't give you an interpretation of one passage that clears it all up.

No, I think this mystery is better viewed as a puzzle of about ten pieces that have to be seen together in order to see a more complete image. Yet even with the truths I present below, I am still not advocating an answer that ends the discussion. This issue is far too complex. But these truths do help me relieve the dissonance to a great level and help start the discussion. They may leave you with more questions than answers. That will not offend me. I hope it encourages you to

add to the dialogue.

But to at least get it started, I offer these as things that I am absolutely convinced the Bible teaches. If I can't have a final authoritative answer to this issue, I can at least focus on things that are clear and go from there. Here are the ten:

1. Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

2. Those who do not follow Jesus end up in Hell (John 3:36).

These two are the basis for why the question of "What about those who've never heard?" exists. Without them there is no issue.

3. God is just (Deuteronomy 4:32; Romans 3:5b-6).

Whatever the answer to the question is, I think we have to believe that God is fair. This matters because the issue at its heart is that it is unfair to condemn someone for knowledge they do not have. But the Bible describes God as a just judge.

4. God is not far from anyone (Acts 17:26-27).

This matters because with this topic it appears we are dealing with people who are far from the truth about God, when in reality no one is actually far from God. Note that Paul in these verses is dealing precisely with where people live geographically.

5. God can be known through the created world so men are without excuse (Romans 1:18-20).

Even without the Bible and a Christian witness, every person that lives now is accountable to God in some sense because they can see him through creation.

6. God can be known from human morality (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 2:14-15).

Similarly, because we know right from wrong and that a general sense of justice transcends culture and time, we know there has to be a standard of right and wrong we are all accountable to. We know there is a God because His law is ingrained within us.

7. God desires that everyone be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

8. God demands repentance from everyone to be saved (Acts 17:30).

These two are crucial because the first one teaches us about God's heart on this issue and the second, at least in theory, eliminates exceptions. Like those who've never heard. If there is an exception there better be a clear explanation in the Bible.[1. A shout out here to the students at a leadership conference I helped lead in 2014 for asking tough questions in a Q&A after this presentation. This event caused me to add an addendum, footnoted here, to this presentation on the concept of an age of accountability. Logically it is hard to believe God demands repentance from a 3-month old baby. Biblically, we can see in Isaiah God acknowledging that a particular child is not old enough to know right from wrong; we see Nathan telling David he will see his deceased newborn in Heaven one day and that Jesus loved children with qualification. Does this mean, biblically, that there is an age of accountability? I am not 100% convinced this is so. Yet I believe it has to exist for God to be fair. This opens up a can of worms of course about what the age is and I only bring it up here because if it exists, I would guess it is at least possible that children are accountable at a younger age in a culture where they hear the Gospel more often than in a place where Jesus' name is never even spoken.]

9. God can get a missionary to a searching person (Acts 10:1-48).

If a person is living a God-fearing life with no knowledge of

Jesus, God can get a missionary to them. It is true that sometimes people groups do not have missionaries because people do not go, but sometimes they do not because they are hostile to Christianity.

10. God can reveal himself in dreams to lost people (Genesis 41; Daniel 2).

This is huge, especially in the Muslim world. There are many stories I encourage you to read about it if you have not. You can begin [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

So again, without presuming that these ten things tie the issue into a nice little bow, I present them as giving us at least a picture of how we can begin reconciling the tensions of God's fairness, the necessity of confessing Christ, and the lack of Gospel witness in thousands of people groups. I doubt I will ever feel completely confident in any answer to the question and I confess we may be asking the wrong question here. But at least it catapults us to search the Scriptures to learn more about who God is and what he is like, and fosters discussion on a complex topic that exercises the mind. That is rarely a bad thing.

When God Hates the Sinner

"Our job is not to love the sinner, hate their sin, but to love the sinner and hate our sin." (Rosaria Butterfield)



A couple of times on here I have mentioned that I do not like to communicate in clichés, especially Christian ones. The social media fad of posting memes with eight words that neatly and simplistically sum up complex political and theological topics unnerves me.

So I'm not inclined to say things like "Love the sinner, hate the sin". I'm not alone on this. Some people really do not like this phrase. But what makes this Christian cliché so unique is that people in two diametrically opposite camps have condemned it.

On one hand, there are people who feel completely ostracized by Christians and their churches. They have spoken out vehemently against this platitude because, from what I can tell, the words ring hollow and self-righteously judgmental. To them, Christians have substituted loving and humble relationship for an empty, Sunday School answer theology. The message is shouted from a distance, focused on hatred and does not square with their reality. Hating their sin is, in essence, hating them. But I confess I am still quite ignorant in this area and I cannot fully represent other people's views.

On one hand, there are people who feel completely ostracized by Christians and our churches. They have spoken out vehemently against this platitude because, from what I can tell, the words ring hollow and self-righteously judgmental.

An Exegetical Fallacy

Yet as interesting, I have read conservative Christian scholars speak out against this phrase as well. Most notably, D. A. Carson, a professor of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School says:

One evangelical cliché has it that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. There is a small element of truth in these words: God has nothing but hate for the sin, but this cannot be said with respect to how God sees the sinner. Nevertheless the cliché is false on the face of it, and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone, the psalmists state that God hates the sinner, that His wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests on both the sin (Rom. 1:18-23) and the sinner (1:24-32; 2:5; John 3:36). [1. Carson, D. A. "God's Love and God's Wrath." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (October-December 1999): 387-398.]

Let me make note that in Carson's explanation, the point is how *God* sees the sin and the sinner. The cliché is often used to how *Christians* are supposed to react to both. I am not quite as concerned with how accurate it is in either case as much as I care about understanding and listening to people and trying to communicate with genuineness and theology that is well-developed and nuanced. The Bible explained in context—and not pithy clichés—is the only thing I think should offend people. So its 'biblicalness' is not my focus here.

Instead I want to speak to Dr. Carson's point about God hating the sinner. I've read Psalm 5:5 and 11:5 many times over the years and I cannot get past the mention of God hating people

and not merely sin. Same for Proverbs 6:19. And for Esau in Malachi and Romans. And so on.

So there must be some sense in which God hates sinners. At the same time, I don't think we can deny that God loves all sinners in that he wants relationship with them[2. 2 Peter 3:9] and gives them some measure of blessing[3. Matthew 5:45], among other nuanced definitions of love. We cannot state succinctly and unilaterally that "God hates sinners". Yet the verses in Psalms and Proverbs and about Esau have to mean something that keeps us just as honestly from saying "God doesn't hate sinners." Language is often too multi-dimensional and the Bible too often creates conflicting tensions in logic for us to try to capture this in meme or cliché form.

God still pursues and God still blesses but unless a person comes with the humility of a child, God rejects. In that sense, he 'hates'.

Hate As Volition, Not Feeling

I think the resolution of the tension comes from understanding that 'hate' in both the OT and the NT means that God 'rejects in relationship'. Covenant relationship with God is a relational standing, like marriage[4. The parallels are so deep, the Hebrew word for 'hate' in Malachi has 'divorce' in its semantic range.]. God wants relationship with everyone, but he only welcomes those in who are humble enough to receive Him by grace instead of trying to earn it by works, intelligence or philosophy. God still pursues and God still blesses but unless a person comes with the humility of a child, God rejects. In that sense, he 'hates'.

Which brings me to my point. In Amos 6:8, God says, "*I abhor the pride of Jacob and hate his strongholds...*" The book of Amos was written in part to express the idea that God hates

pride from all peoples and will execute judgment impartially. Because pride prevents the relationship. Yet even his own people in covenant were still guilty of it. It is here that God does love the sinner and hate the sin. But to be like God, we must hate ours as well.

I'm So Humbled By How Great I Am

All the time on social media I see Christians brag on their accomplishments. From education to fitness to sports to serving the poor. I suppose there is something detached from reality about it on the internet that we feel comfortable doing it. I once noticed a comment from a professing Christ follower on my wife's Facebook that said she had lost X amount of weight and that she was "so proud of herself".

How easily we hate the acts of terrorists who shed innocent blood yet sit in comfortable community with those who create disunity in churches. God absolutely hates both.

If the same person had put on Facebook that she left a child in a hot car, the reaction would have been swift and harsh. Instead, people liked the status and praised her. Let me be clear: God hates pride as much as he does the worst things humans are capable of. God finds human pride as gross, disgusting and reprehensible as the worst human acts of evil imaginable, including abuse and murder. How easily we hate the acts of terrorists who shed innocent blood yet sit in comfortable community with those with proud eyes who create disunity in churches! God absolutely hates both[5. Proverbs 6:16-19].

I confess I have used social media to pridefully promote myself so I'm not casting stones here. But make no mistake, Amos 6 tells us clearly that Israel had puffed herself up due to her accomplishments and feelings of superiority over others. And God expressed passionately that he hated it. He

still does. God clearly says, "Let someone else praise you, and not your own mouth" and teaches, "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do, to be honored by others. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret." Yet social media is often a breeding ground for violating these verses. Often in clever, proud-of-my-humility ways.

Why He Must Increase and We Decrease

I do not think biblically it is wrong for a Christian to ever talk about what they have accomplished. But there must be a full and significant expression of praise to God along with it. This is not something to be done for show; God says in Amos 5:21 that he hates that too. He alone truly knows the difference. He knows if it comes from a heart that understands what John the Baptist meant when he said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from Heaven." But before others, we must be satisfied with our good deeds being private, or else exalt God far more than the accomplishment. God will not share his glory with another. And he hates it when we try.

I'll close with something written by Isaac Watts over 300 years ago that we desperately need to meditate on today:

*Now for the loss I bear his name
What was my gain I count my loss
My former pride I call my shame
And nail my glory to His cross*

*The best obedience of my hands
Dares not appear before Thy throne;
But faith can answer Thy demands,
By pleading what my Lord has done.*

*No more my God
I boast no more*

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 τῇ καρδίᾳ, 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 ὀνειδίσωσιν ὑμᾶς καὶ διώξωσιν καὶ εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν καθ' ὑμῶν ψευδόμενοι ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ. **12** χαίrete 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!