

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

O 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 significant 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 we 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 cliches, 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**

χαίρετε καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς· οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφήτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν.

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

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

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

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

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

The commentary on persecution, in my opinion, continues

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; **15** nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to*

*all who are in the house. **16** Let **your** light shine before men in such a way that they may see **your** good works, and glorify **your** Father who is in heaven.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notice that the four words are alliterated, beginning with the same Greek letter you may recognize from math class as Pi (though I was taught to pronounce it with a long 'e' instead of a long 'i'). I know some people find outline alliteration annoying in modern preaching but it's used here. What does that mean? Perhaps nothing. After all, vs. 7-10 are not alliterated. Yet, I think it probably means that vs. 3-6 are one subgroup of the Beatitudes and vs. 7-10 are a second

group. Even further, I think if you study them you will see that it could be that vs. 3-6 deal with man's relationship to God and vs. 7-10 deal with man's relationship to other men. This follows the pattern of both the Ten Commandments and The Great Commandment given by Jesus.

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

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

Questions? Comments? Let us know below!

What Has Valentinus to Do With Christianity?

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

The two main strings of Gnosticism have been classified as Iranian and Syrian. These strings trickled into other areas of thought and religion, chief among these being Christianity. In fact, this was one of its earliest areas and would sadly have a successful run at it. The kind of Gnosticism that invaded the church came to be known as Gnostic Christianity. It became so prevalent that many people both inside and outside the church thought it was just normal Christianity. This false teaching was adopted by several different Christian teachers and turned into one of the most problematic heresies of early Christianity. There were several main teachers of Christian Gnosticism who developed their own branch of this heresy. The two Christian Gnostic teachers that had the biggest influence were Marcion and Valentinus. And probably the most influential of these two was Valentinus, who became so influential in the church that he very nearly became bishop of Rome.

It might be uncomfortable to think of heretical teachers like Valentinus having a profound *positive* impact on Christianity, but in a way he and other heretics did. These false teachings had some very positive results. They were instrumental in goading the church to collect an authoritative canon that

likewise goaded it to more fully and authoritatively evaluate and form orthodox Christian doctrine based on that canon. But this collected canon of the New Testament would not become reality until the third century. For the many years prior to that, it was much harder to maintain a consensus throughout the worldwide church about the actual teachings of the Gospel. Until then there were primarily only letters and writings claiming divine authority floating about. The fact that this was the case and that there was no definite canon during these years made it so much easier for false teachings to creep into and thrive in local church doctrine. So who was this man who introduced such falsehood to Christian doctrine and what did he teach?

Valentinus and His Gnostic Christian Doctrine

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

Basic Valentinus doctrine says that the first eternal being was First-Being or Profundity. He eventually united with Thought to produce the emanations (aeons) called Mind and Truth. And this production process kept on going with Mind and Truth producing two more emanations, and then those two emanations uniting to produce two more emanations, and so on and so forth. This went on until 26 emanations had been produced after First-Being and Thought. This genealogical strand of First-Being, Thought, and their 26 offspring was

called The Fullness. Every one of these succeeding pairs along The Fullness grew more and more discontent, each succeeding emanation more so than the one before it, because each had less knowledge of and contact with First-Being. This discontentment come to a head in Wisdom (Sophia), the 26th emanation. Her prideful decision to fight to build her way back up to First-Being only resulted in her fall from grace. First-Being tried his best to restore Wisdom to her correct place in an attempt to keep the perfection of The Fullness. It didn't work and therefore the entire line of The Fullness was compromised. As the first phase of a strategy to restore the former holiness of The Fullness, First-Being also produced directly from Himself the emanations of Christ and Holy Spirit. Together the two brought a joy to The Fullness that resulted in the emanations collectively producing Jesus.

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

The Disciples of Valentinus

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

The Nag Hammadi contains 13 codices (a codex is an ancient

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

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

Five Amazing Truths About Election On Which Every Christian Should Agree

Editor's Note: This article was written as a follow up to an article published earlier this year by REO on Five Statements

made by Arminius that even Calvinists can agree with. If you missed that article you can read it [here](#).

Aside from the myth of the [Rapture](#), nothing stirs up a theological hornets nest like Predestination and Election. Just five minutes ago, I overheard some students at my high school debating Arminianism and Calvinism. They don't even get that worked up over Trump! While I don't want to diminish the points of disagreement, I find it helpful to discuss five truths surrounding the doctrine of Election that all Christians, whether Arminianist or Calvinist in leaning, can (and should) agree on.

Election equates Christians with God's chosen people.

When the writers of the New Testament use the term "elect" their first century audience would have thought immediately about God's chosen people in the Old Testament. Peter calls believers a "Chosen Nation" and a "Royal Priesthood." In doing so, he identifies the calling of the believer with the calling of God's chosen people Israel. Just like the people of God under the Mosaic Covenant, Christians also have a calling to worship God as one people and to be a priesthood for other "nations" who do not know the God of the Bible. As priests our role is to connect the nations with the one true God. This is not through animal sacrifice, but by the living sacrifice of a Gospel-centered life.

Election speaks to our being in Christ.

The title "Christ" denotes Jesus' position as God's "Chosen one." He is the Lord's anointed, the chosen king, THE servant spoken of in Isaiah; Jesus is the Elect (Luke 9:35). Ephesians 1 tells us that we have been chosen "in Him." Our status as

“the elect” is made possible because we belong to “The Elect” One. We are chosen because we belong to the Chosen one.

Election connects us a larger community of faith.

Perhaps this is a restatement of point number one, but from a different angle. As modern Americans, we envision faith as private and individualistic. We need a greater emphasis on the community of faith. Too often we think that the gospel is about me and God. Paul, however, usually presents the gospel as us and God. While we are certainly not saved because of the faith of others, every passage about election in the scripture is addressed to groups of Christians. When John calls the congregation receiving his letter “The Elect Lady” (2 John 1:1) the point is clear—the people of faith are God’s elect. This emphasis on community is why the church father Cyprian proclaimed that “there is no salvation outside of the Church.” Christianity never imagines the Christian life outside of a community of faith. To be Elect is to belong to something bigger.

Election makes ethnic differences insignificant.

Many Puritans applied the idea of “the Elect Nation” to what they thought were God’s eschatological purposes for the nation of England. In doing so, they missed the purpose of Paul’s teaching in Ephesians, Colossians, and Galatians. There is a reason Paul spends the first chapter of Ephesians discussing Predestination and Election. There is a reason he asserts God’s activity and the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice. In establishing these doctrines, Paul is getting to his point in chapter 2—The unity of Jew and Gentile. God is creating “one new humanity out of two.” (Ephesians 2:15) Any feelings of racial superiority or hostility are burned away by the truth that in Christ we are one people. (For more on this you can

read this [article](#))

Election makes no room for pride.

In light of all these truths, the doctrine of election should primarily be a humbling one. We don't deserve to be God's chosen people, we don't deserve to be in Christ, we don't deserve to be part of a family of faith, we don't deserve to be healed of our racism. As much as we may or may not have tried, we have done nothing to deserve God's election. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

If Ephesians 2 is true, rather than prompting us to argue over TULIPs and the order of decrees, maybe the doctrine of election should prompt us to humility, unity, and good works. If it doesn't do that, it's not a doctrine worth teaching.