



When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

## 2 TIMOTHY 4:13

The apostle says to Timothy and so he says to every preacher, “Give thyself unto reading.” The man who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted. He who will not use the thoughts of other men’s brains, proves that he has no brains on his own.

Brethren, what is true of ministers is true of all our people. You need to read. Renounce as much as you will all light literature, but study as much as possible sound theological works, especially the Puritanic writers, and expositions of the Bible. We are quite persuaded that the very best way for you to be spending your leisure, is to be either reading or praying. You may get much instruction from books which afterwards you may use as a true weapon in your Lord and Master’s service. Paul cries, “Bring the books”—join in the cry.

**CHARLES SPURGEON**

**Paul, His Cloak and His Books**

(sermon preached November 29, 1863)

# THE BOOKS THAT SHAPED US

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# INTRODUCTION

*Jared Mellinger*

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**O**ur denomination has been deeply influenced by good books. This issue of the Journal is devoted to celebrating the books and authors that have shaped Sovereign Grace Churches: J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*, John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*, R. C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God*, and others.

It was difficult to know where to stop. *Charity and Its Fruits* by Jonathan Edwards should have probably been included, as should the writings of Sinclair Ferguson. But if we were to exhaustively include everyone who shaped us, the Journal would need to be significantly expanded.

These articles are a reminder that we are rich in sound resources, and indebted to many faithful leaders, authors, and friends. Read these articles and the books they point to with gratefulness to God.

Several of these articles mention C. J. Mahaney's influence in introducing pastors to these resources. I retained those references despite the repetition, since they come from various contributors and serve as a God-honoring reminder of the good influence C. J. has had on our pastors and churches over the years.

I could highlight individual articles that I especially enjoyed and benefited from, but instead, I'll simply recommend that you read them all. In Sovereign Grace, we have often said that we want to create a culture of reading in our churches. We encourage every Christian to build a personal library that leads them into a deeper knowledge of God and cultivates a greater hunger to treasure and apply the most important book of all—the Word of God.

May these great books continue to shape our pastors and congregations long into the future.



# IN THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY

*THE HOLINESS OF GOD* by R. C. SPROUL

***Jace Hudson***

*Lead Pastor, Covenant of Grace (Copley, OH)*

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**A**s Americans, we tend to prefer a God who is small. One who is like us, only a little bigger. That kind of God feels safe to us. We can understand him. We can explain him because he is like us. But this is simply not the God of the Bible. He is something altogether different. God is the opposite of small. He cannot be categorized or contained.

The irony is that we want a God we can understand and explain, but he would be weak and uninspiring. After all, he's only a little bigger and brighter than we are! That kind of God feels manageable to us but not at all deserving of our adoration and allegiance. We're put off by an awesome and terrifying God, and yet this is exactly what we need. Only a God who is infinitely greater and wiser than we are can sustain our faith, ignite our passion, enlarge our minds, and humble our pride. We desperately need to see God in all his holiness.

First published in 1985, R. C. Sproul's *The Holiness of God* is now a classic. It was an important volume when it was first released and is even more so today. Holiness is the characteristic of God's nature that is at the very core of his being. This is a book about God, and yet it is also a book about us. Only as we encounter God in his holiness is it possible for us to see ourselves as we really are.

## ***Grappling with Holiness***

Sproul begins the book with a story about a time in his life when he wrestled to understand how a good God could allow much sorrow in this world. He was also bothered by stories in the Old Testament that seemed to reveal a brutal side to God. Like the time his anger was kindled against Uzzah for touching the ark of the Covenant, and God struck him down (2 Sam. 6:1–7). How could Sproul love such a God?

His study of Scripture kept leading Sproul back to the idea that God is holy. From this point on, he was captivated by the holiness of God. He writes, “To this day, I am still absorbed with the question of the holiness of God. I am convinced that it is one of the most important ideas that a Christian can ever grapple with. It is basic for our whole understanding of God and of Christianity.”<sup>1</sup>

## ***Undone by a Glimpse of God***

One of his most powerful expositions is the stunning scene from Isaiah 6, where the prophet Isaiah encounters the Lord in the temple. Sproul looks first to those seraphim in God’s presence who continually cry out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isa. 6:3) God is not just holy, but holy, holy, holy. Using a rhetorical device of the Hebrew language, the Bible expresses the extent of God’s holiness by emphasizing it through repetition. Sproul explains:

Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy, or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It does say that he is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of his glory.<sup>2</sup>

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1. R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1998), 12.

2. *Ibid.*, 26.

From there, Sproul surveys Isaiah—a seemingly good and noble man. And yet, before the presence of the holy God, he was completely undone.

If ever there was a man of integrity, it was Isaiah ben Amoz. He was a whole man, a together type of a fellow. He was considered by his contemporaries as the most righteous man in the nation. He was respected as a paragon of virtue. Then he caught one sudden glimpse of a holy God. In that single moment, all of his self-esteem was shattered. In a brief second he was exposed, made naked beneath the gaze of the absolute standard of holiness. As long as Isaiah could compare himself to other mortals, he was able to sustain a lofty opinion of his own character. The instant he measured himself by the ultimate standard, he was destroyed—morally and spiritually annihilated. He was undone. He came apart. His sense of integrity collapsed.<sup>3</sup>

This is a timely tonic for a generation whose access to social media has only exacerbated our obsession with comparing ourselves to others. To understand our sinfulness, we must compare ourselves to the absolute standard of holiness. Then we are undone. And being undone, we can then be remade in the image of God’s own Son (Rom. 8:29).

### ***A Transcendent Purity***

Contrary to common misconceptions, Sproul contends that “the idea of [holiness] is never exhausted by the idea of purity. It includes purity but is much more than that. It is purity and transcendence. It is a transcendent purity.”<sup>4</sup> And this leads into his examining the holiness of Christ in the story of his calming of a ferocious storm. Sproul points to the disciples’ reaction at the end of the story: they were terrified. He writes,

What is significant about this scriptural story is that the disciples’ fear increased after the threat of the storm was removed. The storm had made them afraid. In the power of Christ, they met something more frightening

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3. Ibid., 28–29.

4. Ibid., 39.

than they had ever met in nature. They were in the presence of the holy.<sup>5</sup>

If I were to recommend only one chapter in *The Holiness of God*, it would probably be “Holy Justice.” Here, we find Sproul at his best, dismantling the misconceptions and misunderstandings of who God is and what he is like. In this chapter, Sproul examines the shocking story of God’s judgment against Nadab and Abihu, and his judgment against Uzzah. He also examines crimes for which God demanded capital punishment and God’s judgment on Canaanite nations including women and children. “This chapter,” Sproul says, “is not for the weak of stomach or heart.”<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult for us to understand how a loving God can sometimes act in seemingly brutal ways. But Sproul argues this is because we take his grace and mercy for granted. Far from being a history of a harsh God, the Old Testament is the record of a God who is patient in the extreme to persistently hard-necked people who rebel time after time against him.

The problem in our understanding of justice is our failure to understand the nature of sin. Sproul says:

The slightest sin is an act of defiance against cosmic authority. It is a revolutionary act, a rebellious act in which we are setting ourselves in opposition to the One to whom we owe everything. It is an insult to his holiness. We become false witnesses to God. When we sin as the image bearers of God, we are saying to the whole creation, to all of nature under our dominion, to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field: “This is how God is. This is how your Creator behaves. Look in this mirror; look at us and you will see the character of the Almighty.” We say to the world, “God is covetous; God is ruthless; God is bitter; God is a murderer, a thief, a slanderer, an adulterer. God is all of these things that we are doing.”<sup>7</sup>

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5. Ibid., 53.

6. Ibid., 100.

7. Ibid., 116.

## ***Let Us Stagger at the Cross***

Sproul explains that God's justice in the Old Testament was neither whimsical nor unwarranted. There is also no conflict between the Old and New Testament. In fact, Sproul says, the most violent act of divine justice and wrath recorded in Scripture is not in the Old Testament but in the New Testament, at the cross.

If ever a person had reason to complain of injustice, it was Jesus. He was the only innocent man ever to be punished by God. If we stagger at the wrath of God, let us stagger at the cross. Here is where our astonishment should be focused. If we have cause for moral outrage, let it be directed at Golgotha. The cross is simultaneously the most horrible and the most beautiful example of God's wrath. It was the most just and the most gracious act in history.<sup>8</sup>

Our problem is we think that we deserve God's grace. But it is impossible for anyone to deserve grace. By definition, grace is undeserved favor. As soon as we talk about deserving something, we are no longer talking about grace; we are talking about justice. And so, in light of God's holiness and our sinfulness, it's amazing that God saves any of us.

*The Holiness of God* doesn't just leave us in awe of God's transcendent glory but also freshly amazed by his saving grace. God is holy. He is infinitely high and exalted. But as Sproul reminds us, God's grace is not infinite. He sets limits on it. And therefore, his grace can never be assumed. God has mercy on whomever he wills (Rom. 9:18).

Sproul also addresses the practical implications of understanding God's holiness. We are to be what we were made to be: people who reflect the holy character of our Creator. He argues that a proper understanding of God's holiness should lead to a transformed life. And the key method Paul underscores as the means to transformation is through the renewal of the mind. We must be serious students of Scripture—learning to think God's thoughts after him. True faith always produces real conformity to Christ.

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8. This paragraph and the preceding one summarize and quote Sproul, *ibid.*, 121.

## ***A Life-Changing Gift***

The significance of this book was highlighted to me at the age of twenty. It was a gift from C. J. Mahaney during my sophomore year in college. Eager to learn more about the charismatic and Reformed “family of churches” he led, I embarked on an eight-hour drive to visit his church. Friends introduced me to C. J. and emphasized my lengthy journey and passion for ministry. I’ll never forget what happened next.

First, C. J. exclaimed, “Excellent!” while making a chopping motion with his hands. Then, he abruptly turned and strode away, shouting back, “Come with me to the bookstore!” Surprised, I had to hurry to catch up. We raced to the “budget-free zone,” where C. J. encouraged me to build my own library. He then thoughtfully selected and generously gifted me a stack of theological and ministerial books, including *The Holiness of God*. I can still vividly recall C. J. holding up this particular book and, with deep reverence, declaring, “This is a must-read.”

Many books don’t live up to their endorsements, but this one does. Having read, reread, and often recommended this book, I agree with C. J.’s assessment. This is a must-read for every Christian and especially those within a Sovereign Grace Church. Few books have had a more profound influence on our denomination.

## ***Transformed by a Holy God***

*The Holiness of God* challenged us not to approach God—especially in our Sunday gatherings—with a casual familiarity, failing to recognize the awe-inspiring holiness that sets him apart. He is altogether holy and worthy of our wholehearted and impassioned worship.

This book also played a pivotal role in shaping our view of sin and grace. Sproul’s emphasis on the seriousness of sin in light of God’s holiness led us into an ever-deeper gratefulness for the grace we don’t deserve. In fact, C. J. has shared that it wasn’t long after reading this book that, when asked by someone how he was doing, he began to respond, “Better than I deserve.” It’s the gospel that fuels our humility, joy, and gratitude.

And finally, *The Holiness of God* has shaped our pursuit of personal holiness. It's one thing to understand the concept of sanctification, but Sproul underscores the urgency of pursuing holiness as a response to God's holiness. It's a journey of conforming our lives to his character, driven by a deep and abiding reverence for him.

*The Holiness of God* can help expand our understanding of God's true nature. It reminds us that the God of the Bible is not a small, easily explained deity but a holy and awe-inspiring being worthy of our reverence and worship. Grace is not deserved but given freely. And holiness is a life increasingly conformed to God's holy character. Pick up and read, and be transformed by the holiness of God.



# KNOWING GOD by J. I. PACKER

*Mickey Connolly*

*Pastor, Crossway Community Church (Charlotte, NC)*

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**A**nd the winner of the most beat up, written in, oft referred to book in my library goes to—(drumroll) the envelope please—*Knowing God* by J. I. Packer. In December 1989 I was unexpectedly thrust into the Senior Pastor role at a church in Maryland. Wondering how to proceed, I asked our Regional Leader what I should preach. He suggested a series on the attributes of God. I clearly remember thinking, “Okay, that should take two or three weeks, then what?”

## *Discovering the Doctrine of God*

You have to understand where I was coming from. Our church had just been adopted into Sovereign Grace. We had been part of a similar family of churches that wasn’t very academically oriented, though it had other strengths. I can remember many jokes about seminaries being cemeteries. Our sermons were largely determined by what the Spirit was saying to us that week. And I literally didn’t own a single commentary or a systematic theology. I thought, “Who needs commentaries or books when you have the Holy Spirit?!”

So I bought Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, Bruce Milne’s *Know the Truth*, A.W. Tozer’s *The Knowledge of the Holy*, and J. I. Packer’s *Knowing God*. Then I got to work and my life completely changed. By God’s grace, so did the church I served.

The two or three weeks eventually became 52 weeks. And each week God became bigger to me; God became holier to me; and God became more glorious to me than I had ever imagined before. My faith and hope had a far stronger

foundation in him. And while all those books informed me, none touched my heart like *Knowing God*. I loved God so much more as I grew to know him so much better.

I'm guessing many in Sovereign Grace had a similar experience when they read *Knowing God*. A.W. Tozer famously said, "What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."<sup>1</sup> I'd be on pretty solid ground in thinking that few books have shaped what we think about God more than Packer's book, because understanding who God truly is affects the way we relate with him and that affects the way we live for him. This book celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023, and I think that it will continue to shape us for many years to come as subsequent generations discover its treasures.

### ***Know the Lord***

Packer divides the book into three sections. In the first section, "Know the Lord," Packer sets the table for studying God's attributes by first speaking to motives and methods. He begins with a wise warning, that we should seek not merely to know doctrine but to know and enjoy God. We can gain knowledge *about* God without actually having knowledge *of* God (i.e., without that knowledge leading to relationship and growth in godliness).

He then inspires the reader to study with four effects of knowing God: (1) those who know God have great energy for God; (2) those who know God have great thoughts of God; (3) those who know God show great boldness for God; and, (4) those who know God have great contentment in God.

Packer recommends receiving, interpreting, and applying God's Word with the help of the Holy Spirit. We do so especially concentrating on God's nature and character as revealed in his Word and works. Then, we read with an eye toward obeying his commands. And finally, we recognize and rejoice in God's love in making himself known and in drawing us into fellowship with

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1. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian Life* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1961), 1.

him. God's love is demonstrated in the incarnation, which is not only vital to saving us but vital to us knowing God. "No one has ever seen God: the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18).

## ***Behold Your God!***

The second section, "Behold Your God!," explains some of God's attributes. Packer makes a statement about God's grace which I think applies to every attribute discussed. He says that God's grace "cannot but sweep him off his feet with wonder and joy."<sup>2</sup> And I would add—as he does in several other places—grace cannot but sweep us off our feet with *trust*. The grace of God gives unreserved confidence in God's character and care that, as another writer said, "affect[s] life and character and destiny."<sup>3</sup>

Here are some highlights from each chapter.

- **God Unchanging.** In all of the changing circumstances of life, God never changes. And because he never changes he is the rock we can build our lives on.
- **The Majesty of God.** Majesty refers to God's greatness. When he asks through Isaiah, "To whom will you compare me?," we must answer that he is incomparable and respond in the only appropriate way: with worship.
- **God Only Wise.** "Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it."<sup>4</sup> What comfort it brings, in the trials and perplexities of life, to know that God is steadfastly working out his perfect, all-wise plan for everything and for me! Patience, humility, and rejoicing in trials flow from this understanding.
- **God's Wisdom and Ours.** God in his kindness communicates wisdom to his people as they fear and follow him.

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2. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God, 20th Anniversary Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973, 1993), 132.

3. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 13.

4. Packer, *Knowing God*, 90.

- **Thy Word Is Truth.** God’s Word is truth because God is truth. So his Word to us is 100% reliable and will never fail us as we build our lives upon it. Packer reminds that God’s Word is both information and invitation—that it guides us but also calls us into personal communion with him.
- **The Love of God.** Packer calls God’s love the supreme manifestation of his goodness and reminds us that the cross is the crowning proof of that love. Remarkably, that redeeming love isn’t simply “diffused good will toward everyone in general and no one in particular”<sup>5</sup> but specific and personal to every believer. So every Christian can say with amazement, “God loves me!”
- **The Grace of God.** Packer covers four crucial truths without which faith for grace becomes impossible: (1) the moral ill-desert of man; (2) the retributive justice of God; (3) the spiritual impotence of man; and (4) the sovereign freedom of God. In response, “The New Testament gospel of grace cannot but sweep him off his feet with wonder and joy.”<sup>6</sup>
- **God the Judge.** Packer writes, “There are few things stressed more strongly in the Bible than the reality of God’s work as judge.”<sup>7</sup> God will judge each man’s work with perfect knowledge and perfect justice. Even believers, though justified, will be judged for rewards based on how each has lived in light of his grace.
- **The Wrath of God.** Far from wrath being “unworthy of God,” it is “A right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.”<sup>8</sup> The wrath of God is always perfect righteousness. And God’s wrath will be terrible for those who reject him. But the Christian rejoices that the righteous wrath of God was propitiated at the cross.
- **Goodness and Severity.** These must be contemplated together for either to be rightly understood. Love, grace, and mercy are perfectly compatible with justice and wrath. Knowing God’s character in its fullness is key to understanding the wonder of the gospel.

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5. Ibid., 124.

6. Ibid., 132.

7. Ibid., 125.

8. Ibid., 136.

- **The Jealousy of God.** God’s jealousy is a “praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.”<sup>9</sup> That “supremely precious” thing is both his glory and his people. This is a vital aspect of God’s covenant love. Moreover, his jealousy requires zeal in his people, that we be passionately devoted to his person, cause, and honor, to live to please God above all else.

## *If God Be For Us*

The final section, “If God Be For Us,” highlights five aspects of our relationship with God that flow from his attributes. In “The Heart of the Gospel,” Packer asks “Has the word *propitiation* any place in your Christianity?”<sup>10</sup> and explains why he sees it as the heart of the good news—that without God’s wrath being propitiated, there can be no forgiveness of sin and no restoration or relationship with him. In “Sons of God” Packer speaks to the glory of our adoption into God’s family. Fundamentally, a Christian is “one who has God as his Father.” While justification is the highest blessing of the gospel, sonship is the highest privilege.

In the final three chapters of this section, Packer speaks to three areas of practical daily life. First, in “Thou Our Guide” he encourages us to believe that God wants to communicate his plans and purposes to his children and gives practical advice for receiving divine guidance, while also warning of a feelings-oriented approach to discovering God’s will. Second, in “These Inward Trials” he wisely warns against the expectation that the Christian life should be easy and trouble free. Rather, our Father uses the trials and difficulties of life to mature us as believers. Finally, in “The Adequacy of God” Packer turns to Romans 8 to encourage us that nothing and no one can stand in the way of our Father’s good purpose to save and keep us till the end.

In the foreword to *Knowing God* Packer states his purpose in writing. “The conviction behind the book is that ignorance of God—ignorance both of his ways and of the practice of communion with him—lies at the root of much of

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9. *Ibid.*, 181

10. *Ibid.*, 181.

the church's weakness today."<sup>11</sup> Even after marking the 50th anniversary of *Knowing God*, we thank God for blessing us through Dr. Packer with a knowledge of God's works and ways, his character and care, that have strengthened the people, pastors, and churches of Sovereign Grace in so many ways.

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11. Ibid., 12.

# THANK YOU, MR. BRIDGES

***Jon Payne***

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**J**erry Bridges changed my life. I was thirteen, growing up in a godly, Christian home, and thought of myself as a pretty good kid. Then I began reading his book, *Transforming Grace*.

Mr. Bridges (30 years later, I still can't bring myself to call him Jerry!), used an illustration of permanent bankruptcy to define the nature of our salvation. I saw myself in his description of many Christians who think that they have declared a temporary bankruptcy in coming to Christ. Bridges' declaration was stark, stunning. Coming to Christ meant we declared permanent spiritual bankruptcy—we had nothing to contribute to salvation; we had no hope of paying our debt to God. We needed more than a stay of execution—we needed a deliverance entirely and permanently of grace.

This is good news, he said, if we are willing to receive it. We really are that bad, but God's grace really is that good. I wasn't sure I had ever seen my salvation that way. But I knew he was right. A transformation from functional legalism to loving grace was underway.

## ***Grace and Growth in Godliness***

Mr. Bridges impacted many Sovereign Grace members and churches over the years. As far as I know, he was the author who introduced us to the phrase "preach the gospel to yourself" in his excellent book *The Discipline of Grace*. He was determined to help Christians base their everyday relationship with God on the finished work of Christ and not on the ups and downs of our sanctification efforts. He said that many Christians assume that God loves us more or less based on our latest victories over sin. He was concerned that many lived

with constant, low-grade guilt sapping their efforts toward growth. So, he taught us to remind ourselves of our identity in Christ and his finished work on the cross. He was, passionately, a gospel man.

But for all of the grace and gospel that he preached, he was not a proponent of predictable, easy-believism or cheap grace—far from it! He was zealous for holiness in the Christian’s life.

His books *The Pursuit of Holiness* and *The Practice of Godliness* call for a rigorous self-discipline and growth in godly living, but always motivated by a gratefulness for God’s grace and always confident that God’s favor toward us is not based on our efforts. He never watered down our call to holiness in order to honor grace, and he never minimized our salvation by grace alone in order to compel us to holiness. No one-sided, half-truth Christianity could find refuge in Mr. Bridges. He confronted the legalist and the antinomian—calling both to the testimony of the Word and the reality of biblical living.

### ***Reading Jerry Bridges***

Mr. Bridges’ writing efforts were not limited to grace and holiness. His book *The Joy of Fearing God* is a compelling description of the character of God and speaks directly to a culture defined by a casual presumption in knowing God’s unlimited greatness. No less an author than R. C. Sproul said of that book, “Reading Jerry Bridges is like eavesdropping on an angel enraptured by adoration.”<sup>1</sup>

Bridges also wrote on the importance of the Holy Spirit in his book, *The Bookends of the Christian Life*. He provided an excellent treatment of Christian fellowship in *True Fellowship*; he described the beatitudes in *True Humility*; and he warned against Christian complacency in *Respectable Sins*. His outstanding book, *Trusting God* remains one of the most accessible treatments on the topic of suffering available today.

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1. R. C. Sproul, endorsement for *The Joy of Fearing God* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 1997, 2016).

In all of these works and others, he wrote with a humble simplicity backed by biblical conviction. His was a sure hand to guide many Christians along the path of full Christian discipleship. I continue to recommend him to church members today. His teaching is timeless, necessary, and applicable. We have not moved past the urgency of a true application of his themes. We must never.

### ***A Lifelong Pursuit of God***

Like many Sovereign Grace pastors, I had the privilege of hearing Mr. Bridges teach in our Pastors College, and later enjoyed a visit from him to teach our church. I pray it will be true of us what was true of him: his personal example adorned his teaching.

I remember him saying once, without bragging, that as far as he knew he had not missed a day of personal devotions for 40 years. He had spent his life applying what he taught, and the evidence of his lifelong pursuit of God beamed out in the most ordinary moments.

I remember witnessing him pray out loud for a simple lunch once. I can honestly say it was the most profound sense of God's presence during a prayer for a meal I have ever experienced. Instantly, as he addressed God, I was aware of one irrefutable fact: this is a man who deeply knows his God. Mr. Bridges didn't just write about grace and holiness—he lived it. He was, simply and humbly, God's man—awed by grace, dedicated to godliness—and giving evidence of actually preaching the gospel to himself for decades.

### ***Captured by Christ for Holiness***

These days, gospel centrality is a catch phrase, but for Mr. Bridges it was a life-defining truth. He had declared himself permanently bankrupt and Christ had saved him. He never became used to the gospel or the call to live worthy of it. He had been captured by Christ for holiness and he would spend his days calling others to come along with him on the journey.

Mr. Bridges is with Christ now, listening to the song of angels actually enraptured with adoration, where he gladly and reverentially honors the Savior he poured out words to honor. I thank God for him. I thank God for the gift he gave to our family of churches. And I pray that a new generation of Sovereign Grace members will be reintroduced to him in the days to come.

# THE TOWERING INFLUENCE OF DR. CARSON

*Jeff Purswell*

*Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (Louisville, KY)*

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It was the Spring of 1994 when my wife Julie and I landed early in the morning at Chicago's O'Hare airport, with little time to spare to make our first appointment—with whom, we didn't know—at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Our short exploratory trip to decide whether we would sell our home, quit our jobs, and move to Chicago for seminary was off to a frantic start. We grabbed our bags, rented a car, and rushed north on the Tri-State Tollway, arriving at the admissions office just after 8:30am.

Our kind host greeted us warmly and then said, somewhat abruptly, “We must run.” And run we did, winding through narrow hallways until we arrived and sat down, breathless, in a tiny, cramped office, across the desk from our first faculty appointment. Dr. D. A. Carson looked up from his book as if he wasn't expecting us. The bemused look on his face seemed to inquire, “So, who are you? And why are you here?” I'll never forget the framed needlepoint on the wall behind him, a picture of Aslan the Lion with the caption, “He is not a tame lion.” Our awkward introduction caused me to wonder to whom the phrase referred—the lion in the picture, or the man behind the desk?

Little did I know where this rather intimidating initiation would lead. Over the next three years, Dr. Carson (I've never relented to his insistence I call him Don) would become a towering influence in my life which persists to this day—his teaching shaping me, his thinking challenging me, his encouragement strengthening me, and his example inspiring me. It's therefore been a personal delight (as well as a personal mission) to see Dr. Carson's influence, which spans the English-speaking world and beyond, shape our family of churches so profoundly.

For most of us, this influence has come largely through his writing. It is difficult to determine just how many books Carson has written or edited. The figure is somewhere around 120, covering an astonishing range of genres (from commentaries and academic works to devotionals and poems) and topics (postmodernism, Second Temple Judaism, Greek grammar, linguistics, exegesis, biblical theology, Bible translation, worship).

There are, however, a handful of books that have not only affected our pastors individually, but which have shaped the broader culture of Sovereign Grace theologically and pastorally. At the risk of omitting a number of worthy titles, this brief article will focus on a few that, in God's hands, have helped make our churches what they are.

### ***The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians***

“... the cross stands as the test and the standard of all vital Christian ministry.”<sup>1</sup> Already in the preface, Carson unleashes a shock wave that has reverberated throughout Sovereign Grace for over 30 years. From our earliest days, the gospel has been central to the life of our churches and the ministry of our pastors. But there is perhaps no single book that has grounded and reinforced that emphasis, giving it definition and shape and urgency, like *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (TCCM).

Taking his cue from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Carson demonstrates how the cross of Christ functions in the New Testament, not only as the means by which God in Christ achieved our redemption, but as a reality that governs all of life, not least the life and ministry of a pastor. Here are but a few of the insights this book has helped lodge in the churches of Sovereign Grace.

#### **The life-shaping effects of the cross**

Carson's piercing exposition first demonstrates the logic of the cross in humbling human pride and pretensions. The gospel was specifically “designed”

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1. D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993, 2004), 9.

by God to undermine human claims to wisdom or merit, to expose the utter bankruptcy of our efforts to know God.<sup>2</sup> He chose to save not the wise or powerful or noble, but the foolish, the weak, and the despised—not those who achieve, but those who believe—who as a result glory only in him and his all-sufficient grace. In short, Carson’s book not only helps us understand the gospel as a saving message, but also to perceive its soul-shaping implications. As a result, *TCCM* has helped make the gospel a consistently applied reality in our lives.

### **The centrality of the cross in our preaching and affections**

In *TCCM*, Carson powerfully expounds Paul’s resolve to “know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2):

. . . what [Paul] means is that all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. Paul is gospel-centered; he is cross-centered.<sup>3</sup>

Few quotes better capture how SGC pastors have been led over the years. Besides living lives pleasing to the Lord, SG pastors have no greater priority or joy than allowing the gospel’s truth, theological implications, and life entailments to frame and shape everything we teach and proclaim.

### **The centrality of the cross in our pastoral leadership**

Paul’s resolve to keep the gospel central not only shaped his message, but his style of leadership:

The message of the cross smashes the great idolatries of the ecclesiastical world: our endless self-promotion, our love of mere professionalism, our addiction to well-defined methods . . . taken together [such tendencies] weave a pattern of ministry that is so far removed from the message of the cross, the demonstrable outreach of the cross, and this New Testament

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2. *Ibid.*, 18.

3. *Ibid.*, 38.

description of the preacher of the cross . . .<sup>4</sup>

### **The perennial imperative to guard the gospel**

It is insufficient to merely claim the label “gospel centered,” to include the gospel in one’s confession or as a slogan on one’s website. As Paul reminded Timothy (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14), the gospel must be continually guarded, as it is under constant attack. Carson’s haunting wisdom has often been quoted by SGC leaders and pastors: “. . . I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry.”<sup>5</sup>

In short, the people and pastors of Sovereign Grace churches are more gospel-centered, and cross-centered, because of *TCCM*.

### ***How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil***

“The truth of the matter is that all we have to do is live long enough, and we will suffer.”<sup>6</sup> If there is a single quote I’ve heard most frequently among SGC pastors, surely this is it. And no book has been more strategic in equipping SGC pastors to prepare their people for suffering than *How Long, O Lord? (HLOL)*.

In the book’s preface, Carson tamps down the reader’s expectations, noting all the things “this little book” is not intended to be or do. It is neither an apologetic for the skeptic nor a book written for those currently in the throes of grief. Rather, *HLOL* is primarily “a book of preventive medicine.”<sup>7</sup> Carson wisely notes that much of a believer’s grief and confusion in the face of tragedy derives from false expectations, based in turn on wrong views of God, the nature of his rule, his purposes for our lives, and the nature of life in a fallen

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4. Ibid., 40.

5. Ibid., 26.

6. D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990, 2nd ed., 2006), 16.

7. Ibid., 9.

world. To correct such wrong views, Carson sets out to “establish patterns and habits of thought that are so strong that when the hardest questions batter the soul there is less wavering and more faith, joy, and hope.”<sup>8</sup>

In relatively brief compass, *HLOL* covers a remarkable range of topics which are at once universal and personal: suffering; evil; sin; pain; death; hell; hope; God’s sovereignty; and human responsibility. One of the great virtues of the book is Carson’s ability to treat such topics with the precision of a scholar, the clarity of a teacher, and the wisdom of a pastor. Far from a survey of cold abstractions, *HLOL* lucidly and compassionately addresses us like a trusted fellow pilgrim, pointing us again and again to the text of Scripture where both clarity and hope can be found.

Perhaps most importantly, Carson points us beyond the mysteries of suffering to reflect upon that place of our greatest certainty: the love and justice of God revealed at the cross. When confronted with pain, Christians too often seek refuge in “answers” or “reasons,” as if philosophical constructs alone can alleviate our grief. But in the cross, we have the greatest exposition of what God is like and why he can be trusted in our pain. “In the darkest night of the soul, Christians have something to hang onto that Job never knew. We know Christ crucified. Christians have learned that when there seems to be no other evidence of God’s love, they cannot escape the cross.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14***

Earlier in our history, Sovereign Grace’s combination of Reformed soteriology (God is sovereign over all things, including our salvation) and continuationist pneumatology (the gifts of the Holy Spirit, including miraculous ones, have not ceased) made us something of an oddity in the evangelical world. Thankfully this is no longer the case, owing to a great extent to solid, dispassionate

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8. *Ibid.*, 10.

9. *Ibid.*, 191.

exegetical work on the part of NT specialists. D. A. Carson's *Showing the Spirit (STS)* is a prime example of such work.<sup>10</sup>

From a Sovereign Grace perspective, however, *STS* has provided much more than exegetical ballast for our continuationist convictions. Carson's careful exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14 has helped us hold those convictions with greater discernment and a more biblical proportionality. We are no less appreciative of the gifts, but we are far more aware of all that the Spirit does in our lives, supreme of which is making Christ and his saving work more glorious in our eyes and more cherished in our affections.

As a detailed exposition, the reader will find clear explanations and insights on a number of important and contentious issues:

- The Christological focus of the Spirit's work (pp. 26–27)
- The meaning of "baptism in the Holy Spirit" (pp. 43–47)
- New Testament vs. Old Testament prophecy (pp. 91–100)
- The meaning of "greater gifts" (pp. 56–57)
- When do spiritual gifts "pass away"?—1 Corinthians 13:8–10 (pp. 66–72)
- How does Acts fit in with 1 Corinthians 12–14? (pp. 138ff.)
- Reflections on "second blessing theology" (pp. 158ff.), normative revelation (pp. 160ff.), the charismatic movement (pp. 170ff.)

I think it would encourage Dr. Carson to know that, despite the differences between his tradition and ours, *STS* has both seasoned and strengthened the pneumatology of Sovereign Grace, making us wiser, more discerning, and even more passionate for the Spirit's Christ-exalting work in our midst.

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10. D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987).

## ***A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers***<sup>11</sup>

I mentioned earlier my first encounter with D. A. Carson. After our somewhat awkward introduction, Dr. Carson patiently answered the many questions scribbled on my legal pad, giving me more than enough to reflect upon. As we stood up to leave, he asked if he might pray for my wife and me. We gratefully accepted but we were not prepared for what happened next.

Almost immediately, we were aware of God's presence—a profound sense of both his majesty and his nearness. Phrase after rich phrase resonated with biblical language and child-like trust. Our eyes filled with tears even as our hearts filled with faith, and we arose from this very first meeting with our decision made, convinced we were to move to Chicago.

I had that meeting in mind when I first read Carson's book *A Call to Spiritual Reformation (CSR)*. What I read reflected what I had heard in that office, and it would soon begin shaping my own prayer life.

The goal of *CSR* is simple. Carson examines eight prayers of the apostle Paul with the goal of aligning our prayer habits with his.<sup>12</sup> What are Paul's requests? His arguments in prayer? His priorities for those he prays for? His beliefs and assumptions that inform his prayers? If these are inspired prayers, then surely they're intended to inform and inspire our own prayers. Along the way, Carson intersperses his expositions with chapters offering wise and practical advice on prayer in general (ch. 1), praying for others (ch. 4), excuses for not praying (ch. 7), and praying in light of God's sovereignty (ch. 9).

Carson launches the introduction to the book with this provocative question: "What is the most urgent need in the church of the Western world today?" His answer: "The one thing we most urgently need in Western Christendom

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11. This book has been republished as *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

12. D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 17–18.

is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.”<sup>13</sup> Anyone who applies the rich contents of this book to his own prayer life cannot fail to do so.

### ***Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson***

The title of this book has provided the pastors of Sovereign Grace a designation we love to embrace: “ordinary pastor.” This is not a pose or an expression of false humility, but rather an honest assessment of our own weaknesses and limitations. That’s one of the reasons this little book, unique among Carson’s writings, has been so precious to us.

As Carson admits in the preface: “Most of us—let us be frank—are ordinary pastors. Dad was one of them. This little book is a modest attempt to let the voice and ministry of one ordinary pastor be heard, for such servants have much to teach us.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed they do.

Compared to so much of the pastoral literature that rolls off evangelical presses, often by pastors with impressive public personas (many of whom are young), these reflections on the life and ministry of Dr. Carson’s father, Tom, are starkly different. Humanly speaking, there are no tales of public triumphs and ministry plaudits, no formulae for ministry “success,” nothing to generate clicks on social media. Carson instead offers us something far more valuable and enduring: a portrait of faithfulness. Faithfulness amidst hardship and opposition. Faithfulness when ministry seems barren. Faithfulness when discouragement verges on despair.

Much of the inspiration here comes both from what underlay that faithfulness and concrete forms it took: a deep reverence for God and his Word; a rest in God’s providence; devotion to prayer; a tender conscience; a compassion toward the needy; a love for his family; a hard-won contentment; a hunger for reading; a relentless work ethic. While Dr. Carson does not romanticize

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13. Ibid., 12.

14. D. A. Carson, *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor: The Life and Reflections of Tom Carson* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 9.

or embellish these memoirs, the profile he draws of his father resembles in so many ways what the New Testament defines as pastoral success. And it is an example that has made a deep impression on Sovereign Grace pastors.

### ***A Recurring Theme***

Space doesn't permit a full treatment of D. A. Carson's influence on our family of churches. Although this brief survey spotlights some high points, Carson's contributions to us are not piecemeal—an insight here, a helpful quote there. Nor is our indebtedness due to his being vastly well-read, or his tremendous gift of synthesis, or his blend of theological precision and pastoral insight. Look across Carson's body of work and one theme appears again and again. And not just repetitively, but in a way that binds his labors together—the DNA that infuses all its parts. And that is the gospel.

Although I suspect he might be uncomfortable with this, I could easily turn towards him a statement he made about the apostle Paul. It seems to me that:

... all he does and teaches is tied to the cross. He cannot long talk about Christian joy, or Christian ethics, or Christian fellowship, or the Christian doctrine of God, or anything else, without finally tying it to the cross. [Dr. Carson] is gospel-centered. He is cross-centered.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, we attribute all of this to the grace of God, who deserves all glory for it. And if I may, on behalf of Sovereign Grace, I express my thanks to Dr. Carson.

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15. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 38.



# LINGERING AT CALVARY

*THE CROSS OF CHRIST* by JOHN STOTT

## ***Ben Kreps***

*Lead Pastor, Living Hope Church (Middletown, PA)*

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In 2007, my wife Kate and I were attending the church where we met and married. I was a fairly recent convert, but over time, as I began reading theologically rich books and listening to expositional preaching online, I began to struggle with the doctrine and preaching at our church. I observed a conspicuous absence of any mention of Christ and him crucified during the service.

One Saturday evening, I suggested to Kate that we visit the church I had attended with my family in my childhood and early teen years. That church was Living Hope Church (LHC) where I currently serve as the lead pastor.

We gathered with the saints at LHC the following morning and received clarity as we experienced the service. What I was longing for was a church whose heartbeat was to make much of the risen Christ of the cross. In the transition to LHC and Sovereign Grace Churches, we discovered a beautiful gospel-centeredness. I also learned that one of the most influential books on our family of churches was *The Cross of Christ* by John Stott. Many people we met had it on their bookshelves.

*The Cross of Christ* was a critical resource used by the founding generation of pastors in SGC to help lead us into being gospel-centered in our life and practice as local churches. This book also made a significant contribution in guarding our family of churches from the theology that was being propagated and popularized in the early 2000s by progressive theologians who claimed the substitutionary nature of the crucifixion amounted to “a form of cosmic child abuse.”

## ***The Aim of This Book***

In his original preface, Stott shares his burden in writing this book. He was concerned about the loss of the centrality of the cross in evangelical circles and a growing misunderstanding of the nature of the atonement. He succinctly provides his aim, which is to show that “the biblical doctrine of atonement is substitutionary from beginning to end.”<sup>1</sup>

He begins the book by interacting with how the church has thought about the cross historically and how Jesus, along with the apostolic authors of Scripture, viewed the significance of Calvary. He concludes that “Christian integrity consists . . . mostly in personal loyalty to Jesus, in whose mind the saving cross was central.”<sup>2</sup> At the cross, Christians find “their pride broken, their guilt expunged, their love kindled, their hope restored and their character transformed.”<sup>3</sup> It is no wonder then, that the apostle Paul describes the gospel as that which is “of first importance” (1 Cor. 15:3).

In the chapter “Why Did Christ Die?” Mr. Stott eloquently and persuasively writes:

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” the old negro spiritual asks. And we must answer, “Yes we were there.” Not as spectators only, but as participants, guilty participants, plotting, scheming, betraying, bargaining and handing him over to be crucified. We may try to wash our hands of responsibility like Pilate. But our attempt will be as futile as his. For there is blood on our hands. Before we can begin to see the cross as something done *for* us (leading us to faith and worship), we have to see it as something done *by* us (leading us to repentance). Indeed, “only the man who is prepared to own his share in the guilt of the cross,” wrote Canon Peter Green, “may claim his share in its grace.”<sup>4</sup>

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1. John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 16.

2. *Ibid.*, 48.

3. *Ibid.*, 49.

4. *Ibid.*, 63.

Stott understood that we must never separate the reality that Christ was crucified by sinful men and that it was for the sake of love that he willingly laid his life down for sinners. He writes, “As we face the cross . . . we can say to ourselves both, “*I* did it, my sins sent him there,” and “*He* did it, his love took him there.”<sup>5</sup>

## *In My Place*

In chapter after chapter, Stott surveys the landscape of Scripture as he paints a biblical theology of substitution and sacrifice, slowly and beautifully unfolding the multifaceted glories and achievements of the cross. At the cross, God revealed his glory, love, and justice. It was also his cosmic victory over evil. Still, Stott insists that we understand the foundation of the accomplishments of Calvary is what theologians refer to as penal-substitutionary atonement.

This is a short-hand way to say that in Christ’s death, he was punished (penal) for our sins, in our place, as our sinless substitute. In his death, he satisfied the justice and wrath of God, justifying us in crediting the perfect righteousness of Christ as ours, redeeming us from our sins, reconciling us to God, and adopting us as children of God—all received with the empty hands of faith, purely on the grounds of grace.

What good news! Bringing out the significance of Romans 3:25, Stott writes, “How then could God express simultaneously his holiness in judgment and his love in pardon? Only by providing a divine substitute for the sinner so the substitute would receive the judgment and the sinner the pardon.”<sup>6</sup>

The final chapters encourage us to live under the cross, as Stott writes, “the very purpose of his self-giving on the cross was not just to save isolated individuals . . . but to create a new community whose members would belong to him, love one another and eagerly serve the world.”<sup>7</sup> He shows how the right understanding of the cross informs our church life as we move toward one

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5. *Ibid.*, 64.

6. *Ibid.*, 134.

7. *Ibid.*, 249.

another in sacrificial love and service.

The sacrifice of Christ is the model and motivation for denying ourselves and laying down our lives for him, but also shows us the worth that we have because of his love. “Standing before the cross we see simultaneously our worth and our unworthiness, since we perceive both the greatness of his love in dying, and the greatness of our sin in causing him to die.”<sup>8</sup> Because of Calvary, we serve one another, love our enemies, and even endure suffering with patience, godly maturity, and great hope.

Over the last couple of decades, *The Cross of Christ* has been a vital resource that has shaped our lives and church culture in Sovereign Grace. It can also influence and shape us as we move forward into the future as a family of churches in at least these two ways:

## **1. Understanding The Gospel**

In C. J. Mahaney’s classic book *Living the Cross Centered Life*, he quotes David Prior who writes, “We never move on from the cross, only to a more profound understanding of the cross.”<sup>9</sup> I have often thought that the gospel is the only message that never grows old no matter how many times we hear it. Let us never grow complacent or fail to take up the great privilege we have to study and apply the substitutionary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Books like Stott’s serve to take us into a deeper, more profound understanding of the cross.

## **2. Guarding Our Gospel-Centeredness**

The theology of this book helps to ensure what we mean concerning our shared value of “Gospel-Centered Doctrine and Preaching.”<sup>10</sup> It clarifies what we mean

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8. Ibid., p. 278.

9. David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 5, as quoted in C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2006), 17.

10. “We believe that the gospel—the good news of God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ—is the pinnacle of his redemptive acts, the center of the Bible’s story, and the essential message for our faith, life and witness. We are committed to the expository preaching of the gospel, singing the gospel, praying the gospel, and building our churches upon the gospel. Our ultimate hope in all that we do is not our plans

by the gospel. “One of the greatest arts or gifts in gospel-preaching is to turn peoples ears into eyes, and to make them see what we are talking about.”<sup>11</sup> What we want them to see each Sunday is the risen Christ of the Cross. This kind of doctrine and preaching equips us to persevere in gospel-centeredness not merely as jargon, but meaningfully as Christ and him crucified is preached each Sunday in all the churches of Sovereign Grace, and lived out in our lives, manifesting in humility, joy, gratitude, encouragement, generosity, servanthood, and godliness.<sup>12</sup> God intends that his church adorn the proclamation of the gospel with a culture of grace that grows out of the gospel.

### ***Cross Centered Days***

It has been said that if we assume the gospel in this generation, we will lose it in the next. We must never assume that we possess such sufficient knowledge of the gospel that we can move on to other topics. “Do you want to live a cross centered life? A cross centered life is made up of *cross centered days*.”<sup>13</sup>

Books like *The Cross of Christ* equip us to live cross centered days as we look forward with great anticipation to when we will see the crucified and risen Christ on the day of his return. We will be made like him when we see him in his glorified body (1 John 3:2), but with one important difference: we will see the wounds of his cross in his hands and his feet and his side. This will be an everlasting memorial and reminder as we dwell with him in eternal glory that the only reason we are there is that he willingly substituted himself on the cross, bearing the righteous wrath of God for undeserving sinners like you and me.

Allow Stott’s book to build your faith, deepen your affection for Christ, and prepare you for That Day.

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and labors, but the perfect life, substitutionary death, victorious resurrection, and glorious ascension of Jesus Christ.” See our Shared Values in SGC: [www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shared-values](http://www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shared-values)

11. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 334.

12. See our Shaping Virtues in SGC: [www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shaping-virtues](http://www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shaping-virtues)

13. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life*, 132.



# WHY I THANK GOD FOR JOHN PIPER

**Rick Gamache**

Senior Pastor, Cornerstone Community Church (Burnsville, MN)

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*“The extent of his providence is total. Nothing is independent of it. Nothing happens but by ‘the counsel of his will’—the infinite wisdom of his plan.”*

~John Piper, Providence

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I wholeheartedly believe that I overslept that Sunday in the winter of 1989 according to the infinite wisdom of God’s sovereign plan. And I wholeheartedly believe that I was responsible for not setting my alarm.

I was a student at North Central Bible College in Minneapolis. But the church I attended was in St. Paul. I didn’t have a car. And I missed my ride. But I had a memory. A few weeks earlier, a church history professor that I had come to admire held up a copy of a book entitled *Desiring God* by some guy named John Piper. He encouraged the entire class to attend Bethlehem Baptist Church sometime before we graduated because “to hear Piper preach is probably what it was like to hear John Calvin preach.” Bethlehem was two blocks away from my bed. And so I got up, got ready, and wandered those blocks alone not knowing when service started.

I made it in time. There is no human explanation for this introverted hater of new situations making his way to the balcony and taking a seat next to a complete stranger just as the pipe organ blared. We opened our hymnals, sang with gusto, and the choir performed the offertory. Then what I thought was an unkempt kid in an ill-fitting suit got up behind the pulpit. I don’t remember the sermon text. I can’t quote a word from the message, but I’ll never forget the feeling I had as God’s truth was powerfully proclaimed. It was the weight of God’s glory. And I couldn’t move.

Little did I know then that oversleeping would change the course of my life.

I spent the next eleven years of my life at Bethlehem. I was married there. I completed my seminary internship there. And in 1996, I was hired by the fledgling resource ministry of the church, *Desiring God*. It was while I was there that I received a call from Nora Earles. She was, without exaggeration, the happiest, loveliest person I had ever talked to on the phone. I was so impressed that I gathered the folks working with me to tell them about her and about this guy on whose behalf she was calling: C. J. Mahaney. That phone call led to John's and C. J.'s first conversation. They quickly became friends.

C. J. brought his pastoral team to Bethlehem to learn more about the ministry in Minneapolis. Our interaction left an impression on me. In 1999, C. J. was a speaker at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. He began his sermon by honoring the work of God through the man, John Piper. It was beautiful. As I sat on the balcony steps listening, I cried. I remember thinking, "It's about time someone said it."

In March of 2000, I was asked to help revitalize a struggling church with a connection to Bethlehem. They hired me. In 2001, the elder team began discussing what living life together should look like. I remembered that there was a book entitled *Why Small Groups?* on my shelf, and it was edited by C. J. I also discovered that Sovereign Grace (PDI Ministries at the time) hosted a conference for small group leaders. Jon Bloom, Mark Alderton, and I attended the conference. Once again, the course of my life changed. We returned knowing that we had found a denominational home. Mark Alderton went to the Pastors College in 2002. Our church was officially adopted into the SGC family in 2003. To this day, I count the decision to ask to be adopted by Sovereign Grace as the best decision the elders from this church have ever made. Being a Sovereign Grace church is one of my favorite things about Cornerstone Community Church.

When I attended that small group leaders conference, I had no idea the degree to which John Piper's writings were impacting Sovereign Grace. I didn't realize how recently the theological convictions had shifted in an essentially Reformed direction. Ignorant as I was, I did hear the impact on the teaching. And I experienced it among the people.

## ***Christian Hedonism***

I was already a dyed-in-the-wool “Christian Hedonist.” John Piper is right, sentences do change lives—“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him”<sup>1</sup> certainly changed mine. For eleven years, John Piper, in his preaching and writing, taught me that God wants us to be happy and that the deepest, most profound, and only enduring happiness is found in him. To be happy in him is to experience true joy and that is the chief way we honor and glorify (worship!) God.

But it was at the small group leaders conference that I encountered the most joyful people I’d ever met. I couldn’t believe that there were so many people like Nora Earles in one place. I knew at once that the folks speaking at and attending the conference were true “Christian Hedonists.” And I realized that the joy and satisfaction in God came from a deeper knowledge and application of the glorious gospel than I had ever known.

When C. J. preached his sermons on “The Cross Centered Life,” I had a fresh encounter with the glory of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It felt like being converted all over again. True joy is joy in Jesus. True joy always flows from the gospel. That’s why these people were so happy. That’s why the people at that conference were the most genuinely joyful people I had ever encountered. And the joy in Jesus was contagious.

## ***The Feast of Worship***

I had learned from John Piper that worship is the feast of “Christian Hedonism.” I knew that worship was to be in spirit and in truth. I understood the biblical truth about who God is and what he’s done for us in Christ is the fuel of worship. I had an intellectual grasp on the fact that God’s truth stoked a fire in the heart and that the resulting affections for God were the heat that honored him.

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1. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986).

I experienced the most authentic worship I had ever experienced at that conference. The songs we sang were bursting with Bible. The doctrine dropped into my heart and I erupted in appropriate praise to the only One worthy of my worship. I reveled in the fact that I had nothing to give God and lifted my cup of salvation and said, “Fill it, please, Lord, to overflowing.” And he did.

### ***Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts***

I was saved into an Assembly of God church for which I will always be grateful to God. North Central University is an Assembly of God school. I was raised Catholic, so I didn’t know a Pentecostal from a Presbyterian when I arrived there in the late 1980s. I did know that what I was being taught and what I was seeing among the faculty and student body regarding the spiritual gifts wasn’t what I read in my Bible. I was increasingly uncomfortable with the foolish abuses of the gifts. So by the time I started attending Bethlehem, I was ready to be done with all things Charismatic. I transferred to Bethel University and was content to ignore the full implications of the spiritual gifts passages.

Then, at the beginning of 1990, John Piper began a sermon series called “Compassion, Power, and the Kingdom of God.” Later that year he began a sermon series on the Book of Acts. He preached and wrote about continuationism regularly in those days. The Lord wouldn’t allow me to sacrifice my exegetical integrity. John Piper kept pressing my nose down in my Bible to show me God’s good intention for all of the spiritual gifts meant to operate in the church until the Perfect comes.

But at the conference, I witnessed the Spirit-empowered gifts used in an orderly way that really was for the common good. I heard prophetic words (tested by pastors before being delivered) that built up, encouraged, and consoled. My heart cried out, “God is really among you.” The Holy Spirit is God’s empowering presence. I already knew that. But there I experienced it. And I have continued to experience it.

## ***Explosive Biblical Fellowship***

In his sermon series on the book of Acts, John Piper taught about “explosive biblical fellowship”—the kind of life together that shakes houses. He pointed out the rhythm of life in the early church: large gatherings in the temple, small gatherings in homes. He taught and wrote that the agenda of small groups is to provide a context to speak God’s promises to one another. It’s not a place to learn more biblical stuff, but a place to apply and live out the biblical stuff we know—a place to minister to one another in the power of the Holy Spirit. I attended and eventually led my first small group at Bethlehem.

At the small group leaders conference, the theological foundation of life together was reinforced. I heard clearly that biblical fellowship is intended to encourage and correct. Sanctification was connected to living life together in the local church in a way I’d never considered. I heard about care and living out “the one anothers” of Scripture. And I had conversations with people who assured me that their Christian life was utterly transformed by tapping into fellowship with other believers as a means of grace.

## ***When the Elect Cry***

And that was just one conference. I could go on to other conferences. I know that John Piper’s teaching on God’s absolute sovereignty over all things, including the salvation of sinners, was part of Sovereign Grace’s theological revolution in the mid-1990s. It was also part of mine. Chapter 5 in *The Pleasures of God* (still my favorite of John’s books that I’ve read; I can’t keep up) is “God’s Pleasure in Election.” God used the content of that chapter to incite my own theological Copernican Revolution. In an instant, my entire life made sense. The logic and biblical continuity of the doctrine of election was immediately intellectually appealing to me.

Space doesn’t allow me to continue with the many ways John Piper’s writing shaped and impacted us. With all of the grace and fruit, the only fitting end to a reflection like this is prayer:

Thank you, Lord, for the ministry of John Piper. Thank you for using him as a guardian of orthodoxy in the wider church. Thank you for his influence on my life. And I praise you for the way your grace has flowed through him to our family of churches. I bless your name for a band of believers and brother-pastors who live life with an “impassioned orthodoxy.” Please grant the grace to go on being orthodox and on fire. May the theology in our heads always make the drop to our hearts in order to ignite authentic doxology. And, by your Spirit, cause us to live it out together in a praxeology that gets us everlasting, ever-increasing joy and gives you the eternal honor and glory due your name. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

# OVERCOMING SIN AND TEMPTATION by JOHN OWEN

**Bill Patton**

*Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)*

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**R**eaching across more than three centuries, John Owen showed me my heart as no one had ever done before.” So said the English-born Canadian theologian, pastor, and writer, J. I. Packer. Packer went on to say, “I owe more, I think, to John Owen than to any other theologian, ancient or modern, and I am sure I owe more to his little book on mortification than to anything else he wrote.”<sup>1</sup>

## ***Pointing to the Great Puritan***

Many pastors in Sovereign Grace discovered the writings of John Owen after hearing C. J. Mahaney preach a paradigm shifting sermon on the topic of “Indwelling Sin.” In that sermon, C. J. urged us to read Volume VI of *The Works of John Owen*.<sup>2</sup> But C. J. was not alone in urging people to absorb Owen’s insights.

John Piper pointed us to the great Puritan as well: “We cannot properly estimate the blessing of soaking our minds in the Bible-saturated thinking of the likes of John Owen. What he was able to see in the Bible and preserve for us in writing is simply magnificent. It is so sad—a travesty, I want to say—how many Christian

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1. J. I. Packer, *Puritan Portraits: J. I. Packer on Selected Classic Pastors and Pastoral Classics* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus Publishing, 2012), 192.

2. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VI (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1967).

leaders of our day do not strive to penetrate the wisdom of John Owen.”<sup>3</sup>

When encouraging people to read Owen, Sinclair Ferguson observed that many readers of *The Mortification of Sin* feel it penetrates more deeply into their hearts than anything they have ever read outside of the pages of the Bible.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Enemy Within***

By reading Owen, our understanding of spiritual warfare shifted and our understanding of sanctification deepened. Our history as a family of churches traces back to the charismatic movement of the late 1970s and the 1980s. As a result, we understood that as Christians, we battle against the devil whose lies, wiles, and fiery darts must be resisted (James 4:7).

We also understood that we must battle cultural ways of thinking which entice us to rejoin the world’s ongoing rebellion against God (Eph. 2:2). What Owen showed us was that the Christian’s warfare isn’t only against those forces outside of us—it’s also against an enemy inside of us. In fact, the world’s influence and Satan’s devices are only effective against us to the extent that they successfully engage our own, internal, sinful desires (James 1:14). Consequently, and perhaps most fundamentally, we must fight the inherent sinfulness remaining in the shadowy darkness of our own human hearts.<sup>5</sup>

Cultivating a biblical worldview, experiencing the Spirit’s power, and participating in accountability structures all help to sanctify us—but they are insufficient. What Owen showed us is that the Holy Spirit will not fight the battle of sanctification *for* us, but rather *with* us. Progress in personal sanctification is not like the walls of Jericho miraculously falling in a display of divine power as we ask the Lord to deliver us from evil. It’s much more like the ongoing fight against the stubborn Canaanites, who, after a general conquest of the

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3. John Piper, foreword to *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* by John Owen (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

4. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin* (Carlise, PA: Banner of Truth, 2022).

5. Kim Riddlebarger, *Power Religion: The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church?* Edited by Michael Horton (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishing, 1992), 278.

land, dwelt in it still (Josh. 17:12).<sup>6</sup> Godliness grows as we mortify (or put to death) the power of sin within our own hearts—daily.

## ***The Mortification of Sin***

*The Mortification of Sin*<sup>7</sup> opens with Romans 8:13, which says (in the King James Version), “If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body ye shall live.” Owen’s thesis statement based on that verse in context is this:

That the choicest believers who are assuredly free from the condemning power of sin ought yet make it their business all their days to mortify the indwelling power of sin.<sup>8</sup>

Each clause is significant. Even the best Christians—who enjoy freedom from the power of sin to condemn them—should nevertheless work every day of their lives to put to death sin’s power in their hearts. Freed from sin’s *condemning* power, we must fight sin’s *remaining* power. That’s because remaining sin opposes the glory of God, it darkens the soul’s light, it weakens the vigor of our spiritual lives, it poisons all our love, and it produces instability and contradictions.

Owen personifies sin in our hearts in the same way Paul does. Paul taught that sin seizes every opportunity (Rom. 7:8, 11); it produces every kind of covetous desire (Rom. 7:8); and it constantly deceives us (Rom. 7:11). Sin is living in us (Rom. 7:17); it is at work in all our faculties (Rom. 7:23); it is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7); and it is always waging war within (Rom. 7:23). Consequently, Owen says:

If, then, sin will be always acting, if we not be always mortifying, we are lost creatures. He that stands still and suffers his enemies to double blows upon him without resistance, will undoubtedly be conquered . . . There is not a day but sin foils or is foiled, prevails or is prevailed on; and it will

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6. Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VI, 343.

7. The first of four treatises in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VI.

8. Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VI, 9.

be so whilst we live in the world.<sup>9</sup>

Indwelling sin, he explains, always exploits our natural weaknesses. All of us, by virtue of our makeup, may be more strongly inclined or predisposed to certain sins. Owen explains:

There are advantages for temptations lying oftentimes in men's *natural tempers and constitutions* . . . [They] lie at the very door of their natures and they can scarce step out, but they are in the snare of one or the other of them.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to the axiom of this present age, our natural propensity to certain sins does not minimize our guilt on account of them.

Some, with an open profaneness, will ascribe gross enormities to their temper and disposition . . . [yet] David reckons his being shapen in iniquity and his conception in sin as an aggravation of his following sin, not a lessening or the extenuation of it. That thou art peculiarly inclined unto any sinful distemper is but a peculiar breaking out of original lust in thy nature, which should peculiarly abase and humble thee.<sup>11</sup>

When we begin to see the power and pervasive nature of sin in our fallen nature, we realize that the battle against sin will be lifelong. And we find ourselves repenting not only for the many sins we commit, but for the dreadful sinners we are.

### ***The Disordered Heart***

Indwelling sin, Owen says, seeks to gain ground first in our emotions:

God created them all in a perfect harmony and union. The mind and the reason were in perfect subjection and subordination to God and his

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9. *Ibid.*, 11.

10. Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. VI, 131-132.

11. *Ibid.*, 60.

will; the will answered, in its choice of good, the discovery made of it by the mind; the affections [emotions] constantly and evenly followed the understanding and will. But that harmony has been disturbed by sin.

Now, the faculties move cross and contrary to one another. The will chooses not the good which the mind discovers; the affections delight not in that which the will chooses; but all jar and interfere, cross and rebel against each other. This, I say, makes the heart deceitful above all things; it agrees not at all in itself.<sup>12</sup>

In a rightly ordered heart, the mind leads, the will then chooses the good which the mind discovers, and the emotions follow behind, delighting in what the mind discovers and the will chooses. Indwelling sin inverts that order. It entices the emotions with the prospect of sinful delights. The mind then works to justify what the emotions long for. Then, the will chooses the evil. In the disordered heart, emotions gain the ascendancy rightfully belonging to the mind.

### ***Strategies for the Fight***

Owen doesn't merely describe how sin works inside us. He offers biblical strategies for the fight. He urges Christians to diligent watchfulness and prayer. Not knowing the strength of sin in his heart, Peter pledged unwavering faithfulness to Christ. Jesus urged him, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). But Peter failed to do so. Hours later, he denied the Lord he loved.

So great an advantage is given sin by thy temper and disposition that without extraordinary watchfulness, care and diligence it will assuredly prevail against thy soul.<sup>13</sup>

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12. Ibid., 175.

13. Ibid., 6.

Against adversaries that deal with deceit and treachery nothing will give security but perpetual watchfulness. It is impossible we should in this case be too . . . watchful. The heart hath a thousand wiles and deceits; and if we are in the least off from our watch, we may be sure to be surprised.<sup>14</sup>

This will make the soul be always committing itself to the care of God, resting itself on him.<sup>15</sup>

Owen further urges us to know ourselves.

Whatever else [many professing Christians] know, they know not themselves . . . Indeed few labor to grow wise in this matter, few study themselves as they ought, are acquainted with the evils of their own hearts as they ought . . . This then is our wisdom, to repair this omission and to get to know ourselves and to know in particular what damage sin is seeking to do in our spiritual and moral system.<sup>16</sup>

He who . . . is not exactly skilled in the knowledge of himself, will never be disentangled . . . all his days.<sup>17</sup>

An introspective study of the evils of our hearts, can turn dark and morbid—if we lose sight of the gospel in the process. At the outset, Owen made it clear that mortification is the duty of Christians who are “assuredly free from the condemning power of sin.” My pastor, Jared Mellinger, says it well:

The sunlight of the gospel of grace provides the necessary atmosphere for healthy self-examination. The gospel brings proportion to our examination. When introspection makes us self-absorbed instead of Christ-absorbed, we undermine our faith. Only when we are secure in the love of God for us in Christ are we empowered for self-examination that is

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14. *Ibid.*, 175.

15. *Ibid.*, 125.

16. *Ibid.*, 168.

17. *Ibid.*, 132.

humble, confident, and fruitful.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, Owen urges Christians to mortify the first uprisings of sin in their hearts.

Rise mightily against the first actings of thy distemper, its first conceptions. Suffer it not to get the least ground . . . As sin gets ground in the affections to delight in, it gets ground also upon the understanding to slight it . . . If it have allowance for one step, it will take another. Dost thou find thy corruption to begin to entangle thy thoughts? Rise up with all thy strength against it, with no less indignation than if it had fully accomplished what it aims at.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Experiencing Grace***

Every time I revisit John Owen's works on sin and temptation, I am helped. He understands my struggle with myself. His insights are brilliant because he grasps more comprehensively than most, what God has revealed concerning the pervasive effects of the fall, the liberating power of the gospel, and the glories of communion with Christ.

As my friend C. J. Mahaney wrote in his endorsement of Crossway's unabridged *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*,<sup>20</sup> "Read this book carefully; it will help you understand your heart and experience God's grace."

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18. Jared Mellinger, "Self-Examination Speaks a Thousand Lies," *Desiring God*, June 7, 2017. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/self-examination-speaks-a-thousand-lies>

19. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*, 62.

20. John Owen, *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*.



# STRIVING TO BE LIKE JESUS

*HOLINESS* by J. C. RYLE

## *Larry McCall*

*Pastor, Christ's Covenant Church (Winona Lake, IN)*

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**A**fter agreeing to write this commendation of J. C. Ryle's classic book, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*, I found myself dusting off an old volume from my bookshelf. As I opened the cover of my hardback copy of *Holiness*, my eyes were drawn to the date I had written on the inside cover: October 1977.

As a young seminarian, I had been gratefully caught up in the growing wave of a renewed passion for Reformed theology. At the encouragement of some more mature friends, I had purchased this book and had my first exposure to Bishop Ryle. That first reading of *Holiness* challenged my thinking, stirred my heart, and impacted my daily life.

Now, 46 years later, it was time for a reread. What I discovered was that my need for the truths and applications found in this book were as relevant to my life as a man approaching age 70 as they were to my life as a seminarian in my early 20s. Let's see if you might find yourself in agreement—no matter what your current age.

## *Who was Bishop Ryle?*

John Charles Ryle was born in 1816 at Macclesfield to a well-established English family. His father was a Member of Parliament, and the family was quite comfortable as the owners of a bank. The young J. C. was given the best education available, first at Eton and then at Oxford. It was while at Oxford in 1838 that Ryle heard a sermon on Ephesians 2:8. That Sunday evening, the Lord graciously saved him. In 1842 Ryle was ordained in the Anglican

Church, and over the next 38 years he served two churches as their parish vicar. In 1880, at the age of 64 he became the first Bishop of Liverpool, where he served until shortly before his death in 1900.

### ***Why did J. C. Ryle write Holiness?***

The 1870s saw a rise in the “Higher Life” movement in the USA and in the UK. This view of the Christian life arose largely from the Wesleyan/Holiness movement and was popularized through the writing and teaching of William Boardman as well as the husband/wife team of Robert Pearsall Smith and Hannah Whittall Smith. This led to the founding of the Keswick movement. The stated motivation for the Higher Life movement was to encourage Christians to live a more holy life—and in some teachings, even a sinless life—but the means to that state was marked by passivity on the part of the Christian. Such terms as a “second work” or “second blessing” or “entire sanctification” were held out as a desired state for the Christian, and the means to that higher level of Christian living was to “let go and let God.” Sanctification was seen as something sudden and passive.

J. C. Ryle saw this movement as unbiblical and harmful to Christ’s people. He saw in the Bible a clear message that progressive sanctification is not presented as a sudden “second blessing” of the Spirit that came through a Christian’s passivity, but as a gradual and progressive work of the Spirit that involved the Christian’s active obedience to the words of Christ and an intentional pursuit of conformity to the character of Christ.

Ryle’s response to the growing influence of what he saw as the deviant doctrine of the Higher Life movement was to write his now classic *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*. It was published first in 1877 and then as a more expanded edition in 1879.

Ryle wrote this volume not so much as a polemic against the Higher Life movement and its primary promoters (he rarely “named names” in his concern over this errant theology and its emphases), but as an apologetic of the biblical teaching on holiness and sanctification. He leans heavily on clear, accessible expositions of Bible passages with practical illustrations and applications. Ryle

also shows his understanding that he was not teaching some novel doctrines on holiness. Indeed, he humbly shows through his extensive quotes of their works in the body and footnotes of *Holiness* how the English Puritans who preceded him by a couple of centuries also addressed these same issues in their day.

### ***How is the Book Laid Out?***

The first seven chapters are the heart of the book. These chapters formed the original 1877 edition of *Holiness* and stand as “a book within a book” of the later, longer edition that has come down to us over the intervening generations. In these chapters, Ryle explains “the real nature of holiness, and the temptations and difficulties which all must expect who follow it.”<sup>1</sup>

The rest of the longer edition consists of a series of holiness-related sermons that are arranged thematically: biblical character studies with both positive and negative examples (chapters 8–12); the church (chapters 13–14); Christ (chapters 15–20); and extracts from Robert Traill and Thomas Brooks (chapter 21).

### ***Why Does our Generation Need this Book?***

#### **As Individual Christians**

Our contemporary, Kevin DeYoung, challenges in his book *The Hole in Our Holiness*, “There’s the reality that holiness is plain hard work, and we’re often lazy. We like our sins, and dying to them is painful. Almost everything is easier than growing in godliness. So we try and fail, try and fail, and then give up.”<sup>2</sup>

Many of us would find ourselves challenged and encouraged to re-engage in the fight against sin and the pursuit of daily Christlikeness by thoughtfully and prayerfully reading (or rereading) Ryle’s timeless volume. May the Spirit use his Word to shake us from our spiritual lethargy and give us Christ-centered, gospel-fueled hope in our quest to obey our Savior’s words and reflect

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1. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*, 5th ed. (Heritage Bible Fellowship, 2011, Kindle), 7.

2. Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 19.

his character in daily life.

### **As those who have not yet repented of their sins nor turned to Christ in faith**

Surprisingly (to me), Ryle makes appeals to unconverted readers here and there in the book, such as this from the chapter, “Christ is All:” “Come to Christ and He shall save you. Come to Christ and cast the burden of your soul on Him. Fear not: only believe.”<sup>3</sup> I had not thought that unsaved individuals would read a book on holiness. But, Ryle clearly shows his concern for the lost by making his appeals, and by not making assumptions as to the spiritual condition of his readers.

### **As families**

As parents and grandparents carry out our God-given mission of impacting the coming generation with the gospel, what are we aiming for? Toward what kind of lives are we discipling our children and grandchildren? Are we calling them to faith in Jesus Christ and a life of following him, steadily being conformed to his likeness? Parents and grandparents would be well served to recall that the biblical pattern of sanctification is that of a sure and steady transformation into the likeness of Christ, and to make that focus a key part of our discipleship of the next generation.

### **As pastors and local churches**

Though nearly 150 years have passed since the original publication of *Holiness*, its value for our time remains amazingly relevant. Ryle wrote in a timely way, addressing the issues of his day that arose from the growing popularity of the Higher Life movement with its largely passive approach toward sanctification. Yet, this classic book is not only timely, but timeless.

Distortions of the doctrine of sanctification in our day are reminiscent of the distortions in Ryle’s day. Though the particulars may be a bit different, we also are living in an era in which an approach to the doctrine of sanctification lacks the biblical emphasis on the grace-fueled battle against sin and the Spirit-empowered quest to obey the imperatives of God’s Word.

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3. Ryle, *Holiness*, 481.

Therapeutic Christianity, which is so prevalent in our western churches, is almost wholly horizontal in its bent toward self-help advice. Little of the vertical emphasis on God's calling on our lives as his people gets air time in pulpits and podcasts. Possibly out of fear of being seen in our culture as legalistic or narrow minded, the commands of God get little if any attention.

Yes, we agree with the call to sinners, "Come as you are," but unlike a tendency found in some of our current evangelical churches, we must not imply "Remain as you are," but "Come and be transformed by Christ!" Even in some Reformed circles, the emphasis on the indicatives of God's justifying grace consume so much of our teaching and preaching time, that the imperatives of sanctification that follow receive but scant attention. Reading Ryle and rethinking our teaching and counseling ministries in light of Ryle's biblical expositions may well serve as a corrective to our imbalances.

### **As Sovereign Grace Churches**

Thankfully, our family of churches has sought to be Christ-centered in our theology and in our preaching. At the encouragement of our leaders, we have been called to be Christ-exalting in our practice as individuals, as pastors, as local churches and as a denomination. In the chapter titled "The Ruler of the Waves," Ryle reminds us "Surely we cannot know this Christ too well."<sup>4</sup> Long-standing Sovereign Grace pastors will recall that we have often been reminded of this glorious reality.

With each passing of the leadership baton from generation to generation in our fellowship of churches, it would be wise to refresh our minds and hearts with a biblical understanding of the need for holiness and God's revealed pattern of sanctification by a rereading of Ryle's *Holiness*. Ryle's example of careful exposition, solid theology, engaging and accessible application, and tender pastoral care also provides a model to the current and coming generations of pastors within our fellowship.

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4. Ibid., 307.

## **A Few Recommendations**

While some readers will find great value in reading *Holiness* from cover to cover, others might find that a bit overwhelming. At a minimum, I would encourage you to read chapters 1–7, which formed the original edition. If you want to add a few more chapters, I would recommend chapter 12, “The Ruler of the Waves,” and chapter 20, “Christ is All.”

If you do not yet own a copy of Ryle’s book, take care in deciding which edition you will purchase. Some current editions are abridged, others annotated; some are revised by modern editors while some editions are the actual work by Bishop Ryle. It’s available in hardback, paperback, or digital form. Though I have a nice hardback printed in Great Britain in 1977 (Banner of Truth currently has a hardback available), this time around, I read the book in digital form, allowing me to highlight excerpts on my Kindle, which I greatly enjoyed.

I will close this review as Ryle closes *Holiness* with these words:

Let us live on Christ. Let us live in Christ. Let us live with Christ. Let us live to Christ. So doing, we shall prove that we fully realize that “Christ is all.” So doing, we shall feel great peace, and attain more of that holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.<sup>5</sup>

Amen!

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5. Ibid., 493.

# TALKING TO YOURSELF

*SPIRITUAL DEPRESSION* by D. MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

## **Rich Richardson**

*Lead Pastor, Center Church (Gilbert, AZ)*

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John Piper famously said, “Books don’t change people, paragraphs do—sometimes sentences.”<sup>1</sup> One sentence that changed lives in Sovereign Grace Churches over the years comes from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his classic book, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure*. The good doctor said, “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?”<sup>2</sup>

This simple, penetrating sentence and the gospel application that it contains has echoed from many Sovereign Grace pulpits over the years.

The day I first heard this quote is etched on my heart. I was listening to my favorite preacher, C. J. Mahaney. I do not remember the sermon title or the series it was from, but that sentence caused me to gasp. I stopped the recording. I knew the Lord had given me a gospel application tool for a lifetime. Before I finished the recorded sermon, I ordered the book and I have cherished it ever since.

## ***A Revived and Joyful Church***

*Spiritual Depression* is a collection of twenty-one sermons that Dr. Lloyd-Jones delivered at Westminster Chapel in London during 1954. He preached

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1. John Piper, “Books Don’t Change People, Paragraphs Do,” *Desiring God*, 07/16/2013. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/books-dont-change-people-paragraphs-do>

2. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Group, 1965), 20.

this series because “Christian people too often seem to be perpetually in the doldrums and too often give this appearance of unhappiness and of lack of freedom and absence of joy.”<sup>3</sup> He wrote, “Believing as I do that the greatest need of the hour is a revived and joyful Church the subject dealt with in these sermons is to me of the greatest possible importance.”<sup>4</sup>

Lloyd-Jones begins with general considerations: how temperament and physical conditions can contribute to our challenges, the importance of knowing ourselves, why some people are particularly prone to being downcast, the dangers of morbid introspection, and unbelief as the ultimate cause of spiritual depression. He observes that those affected by this condition are usually uninterested in doctrine. “Spiritual depression or unhappiness in the Christian life is very often due to our failure to realize the greatness of the gospel.”<sup>5</sup>

The sermons include challenges such as “Vain Regrets” over things done in the past (chapter 6), “Fear of the Future” (chapter 7), and a insightful treatment of “Feelings” (chapter 8) that focuses on the danger of being controlled by our feelings or making them central. He also has two sermons addressing the importance of faith (chapters 10 and 11).

The book concludes with three sermons from Philippians 4: “The Peace of God” (chapter 19) which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus; “Learning to be Content” (chapter 20) whether we are experiencing abundance or need; and “The Final Cure” (chapter 21), which is that we are made strong by the one who is constantly infusing strength in us. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

Nearly 70 years after the book was written, it remains a classic in personal, gospel application. The churches in Sovereign Grace have always prioritized applying the glorious gospel to all of life, and this book by Lloyd-Jones has helped us to do so.

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3. Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression*, 12.

4. *Ibid.*, 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 54.

## ***A Life-Changing Paragraph***

The sentence I shared earlier is part of a life-changing paragraph at the end of the first chapter. Lloyd-Jones elaborates:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them but they are talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc. Somebody is talking. Who is talking to you? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment [the psalmist of Psalm 42] was this: instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul?" he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says, "Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you."<sup>6</sup>

When C. J. quoted this paragraph, he effectively injected real life gospel application into the collective bloodstream of Sovereign Grace. This application of the gospel has had a significant impact in my life, and on many others in Sovereign Grace.

## ***Preaching the Gospel to Ourselves***

We Sovereign Grace pastors are not professionals but fellow saints who are "prone to wander" just like anyone else. My temperament is melancholic and there are so many days that I find myself wandering about in a forlorn miasma. As I walk on the outskirts of dark discouragement, this quotation has pulled me back to bright gospel truth.

Even now I can hear the voice of the psalmist as repeated by Lloyd-Jones and C. J., and I ask, "Why am I listening to myself? I must speak to myself." In so many of my devotional times, I've needed to speak the truth of the gospel to my discouraged soul.

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6. Ibid., 20–21.

More often than not, I've needed self-sermons such as, "*Self, you are so forgetful and such a moron. You awake today and have an inheritance that you could not earn and cannot lose. You have received the gift of eternal life by means of the blood of your savior, Jesus Christ. Though you were an abject sinner, you have been made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit. You are forgiven, but much more you have been declared righteous before God Most High. Your status before him is unchangeable because Jesus has risen to an indestructible life. And self, you are adopted into the family of God and regarded not as an employee, a shareholder, or a member but a son. More than that, soul, Jesus is praying for you at this moment and the Holy Spirit is helping you now in your extreme weakness. What do you have to fear? What reason do you have to be discouraged?*"

### ***Helping Others Preach the Gospel to Themselves***

John Calvin said, "If a preacher is not first preaching to himself, better that he falls on the steps of the pulpit and breaks his neck than preaches that sermon."<sup>7</sup> We preach best when we apply the gospel to ourselves first and most often.

We have been taught for years in Sovereign Grace that we must not just teach truth but apply truth to suffering and sinning saints. Time and time again, as I've tried to explain how the gospel actually helps us in the throes of our discouraging Wednesday mornings, I've thought of the quotation from *Spiritual Depression*. I know that the saints of my church are toiling against self, Satan, and the world. They don't need a pep talk or an inspirational talk. They need the power of the gospel or they will be powerless in their lives.

So, I have sought to concretize the gospel for people by continually reminding them that they are far more apt to listen to themselves speaking discouragements, failures, and disappointments, than they are to speak life-giving truth to themselves. More than once, I have urged our people to forcefully and verbally interrupt that continual internal dialogue with the gospel of grace. What should they say? The same speech that I speak to myself.

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7. Herman J. Selderhuis and Albert Gootjes, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, Vol. 26 (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 304.

My experience is not unique in Sovereign Grace. Many men over the years have counseled the weary, the weak, and the wandering to speak to themselves instead of just listening. Only eternity will reveal the benefit of this book and this paragraph from Lloyd-Jones. On that day, we will be regaled by the difference that simply speaking the truth to ourselves has made.

Until then, we can be grateful and continue to fight discouragement by preaching truth to ourselves. On behalf of Sovereign Grace pastors everywhere, I extend a great “thank you” to the good doctor.



# STROLLING THROUGH LIFE WITH JOHN NEWTON

*Andy Farmer*

*Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)*

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I first “met” John Newton in a significant way when I was reading stories of noteworthy Christians to my kids back in the 1990s. I came across a young people’s biography of John Newton,<sup>1</sup> whom I knew only as the composer of “Amazing Grace.” I’d read a number of Christian hero stories to my kids by that point. Those books didn’t prepare me for Newton’s life. Talk about a page-turner! Adjectives like “rollicking” and “tragic” and “inspiring” and “adventurous” and “resilient” all fit as apt descriptors in his story.

## *A Wretch Like Newton*

A quick overview of his life: John Newton was born in 1725 in London. His father was a merchant ship captain who spent most of his life at sea. Newton’s mother died when he was around seven, leaving him effectively living on his own till his father began taking him on voyages at age twelve. When he wasn’t at sea Newton spent his teenage years running amok with a gang in London. He was kidnapped and pressed into British naval service at nineteen. On board ship he was an excellent sailor but an uncontrollable presence, constantly punished for insubordination but to no avail. He particularly relished blaspheming God and aggressively sought to mock and undermine the faith of any Christian he came in contact with.

The navy gave up on him and traded him to a merchant captain where he was first exposed to the slave trade. Newton ended up in Africa where he was

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1. Catherine Swift, *John Newton* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1994).

enslaved by Africans—tied most of his days to a post for over a year. He was eventually rescued and began to sail again.

On one Atlantic crossing his ship was caught in a vicious storm and began to break apart. Newton, as captain, lashed himself to the wheel and, for the first time, cried out to the God whom he had disdained his whole life. However, his was not an immediate conversion, as he reverted to his ungodly ways soon after he landed safely on British soil. In fact, it was after this experience that Newton took on a more lucrative command as captain of a slave ship.

### ***God's Victorious Pursuit***

But something was at work in John Newton's soul. He began to have a burdened conscience over his life and his participation in slavery. And he found himself attracted to Christians he met along the way. Through their influence, he wrestled with the claims of the gospel and gradually warmed to the claim of Christ on his life.

The impetus to leave the slave trade, however, was not from spiritual or moral conviction. It was the intervention of God through epileptic seizures—events that he had never experienced before and would never experience after he left sailing. Once settled on land, he began to connect to the growing evangelical movement. It was sitting under the preaching of George Whitefield that led him to consider the ministry. Without any formal training, it took Newton several years to be ordained as a minister in the Church of England. During this time he published his “Authentic Narrative”—a confessional account of his run from God and God's victorious pursuit of him.

The “Authentic Narrative” afforded him a significant measure of celebrity, but his desire was to be a local pastor, and he took the curacy of the parish in Olney, a rural town north of London. He served that church for fifteen years and then took the pastorate at St. Mary Woolnoth Church in the heart of the business district in London. He pastored faithfully at St. Mary's for twenty-seven years.

Newton married the only woman he ever loved and he and his wife Elizabeth enjoyed an intimate forty-two year marriage. Though they never conceived children, they took in two girls who had been orphaned and raised them as adopted daughters.

Today John Newton is generally known for his hymn writing, his advocacy of gospel mission, and his commitment to the abolition of the slave trade. He died in 1807 at the age of eighty-two, two weeks after the abolition of the British slave trade. What he personally wanted to be known for is carved in the self-composed epitaph on his grave in Olney.

JOHN NEWTON  
Clerk,  
Once an Infidel and Libertine,  
A Servant of Slaves in Africa,  
Was,  
by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior  
JESUS CHRIST,  
Preserved, restored, pardoned,  
And appointed to preach the Faith  
He had long laboured to destroy

### ***Reading John Newton***

Every believer should read a biography of John Newton—at least for the adventure of it. But the true gold to be mined from John Newton comes from the rich and ample deposits of his letters. Most of the great practical theology we access from the Owens and Spurgeons and others comes from their reprinted sermons, preaching, and writing meant for churches and movements. John Newton was a competent preacher but he was largely extemporaneous. And his sermons tend to read that way. What sets John Newton apart is his personal pastoral care for individuals that comes through his volumes of letters.

The best I can describe my encounter with John Newton in his letters is the experience of a stroll. I picture myself strolling down a country lane with this

scarred and seasoned pastor as he engages my questions, ruminates on bigger meanings, and reflects on his own encounters with weakness, folly, and grace along the way. Newton counsels me as a fellow traveler, a fellow sinner, a fellow saint on the way to glory. And always with gospel clarity and simplicity. Here are three ways strolling with John Newton in his letters can help your walk with Jesus.

## ***1. John Newton Will Care for Your Soul***

One taste of Newton's perspective that I keep tended in my soul is the following:

One thing is needful, to have our hearts united to the Lord in humble faith; to set Him always before us; to rejoice in Him as our Shepherd and our portion; to submit to all His appointments, not out of necessity, because He is stronger than we, but with a cheerful acquiescence, because He is wise and good and loves us better than we do ourselves; to feed upon His truth; to have our understandings, wills, affections, imaginations, memory, all filled and impressed with the great mysteries of redeeming love; to do all for Him, to receive all from Him; to find all in Him. I have mentioned many things, but they are all comprised in one, a life of faith in the Son of God. We are empty vessels, but we cannot remain empty. Except Jesus dwells in our hearts and fills them with His power and presence, they will be filled with folly, vanity and vexation.<sup>2</sup>

In his letters, John Newton is simple. He converses with men in high positions of worldly power and influence. He engages fellow pastors, often those who oppose him, on theological controversies and on personal pastoral concerns. But he also keeps up correspondence with elderly saints, poor widows, and young believers. He doesn't try to impress the great and he doesn't condescend to the small. You will never be confused in reading Newton; he is incredibly practical but never at the expense of the call to faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel.

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2. John Newton, *The Voice of the Heart* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., 2001), 221.

Newton's experience with a life of profound, unresolvable regrets (his personal participation in the enslavement of people and his tragic success in destroying the faith of others in particular were never far from his mind) produce a humility and compassion with the sins and struggles of the Christian life. He wrote of his own experience,

The life of faith seems so simple and easy in theory, that I can point it out to others in few words; but in practice it is very difficult, and my advances are so slow, that I hardly dare say I get forward at all.<sup>3</sup>

During one intense spiritual struggle, Newton wrote to a friend, "My soul is like a besieged city; a legion of enemies without the gates, and a nest of traitors within . . . Pray for me, that my walls may be strengthened and wounds healed."<sup>4</sup>

But he draws on "amazing grace" in the daily fight for faith.

We are never more safe, never have more reason to expect the Lord's help, than when we are most sensible that we can do nothing without him. Oh he is a suitable Savior! He has power, authority and compassion to save to the uttermost. All shall work together for good: everything is needful that he sends; nothing can be needful that he withholds. Hide yourself under the shadow of His wings; rely upon his care and power. When you cannot see your way, be satisfied that he is your leader. When your spirit is overwhelmed within you, he knows your path; he will not leave you to sink. He has appointed seasons of refreshment, and you shall find that he does not forget you.<sup>5</sup>

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3. John Newton, *Letters and Poems*, Kindle

4. John Newton, *The Works of John Newton*, Vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1839), 612–13.

5. John Newton, *Letters of John Newton* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007), 178.

## ***2. John Newton Will Help You Help Others***

Strolling with John Newton through his letters will help you walk with suffering and beleaguered saints. Newton ministered to others as Jesus had ministered to him.

Grace, free grace, must be the substance of my discourse, to tell all the world from my own experience that there is mercy for blasphemers, for the most hardened, the most complicated wretches.<sup>6</sup>

John Piper has said of Newton, “Glad-hearted, grateful lowliness and brokenness as a saved ‘wretch’ was probably the most prominent root of Newton’s habitual tenderness with people.”<sup>7</sup>

Newton counseled from the Bible and called people to biblical obedience, but pointed them to the God of the Bible as the source of their help in need.

The doctrinal parts of our message are in some degree familiar to us, but that which gives a savour, fullness, energy and variety to our ministrations is the result of many painful conflicts and exercises which we pass through in our private walk, combined with the proofs we receive, as we go along, of the Lord’s compassion and mercies under all the perverseness and folly we are conscious of in ourselves. It is only in this school of experience that we can acquire the tongue of the learned, and know how to speak a word in season to those that are weary.<sup>8</sup>

And Newton was a patient man. He labored for years in local churches watching people grow and change, and struggle and resist change as well. He knew that sanctification is a lifelong process, and he cared for souls with that in view.

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6. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 171.

7. John Piper, “John Newton: The Tough Roots of His Habitual Tenderness,” The Bethlehem Pastors Conference, 2001.

8. Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, 416.

I have been thirty years forming my own views; and, in the course of this time, some of my hills have sunk, and some of my valleys have risen; but how unreasonable would it be to expect all this should take place in another person; and that, in the course of a year or two!<sup>9</sup>

### ***3. John Newton Will Help You Finish Well***

John Newton often described the process of aging as “ripening for glory.” I love that. As I begin to think about the final leg of my journey, Newton inspires me to finish well. He wrote to a friend, “It is not necessary for me to live long, but it is highly expedient that while I do live I should live to Him.”<sup>10</sup>

In the months before he died at the age of 82, Newton was asked if he was prepared for the approach of death. I love his response. “I am packed and sealed and waiting for the post.”<sup>11</sup>

When I first read that two decades ago it kind of jarred me. But now as I get closer to my own final shipping day, I appreciate John Newton’s candor and perspective. John Newton continues to counsel me to not settle into old age. I know that even my last days may be hard and full of suffering and loss. By the time he died, Newton was blind and infirm with a number of ailments. But his perspective on the fading years needs to be ours as well.

When you get to heaven, you will not complain of the way by which the Lord brought you.<sup>12</sup>

In Sovereign Grace Churches, John Newton has had an impact on our understanding of pastoral ministry and the Christian life. Fifteen years ago a volume of his letters was given to all of our pastors, and we have been encouraged to learn from his life and ministry.

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9. Richard Cecil, *John Newton* (Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), 214.

10. Newton, *The Voice of the Heart*, 210.

11. Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, 347.

12. Newton, *The Voice of the Heart*, 148.

If you're interested in reading about John Newton, here are two biographies I'd suggest. The book I read to my kids, *John Newton* by Catherine Swift, was part of the 1990s Bethany House "Men of Faith" series. I believe it is out of print but you can get it second hand online. My favorite recent biography is *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* by Jonathan Aitken, published by Crossway.

There are lots of ways to get access to his letters. You can find them online at several sites. The best concise collection, *Letters of John Newton*, is published by Banner of Truth.

# OUR DEBT TO DAVID POWLISON AND HIS COLLEAGUES

*Pete Payne*

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**S**overeign Grace Churches—pastors and members alike—owe a profound debt to David Powlison and those who served with him at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF). Let me explain.

In the fall of 1990, my family and I had joined Southside Church, at the time a member church of what was known as People of Destiny International. Prior to that, I had served in various capacities in several different denominations, most recently as the Youth Director of a large Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Virginia Beach, where Southside Church was also located.

I had come to Virginia Beach to pursue a Master's Degree in Counseling from Regent University, in hopes that I might learn how to help the teens and young adults that God had brought across my path in my previous ministry experiences, as well as in my role as a high school band director. My wife, Betsy, and I loved those young people and had a deep desire to help them with the problems they faced. Yet, we had absolutely no idea how to truly care for them.

I had received my Master's Degree in 1987, and had spent some time, in addition to youth ministry duties, working at a local psychiatric hospital. I did this at the suggestion of one of my professors, who told me that it would be good for me to gain some "clinical" experience. The counseling faculty members at Regent, at that time, were deeply committed believers with a strong desire to help pastors. They were committed to gospel ministry and served in local churches. They were suspicious of the so-called "therapeutic movement," and

of the many Christian integration theories and practices that were then in vogue. They sincerely wanted to help us to help others.

However, my fellow students and I were often at a loss regarding the connection between gospel truth and the practice of counseling. Enter David Powlison and his colleagues in the Biblical Counseling world.

### ***How Can I Change?***

Steve Shank, senior pastor at Southside Church and a member of the SGC (then PDI) leadership team, had invited David Powlison to come and present his seminar “How Can I Change?” to members of our local congregation. Having recently been led—through the wisdom and study of our denominational leaders—into a growing understanding of Reformed doctrine and a deep appreciation of the Puritans, our churches were well prepared to receive the life-altering wisdom and instruction that flowed from Powlison’s ministry.

I left that seminar saying to my wife: “I would trade the three years of study that went into receiving the Master’s Degree for what we just heard from David Powlison in two days.” For the first time since pursuing a counseling degree nearly a decade earlier, I began to see a path to connecting gospel-centered theology to the problems of everyday life and to truly helping people struggling as sinners and sufferers in a fallen world.

The new friendship and interaction with the men who formed and shaped CCEF helped the family of churches now known as Sovereign Grace Churches to embrace robust doctrines of sin and sanctification, as well as the role that Biblical Counseling should have in our churches. The relational connections forged by C. J. Mahaney and our leadership team with David Powlison and other CCEF faculty members enabled us to begin to develop biblically-grounded counseling practices and a better understanding of how sanctification “works” in daily life and experience.

## *Lessons Learned*

The instruction and writings of David Powlison, Paul Tripp, Ed Welch, and many others helped us learn:

- To take progressive sanctification seriously and learn how to apply biblical truths to help believers grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.
- To believe that growth and change is both possible and essential for all believers.
- To diagnose spiritual problems biblically, and to apply biblical prescriptions to those problems.
- To recognize that our hearts are “idol factories” and to learn sound biblical strategies for putting those idols to death.
- To recognize that “the heart is the target” and to develop biblical practices for applying gospel truths to the sins and sufferings of our members.
- To learn to use the “Three Trees in the Desert,” “Apple Stapling” and other wonderful tools and illustrations developed by CCEF in appropriate ways, while not allowing them to become our singular and rote counseling methods.
- To remember that counseling, or soul care, is best done in the church, under the watchful eye of the Wonderful Counselor.
- To be aware of the dangers of the psychologized or therapeutic worldview and its effect (real and potential) on our people, while simultaneously learning how to interact with secular and Christian counseling theorists in humble and respectful ways.
- To thank God for wonderful resources made available initially through the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* and now through the many books that have been authored by these dear friends over the past three decades.
- Through the genuine friendship and mutual respect between C. J. Mahaney and David Powlison, to NOT become so enamored with the doctrines of sin and sanctification and the concepts and practices of Biblical Counseling that we replace the gospel as that which is of first importance—being cautioned by C. J. (borrowing from Robert Murray M’Cheyne) to take “ten looks at the cross for every look at sin” as we seek to grow and to help others grow in grace.

David Powlison, who died in 2019, remains an incredible gift of God to the Church. If Jay Adams represented the Martin Luther of the Pastoral Counseling Movement, strongly admonishing practitioners who had drifted from biblical foundations into secular wisdom in their attempts to help God's people, David Powlison has been the John Calvin and John Owen of this "Reformation," which has become the Biblical Counseling Movement. David interacted with secular theories and theorists, with Christian "Integrationists," and with theologians of all stripes, always with humility and grace, but with a tenacity and genius that has now inspired two subsequent generations of biblical counselors to "restore counseling to the church and the church to counseling."

### ***Powlison's Books***

If you are not familiar with the thinking and writing of David Powlison, I recommend that you begin with his books, *Seeing with New Eyes* and *Speaking Truth in Love*, a comprehensive compilation of much of his early thought and teaching on the subject of biblical counseling. In the introduction to *Seeing with New Eyes*, he writes:

Intentionally helpful conversations—that's all counseling is—look *different* when you look at them from the perspective of seeing God. You see people and their troubles in a different light. . . . When you include God in the picture, it changes the way you think about "problem," "diagnosis," "strategy," "solution," "helpful," "cure," "change," "insight," and "counselor." When the lights go on, you see God and know that God sees you. . . . My goal . . . is to help us see God in the counseling context.<sup>1</sup>

And, I would follow that with reading a book that was written near the end of his life, *How Does Sanctification Work?*, which simultaneously instructs us on the critical doctrine of progressive sanctification, while gently but firmly warning against a popular but misguided teaching about sanctification that had appeared shortly prior to his writing.

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1. David Powlison, *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition Through the Lens of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 1–3.

All of the books and articles written by David wrestle with real people and the real problems that they face in a real world, while remaining firmly and unalterably tethered to God's glory revealed in the person and work of Jesus. Powlison is sorely missed in the world of biblical counseling, but as we do with his Puritan forebears, we thank God for the Christ-exalting wisdom he has bequeathed to us through his books and other writings.

## ***Other Voices***

There are other “giants” of the biblical counseling world who served at CCEF with Powlison in the years following Jay Adams. Paul Tripp, Ed Welch, and Michael Emler remain influential today, and we are indebted to each of them, and to many others, for their invaluable contributions to this discipline.

Tripp's book *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change*, remains, in my opinion, the best comprehensive introduction to the theory and practice of Biblical Counseling. Ed Welch has interacted significantly, from a biblical perspective, with the world of psychiatry and the complex interactions between body and spirit. His book, *Depression: Looking Up from a Stubborn Darkness*, is a must read for those of us who seek to help those who seem caught in the grip of possible biological issues while fighting for biblically-defined joy in day-to-day living.

Among many others who have followed the path marked out by Adams and then Powlison, I would like to highlight Michael Emler, a physician turned pastor-theologian turned biblical counselor. His exceptional book, *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet*, flows from the best stream of biblical counseling thought, and has proven to be an outstanding resource for training Christians to apply all of Scripture to all of life as they seek to love and care for one another.

Jay Adams, David Powlison and his colleagues from CCEF, as well as the now hundreds of writers and practitioners who are seeking to follow in their footsteps and “restore counseling to the church and the church to counseling” are serving us well, and we need to thank God for them. They have provided, through careful biblical study, through their untold hours of actual counseling practice, and through careful evaluation and observation, insights into the

human condition as seen through the lens of Scripture.

### ***Looking to the Future***

The foundational work done by David Powlison and others has been exceptionally wise and helpful. In looking to the future, we must remain vigilant, always taking insights and ideas flowing from the current and emerging practitioners of Biblical Counseling back to the Scripture to see if these things are true and to assure that our teaching and our practices of counseling and discipleship remain grounded in the Word, thoroughly gospel-saturated.

Unquestionably, nothing would please David Powlison (and his Lord) more than to see his passion for the Word of God being applied by wise biblical counselors as they love and care for the people of God.

I have sought to put in place a few signposts to the place of wonders. The far-off snowy mountains are real. God's people will one day speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, in perfect love, and nothing but love. We can climb in that direction now. The gaze and intentions of the real Christ can in fact shape the interactions between real people in the real world. Grasp that reality: living faith working out into intelligent and purposeful love. Hope for that. Aim for it. Cultivate it. Pray in that direction. Counsel in that direction. Preach in that direction. Live in that direction.

This is the purpose of all that God has done in Christ. He who promises is faithful, and he will do it.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Powlison, *Seeing With New Eyes*, 258.

# REVISITING RECOVERING BIBLICAL MANHOOD AND WOMANHOOD

***Josh Blount***

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If you have ever had the opportunity to revisit a familiar place years later, you know the simultaneous experience of familiarity and disorientation that accompanies such a return. This house, this backyard, this deli counter looks the same—but that block, that road, that neighborhood—how they’ve changed! The central place remains just as you remembered it, but the surrounding context may be almost unrecognizable.

Such is the experience for complementarians in Sovereign Grace returning to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* in the age of same-sex marriage, the pronoun wars, and the transgender revolution: comfortable familiarity, and a measure of disorientation. The content of the book has not changed—but the cultural context in which we are discussing it has changed!

*Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (hereafter *RBMW*), edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, was intended to be just what its subtitle described: “a response to evangelical feminism.” Originally published in 1991, and updated in 2021, this work was and remains the foundational text for the complementarian movement and its primary institution, the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW).

The foreword and “Vision and Overview” section that opens the book contain classic definitions and a theological vision by Piper and Grudem that have defined the terms and scope of complementarianism. From there, we encounter a litany of familiar names. Writers such as Tom Schreiner, D. A. Carson,

and Doug Moo contribute chapters in Section II: “Exegetical and Theological Studies,” Section III: “Studies from Related Disciplines” (i.e., church history, biology, sociology), and Section IV: “Applications and Implications.” These men are notable for their theological influence on Sovereign Grace, on complementarianism specifically, and even beyond that in New Testament studies, Pauline theology, biblical theology, and other topics.

After these meaty central chapters, Piper and Grudem then close the volume with another classic chapter, “Charity, Clarity, and Hope,” responding to Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), the counterpart institution that represents evangelical egalitarianism. Two appendices hold Grudem’s extensive work on the meaning of *kephale* (the Greek word for “head”), and the Danvers Statement by CBMW. For our purposes in Sovereign Grace, I want to focus on two vital sections of this book: the opening chapter and Appendix 2: The Danvers Statement.

### ***A Vision for Biblical Complementarity***

Chapter 1 is one of those classic Piper chapters that has taken on a life of its own and influenced almost all subsequent conversation on masculinity and femininity. It is noteworthy for its definitions and its vision. Piper sounds a note that must not be lost amid the noisy conversation about gender identity and roles: we are not merely called to defend against errors, but we are given the gift and task of positively celebrating the beauty of God’s design. In Piper’s words, “there must be a portrayal of the vision that satisfies the heart as well as the head. Or to put it another way: we must commend the beauty as well as the truth of the vision.”<sup>1</sup>

This call, given early in the complementarian movement, needs even more emphasis in the current climate. Because our beliefs about men and women are so basic to human experience, having to do with marriage, parenting, and the home, and in parallel fashion the rightly ordered church as the household

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1. All page references are to the 1991 first edition, John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 33.

of God (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:14–16), merely developing a polemical stance is never a sufficient response. Truth must be defended as well as celebrated and lived.

To put it differently: Os Guinness once observed that there are some ideas that can be thought, but not lived. Western culture’s ideas about gender identity fit that category (example: the collision between transgender ideology and women’s sports). In such a culture, attempting to live a fundamentally incoherent vision of gender identity, a church that is built on the simple complementarian vision of men and women, equal yet different, will shine like a light in the darkness. Ephesians 5 is radical, and radically beautiful—and both of those statements need to be convictions rooted deep in our soul. As Piper recognized early in this debate, our ability to persuade others needs both clear thinking and joyous affirmation.

Most of the rest of Piper’s chapter is given to providing and explaining his classic definitions of masculinity and femininity:

At the heart of mature masculinity is a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man’s differing relationships.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of mature femininity is a freeing disposition to affirm, receive and nurture strength and leadership from worthy men in ways appropriate to a woman’s differing relationships.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter, with these definitions, became the basis for Piper’s short book *What’s the Difference?*, published first by CBMW and later by Crossway. They have been instrumental in shaping the conversation in the complementarian world, as well as setting a starting point for egalitarian responses. They are highly significant, and worthy of our reflection.

First, it’s important to state that the definitions are imbedded in a much longer, phrase-by-phrase exposition of what they mean (and do not mean). In subsequent conversation, the definitions tend to be discussed without their

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2. Ibid., 35.

3. Ibid., 36.

accompanying commentary, which then tends towards distortions or reductionist readings.

Second, note just how much is packed into these short paragraphs! As many have recognized, defining precisely *what* the Bible teaches about masculinity and femininity is not an easy task, since it requires sensitivity to key texts (like Gen. 1–2, Eph. 5:22–33, etc.) but also a distillation of the patterns evident throughout Scripture that are both subtle and pervasive. Piper’s definitions took on that challenge, and encapsulated much biblical wisdom into two complementarity sentences. (Even the fact that the sentences are distinct yet complementary further supports the message.) And there are both positive statements and careful nuances built into the definitions—yet a further strength, since it acknowledges what is central while making room for complexities in particular situations.

But third, read in light of contemporary challenges, while the definitions point us in the right direction, they need an expansion and clarification both to defend and celebrate our biblical vision in the present moment. The radical, alien, and destructive ideas of transgender theory present a new set of challenges that require deeper, more basic, and more fundamental definitions of masculinity and femininity. For instance, what if someone hypothetically wants to affirm that these two complementary sets of dispositions exist, and that they are good things, but that they are in no way tied to a person’s biological sex? Can a “trans couple” fulfill this role, each party choosing which half of the pairing they want to live out? Clearly no biblical complementarian would affirm this, nor could this have been imagined at the time *RBMW* was published. But that is why the challenge of the transgender movement strikes at an even deeper level of human existence and identity than the egalitarian argument does, and thus requires a broader response.

So more is needed—but not less than the definitions Piper and Grudem articulated, celebrated, and defended in *RBMW*. The debate between complementarians and egalitarians that called for the publication of *RBMW* was one skirmish in a much larger cultural movement attempting to redefine human identity, sexuality, and gender roles. We still live in that broader battle, a moment that requires continuing theological clarity and faithfulness, the same mix of precise definitions

and joyful celebration that *RBMW* represented. Where might we look to find wisdom and direction for such a task? Appendix 2: The Danvers Statement.

### ***The Danvers Statement***

From the perspective of thirty-plus years since its introduction, what stands out about the Danvers Statement is its theological nature and its moderate tone. The rationale, purposes, and affirmations that make up the statement—despite the caricatures of complementarianism that abound—are not sinister, oppressive, or authoritarian. They are measured in tone, balanced, and motivated by what one would hope would be uncontroversial observations about cultural confusion, and what should be universally acceptable goals: the flourishing of marriages, families, churches, and culture through affirming manhood and womanhood.

Furthermore, a sympathetic reader, or even a merely neutral reader, will see that complementarianism began as fundamentally a biblical and theological position. The concerns that animate this movement, as expressed in this founding document, have to do with interpretation of the Bible, of the theological implications of those interpretations, and of the corresponding effects in families and churches. In that sense, complementarian is a theological descriptor similar to—with appropriate distinctions—*homoousian* or Chalcedonian.<sup>4</sup> A good way of simultaneously clarifying our meaning and charting a future course would be a return to this founding document: Do we agree with these theological affirmations? Or have we drifted from them?

Note that the statement “drifted from” doesn’t imply that the Danvers Statement has the status of Scripture, or even the status of one of the classic creeds and confessions of the church. It is a starting point, a collection of statements meant to shape a movement’s future. (In fact, the “Purposes” section explicitly looks forward and calls for publications of scholarly and popular material on

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4. Let me spell out some of those distinctions: the Danvers Statement doesn’t have creedal status like Nicaea or Chalcedon! Furthermore, Trinitarian theology and Christology are first-order theological issues in a way that men’s and women’s gender roles are not. That said, as in any theological controversy, second or third-order issues may become lumped together with other issues until they rise above the level of legitimate disagreements and become matters of false teaching or even heresy.

the topic.) From its very founding, the complementarian movement looked for further thinking to address ongoing questions and press for greater clarity. But while the Danvers Statement itself calls for a “forward movement” to complementarianism, that progress towards greater faithfulness and clarity is incompatible with a subtle, downstream drift. And that drift is precisely where culture threatens us now.

With that perspective, the Danvers Statement confronts us with this question: do our complementarian convictions begin with Scripture and theological principles, and work outwards from there; or do they begin with outside critiques or cultural pressures, and work inwards towards Scripture in response to those categories? The former leads to faithfulness—the latter, compromise, either slow or fast, but inevitable.

Since the adoption of our *Statement of Faith* in Sovereign Grace, we are complementarian by both conviction and confession. This doctrine is part of our spiritual DNA. And it is in no small measure due to *RBMW* and the men and movement this book represents. But it’s not easy to be a complementarian in 21st century Western culture.

Sovereign Grace pastors who return to this classic book in light of contemporary challenges will feel that mix of familiarity and disorientation that accompanies this kind of return. To maintain our conviction and confession in this area, we need a conscious dependence on those who have defended and celebrated this vision before us, and wisdom from them to hold fast to these doctrines for the future. Returning to *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* is a good place to start.

# FIVE WAYS CHARLES SPURGEON HAS INFLUENCED US

## *Riley Spring*

*Lead Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Parramatta (Parramatta, Australia)*

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**A**t a recent Pastors Conference, Jared Mellinger emphatically and humorously declared, “If you’re a Sovereign Grace pastor, Charles Spurgeon is your historical hero . . . you actually don’t get to choose.” And although he was being cheeky, he wasn’t really joking! Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), a Baptist pastor in London, is a man whose life, character, sermons, and writings have indelibly shaped and influenced our family of churches.

As one first generation SGC pastor, Bill Patton, told me, “It would be difficult to overstate Charles Spurgeon’s influence upon Sovereign Grace during our formative years.” And Dave Taylor, Director of Global Missions, also said, “I remember in the early days of Sovereign Grace, a sermon didn’t even feel like a sermon unless it had a C. H. Spurgeon quote in it!”

There is much to learn from Spurgeon, not only for our pastors but for members throughout our churches. In this article I will introduce you to the life and work of Spurgeon and highlight five characteristics about him that have impacted our churches.

I hope it inspires you to purchase and read a copy of *Spurgeon: A New Biography* by Arnold Dallimore.<sup>1</sup> This short, readable, and inspiring book was published

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1. Editors Note: In addition to Dallimore’s excellent volume, *Spurgeon: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987) we also highly recommend Alex DiPrima’s *Spurgeon: A Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Press, 2024), Iain Murray’s *The Forgotten Spurgeon* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust,

in 1984, two years after Sovereign Grace began. Although it is no longer new, I hope it will stir your faith and zeal for the Lord, the work of his kingdom, and the glory of all members playing their part in their local church. That is the impact it had nearly forty years ago for our founding pastors, and the impact it can have on our future.

## **1. A Man of Grace**

Charles Haddon Spurgeon was born into a devoted Christian home and spent five of his early years being raised by his pastor grandfather. He demonstrated his supreme intellect at an early age as he began to read and study widely. But it wasn't until he was in his early teens that he experienced the new birth.

He was a young man racked by conviction of sin. Though he knew the gospel, it wasn't until he stumbled upon a small Methodist church one Sunday that he understood the grace of the gospel. The pastor wasn't present and so a lay leader stepped up to the pulpit. He was weak looking and not well educated, and so he preached a simple message from Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth!" (KJV).

He implored the congregation with the simplicity of "looking," that it takes no effort. He redirected their gaze to look unto God and not to themselves for salvation. And then he turned to Spurgeon, and spoke directly to him saying,

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1966), Michael Reeves' *Spurgeon on the Christian Life: Alive in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), and Geoffrey Chang's *Spurgeon the Pastor: Recovering a Biblical & Theological Vision for Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2022). On Spurgeon's marriage, see Ray Rhodes' *Yours, till Heaven: The Untold Love Story of Charles and Susie Spurgeon* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2021). On Spurgeon's understanding of the relationship between the gospel and social ministry, see Alex DiPrima's *Spurgeon and the Poor: How the Gospel Compels Christian Social Concern* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023). On his conflict with hyper-Calvinists, see Iain Murray's *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism: The Battle for Gospel Preaching* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1995). In addition to learning about Spurgeon's life and ministry, every pastor should read his classic *Lectures to My Students* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2008).

Young man, you look very miserable . . . and you will always be miserable—miserable in life and miserable in death—if you don’t obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved.” He then shouted at Spurgeon, “Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothing to do but look and live!”<sup>2</sup>

Spurgeon retells this scene vividly (see pages 18–20) and recounts, “I saw at once the way of salvation . . . I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, ‘Look!’ what a charming word it seemed to me.”<sup>3</sup> And then the clouds of guilt and shame rolled away. As he looked to Christ alone for salvation, he saw the sun shining through at last and his joy was inexpressible. He was saved by grace alone, not works.

This story marks his conversion and informs the entirety of his life and teaching. He knew what it was to try to save himself, and to work for his own salvation, but when he became convinced that it is all by grace and grace alone, that became his clarion call. He loved Reformed theology and would interchangeably refer to it as “Calvinism” and “the doctrines of grace.”<sup>4</sup>

Dave Taylor comments, “When I think of Mr. Spurgeon and how he shaped Sovereign Grace, I first of all think of his love for and passion for the doctrines of grace.” May we ever be marked by a passion for knowing and applying and proclaiming the grace of God in the gospel!

## ***2. A Man of Action***

But Spurgeon was not a “let go and let God” nor a “hyper-Calvinist” type of Christian. Instead, he was a man of action. I have never read of a Christian pastor who worked as hard as Spurgeon. So consumed was he for the glory of God being spread in the world, the primacy of the local church, the power of

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2. Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 19.

3. *Ibid.*, 19.

4. *Ibid.*, 67.

preaching, the eternal misery of the lost, and the present misery of the poor, that he lived a life of almost ceaseless activity.

Astonishingly, these are just some of the many activities that occupied him each week: Preaching ten times a week, conducting prayer services, visiting the sick, conversing with members of his church, interviewing baptism candidates, starting and running a Pastors College, planting churches, establishing orphanages and almshouses, building the Metropolitan Tabernacle, visiting and supporting other churches, writing and publishing, and answering hundreds of letters.

Admittedly, all this activity did break his body down and he was in constant sickness and pain due to varying maladies. However, his example inspires since he wasn't doing it for his fame or glory or notoriety, but for Jesus. He once replied to someone who was worried that he would break his strength (constitution) if he kept it up:

Well, if I have done so, I am glad of it. . . . If I had fifty constitutions, I would rejoice to break them down in the service of the Lord Jesus Christ. You young men that are strong, overcome the wicked one and fight for the Lord while you can. You will never regret having done all that lies in you for our blessed Lord and Master.<sup>5</sup>

As our SGC founding generation discovered the doctrines of grace, it was Spurgeon's example of zeal that protected us from sitting on our hands. To the contrary, these doctrines compelled us to go out with the gospel. Bill Patton recalls, "Spurgeon's pronounced emphasis on soul-winning while fully affirming Calvinistic doctrine, fired up our evangelistic zeal." This is just as imperative today. May our churches be full of men and women of action.

### ***3. A Man of Steel***

Despite having global notoriety, a church of thousands, preaching to an estimated ten million people in his lifetime, let alone his publications of sermons

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5. Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, 132.

and books around the world, Spurgeon encountered significant opposition and challenge throughout his years. This especially occurred in his final decade of ministry, mainly because he stood his ground for his theological convictions. In the early 1860s there was simultaneously a revival occurring and a major shift in the evangelical landscape as a new theology arose in the church. We now know it as Liberalism, a belief that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God. Spurgeon presciently saw it for what it was and called it out as a heretical cancer. He saw that this was not a modernized Christianity but a new religion altogether. Despite much pressure for him to be “inclusive” and “tolerant” and “not cause a fuss,” Spurgeon couldn’t stand by idly while the gospel was being whittled away.

Bill Patton remarks,

He took a courageous stand for the gospel during a theological downgrade in the churches; and with deep sorrow, he endured false accusations and unjust censure, even from dear friends. We came to identify with Spurgeon in all those things, and his example continues to deeply inspire and challenge us to this day.

This is of vital importance for all current pastors and members of Sovereign Grace Churches today. We must be men and women, churches and pastors, of steel and conviction—standing up for the truth no matter how unpopular or how “intolerant” we may seem. Those churches who embraced the new theology, with downgraded views of doctrine and Scripture, lost the gospel, and eventually died out. Let us be churches marked by a steely conviction to hold to the truth.

#### ***4. A Man of Joy***

With all this hard work and all this opposition, it would be easy to assume that Spurgeon was either impervious to discouragement or riddled with bitterness and cynicism. Instead, although he regularly was beset with deep tides of depression, he was a man of joy. He was deeply serious about holiness

and the majesty of God, devoted to prayer, intense in his labors, and yet would easily burst into thanksgiving and praise.

Not only this, he loved a good jest and joke and was constantly able to use his gift of humor and laughter in his relationships and his ministry, without being flippant or flamboyant. Once, when he was critiqued for including humor in his sermons he wittily replied, “He would not blame me if he only knew how many of them I keep back.”

This is certainly something I love about Spurgeon and Sovereign Grace. A zeal for the glory of God, and holiness, and worship, and serving, and hard work; and a zeal that includes a love for life, laughter, friendships, and relationships. When I was at the Pastors College we were invited to sit in the elders meetings for Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville with C. J. Mahaney, Bob Kauflin, Gary Ricucci, Jeff Purswell, and Brian Chesmore. It struck me that although there was much work to be done, hard decisions to be made, things to plan and prepare, the first order of the day (and usually peppered throughout every other agenda item!) was a healthy dose of joyful laughter, joking, and ribbing, all borne out of goodwill and brotherly love.

As C. J. has often said, “we are to be happy pastors.” By this he doesn’t mean a glib, cheery, commercial smile, but a pinch-yourself, “I can’t believe I am saved and that I get to do this” sort of joy. And this goes for all members of our churches too. Let us, as the psalmist exhorts, “Serve the Lord with gladness!” (Ps. 100:2).

## ***5. A Man Not Alone***

Finally, it is all too easy to imagine historical figures as solitary heroes leaping tall buildings in a single bound like Superman. Spurgeon is one of a kind, but he didn’t do any of this on his own.

First, Spurgeon was a man wholly dependent upon God for all his life and ministry. His daily walk and private devotions evidence this. But we can also see it in his desperation for people to pray for him. When considering his calling to be the pastor at New Park Street Baptist, he agreed to a three-month

trial on a condition: “one thing is due, namely, that in private as well as public, they must all wrestle in prayer . . . that I may be sustained in the great work.”<sup>6</sup>

Second, Spurgeon was a man who was deeply in love with and deeply in need of his amazing wife, Susannah. Their partnership in ministry was incalculable, as she was his great friend and helper. One author has said, “The fact is, that Mrs. Spurgeon’s aid and sympathy were invaluable in the moulding of her husband’s character and life, so that he never could have been what he was without her.”<sup>7</sup> Ladies, please make it a priority to study Susannah Spurgeon’s life and example as a wife and Christian woman; she is simply remarkable.

Third, Spurgeon was a man of the local church and he knew the church comprised various parts, all with a role to play. Within his own church there were so many ministries and societies that were all organized and run by various members that it’s not possible to list them here. (At one time, sixty-six were counted!) Suffice it to say, it was not a one-man show. The elders, the deacons, and a huge proportion of the five thousand members were intimately involved in the life of the church. Behind the great man was a great church, and a movement of church plants grew out of their church.

### ***Inspiration not Imitation***

After informing us that Spurgeon is our hero, Jared Mellinger said,

We study his life and ministry, not so much for imitation but for inspiration. It’s not so much, “Here’s how you, too, can do with your life what Spurgeon did with his life.” That’s going to be: Step one, you’re not Charles Spurgeon; Step two, stop trying. Yet, oh, what inspiration we find in this man of God.

Indeed, we cannot imitate him, but we can and should be inspired by him. May Spurgeon become a hero of yours, and may we always be known as a family of churches full of grace, action, steel, joy, and dependence. With all

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6. Ibid., 47.

7. Ibid., 54

of this focus on the man, I'm sure Spurgeon would want us to end this article by redirecting it all back to his gracious Lord:

“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!” (Psalm 115:1)

# CHRIST-CENTERED GATHERINGS

BRYAN CHAPPELL ON WORSHIP AND PREACHING

*Dustin Smetona*

*Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church of Orange (Orange, CA)*

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**C**orporate worship is nothing more, and nothing less, than a re-presentation of the gospel in the presence of God and his people for his glory and their good.”<sup>1</sup>

If you are a pastor, leader, or member of a Sovereign Grace church, I can safely assume that your heart leaped for joy as you read the quote above. We love the gospel of Jesus Christ. We love our church meetings. We desperately want to “keep the main thing the main thing” as C. J. Mahaney so memorably taught us.

But that is easier said than done.

Our pastoral team is committed to functionally gospel-centered Sunday gatherings. If you are a Sovereign Grace pastor, I am confident that you are too. The question at the front of our minds as we plan our church’s order of service each week is, “How do we keep the glory and grace of Jesus at the center of all we do? How do we ensure that gospel-centered is not merely a badge we wear?”

Bryan Chapell is a faithful and dependable guide for leaders who are asking that question. Sovereign Grace has had the privilege of hosting him in our churches and at our conferences<sup>2</sup> in the past. Not long ago, he was hosted

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1. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 120.

2. <https://sovereigngracemusic.org/training/resources/gathering-to-rehearse-the-gospel/>

in El Paso, TX<sup>3</sup> and Juárez, Mexico.<sup>4</sup> A few years ago, he taught Sovereign Grace pastors about preaching at the Northeast Regional Assembly of Elders. We have deeply benefited from his ministry, and his enduring influence is captured in his writing.

Two of his books have had a pervasive influence on our Sunday meetings: *Christ-Centered Worship* and *Christ-Centered Preaching*. They have provided us with robust biblical, theological, and historical foundations to lead gospel-centered corporate worship and preach gospel-centered expository sermons.

### ***Redemption is the Bible's Message***

“We believe that the gospel—the good news of God’s saving activity in Jesus Christ—is . . . the center of the Bible’s story” (Luke 24:44–47).<sup>5</sup>

As our 7 Shared Values state, the Bible is the true story of redemption. It is impossible to read the Bible accurately without detecting its redemptive arc. God’s Word, fundamentally, is a message of redemption with a call to repent and believe, not a list of moral requirements or a strategy for changing society. We are gospel-centered because the Bible is gospel-centered.

Chapell writes,

We make our worship Christ-centered by shaping it to help God’s people understand and appreciate the grace in all Scripture that culminates in their Savior’s ministry . . . Even aspects of worship that do not directly reference Jesus will honor his purposes when the service is shaped by the contours of redemption that find their ultimate meaning in him.<sup>6</sup>

We have nothing greater to offer our people and our guests than the biblical

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3. <https://www.crossofgrace.net/chapell>

4. <https://www.sovereigngrace.com/blog/fieles-2022-pastors-conference-in-juarez-mexico>

5. <https://www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shared-values>

6. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 115.

gospel. One of my fellow pastors often says to guests in our service, “We hope you leave more impressed with Jesus than with us.” To be clear, our church is not in danger of impressing anyone. We are in danger of simply being unimpressive. If we did not have the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ to offer, we would not last long. But thanks be to God, we have the news of redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to expound, rehearse, and offer to everyone who visits us on a Sunday. Jesus is more impressive than we have yet to grasp.

### ***An Unwavering Commitment to Expository Preaching***

Expositional preaching ensures that our sermons are filled with both authority and redemption. Chapell explains that *Christ-Centered Preaching* could be wrapped around those two words.<sup>7</sup> We aim to preach words that carry the very authority of God himself. In order to do that, our words must clearly proceed from his Word.

His definition and defense of expository preaching is concise, clear, and compelling. “The most dependable way of explaining what the Bible means is to select a biblical text prayerfully, divide it according to its significant thoughts and features, and then explain the nature and implications of each.”<sup>8</sup>

I can think of no better way to describe what Sovereign Grace pastors do each week as they prepare for the pulpit.

### ***The Transforming Power of the Gospel***

“... the goal of preaching is not merely to impart information but to provide the means of transformation ordained by a sovereign God that will affect the lives and destinies of eternal souls committed to a preacher’s spiritual care.”<sup>9</sup> In a cultural and spiritual climate dominated by self-improvement, we are

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7. Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994, 2005), 18.

8. *Ibid.*, 30.

9. *Ibid.*, 25.

preaching the power of God through the gospel for personal transformation. Chapell is so helpful on this point because he reminds us that biblical, gospel preaching is the means by which God does his transformative work in us. God charges pastors to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2), because that is how he is going to comfort, convict, encourage, and strengthen the people in our spiritual care.

Anyone who has played in Little League or even attended a tee-ball game has heard a coach say, “Keep your eye on the ball.” Chapell is a preaching coach who will help us keep our eye on the ball when it comes to preaching. If we want to reach hearts and change lives, we must double-down on applicational preaching that proceeds straight from the Bible and keeps Christ in clear view.

### ***Faith for the Faithful Preaching of God’s Word***

The two most prominent temptations for pastors who have just preached are pride and discouragement. Pride leads us on a hunt for the things we did well. Discouragement obsesses over the parts we wish we could improve. But faith directs our attention to God’s work through our preaching.

Chapell’s theology of preaching is a breath of fresh air to preachers in need of greater faith for the task.

When preachers perceive the power that the Word holds, confidence in their calling grows even as pride in their performance withers. We need not fear our ineffectiveness when we speak truths God has empowered to perform his purposes.<sup>10</sup>

The power is in the Word, not the preacher’s abilities. That remarkable truth can starve pride, nurture humility, and banish discouragement. I am grateful to God that I have heard this over and over again from my own pastors, in private conversations with other Sovereign Grace pastors, and from sermons at the SGC Pastors Conference. It has been sown into my heart by the faithful reminders of many good brothers, Chapell included. Now, it humbles and

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10. Ibid., 30.

encourages me each time I open God’s Word to my dear church.

## ***Every Church Has a Liturgy***

As a church movement with charismatic roots, the word “liturgy” can feel stuffy and stifling. But we have come to embrace that every church has a structure to their corporate worship. Certain practices, habits, and expectations characterize our meetings.

Chapell observes, “Whether one intends it or not, our worship patterns always communicate something.”<sup>11</sup> Bob Kauflin made a similar point on Sovereign Grace Music’s podcast, *Sound + Doctrine*.

Every meeting tells a story. We’re telling a story about something that’s significant, whether it’s where we’ve been and where we’re going or who we are, but the story that God calls his people to proclaim again and again throughout history, is the story of his deliverance . . .<sup>12</sup>

Faithful leaders can plan biblically and wisely without compromising our continuationist convictions. And planning can be a real gift to our churches. Our people need to drink in the glory of God, mourn over the reality of sin, process suffering and grief, pray according to God’s will, and embrace the Savior who is himself all we need. God has assigned us the task of ensuring that these biblical priorities are part of our worship.

With God’s Word as our guide, we intentionally plan moments of adoration, confession of sin, assurance of gospel pardon, prayers of supplication and devotion, right administration of the sacraments, the public reading of Scripture, and benedictions that plant courage in the hearts of saints heading back out into a dangerous world.

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11. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 18.

12. Bob Kauflin, “Values of Corporate Worship: Christ Centered and Gospel Driven, Part 3 of 5,” September 13, 2021. In *Sound + Doctrine*, podcast. <https://sovereigngracemusic.org/training/resources/season-3-episode-05-values-of-corporate-worship-christ-centered-and-gospel-driven-part-3-of-5/>

This is described well by Chapell when he writes, “Our goal, therefore, should not be to mimic the liturgies that follow [in this book], but to learn how the church has used worship to fulfill gospel purposes through the ages so that we can intelligently design worship services that will fulfill gospel purposes today.”<sup>13</sup>

With an open Bible on our desks, an eye on church history, and a conscious dependence on the Spirit, we plan our worship gatherings—at the same time asking the Spirit to interrupt our plans as he deems necessary. As we read and apply Chapell’s writing, we will grow in our ability to plan corporate worship that fulfills gospel purposes.

### ***Read and Reread Bryan Chapell***

Sovereign Grace has gospel-centered convictions, but how do we continue to lead our churches in gospel-centered worship and preach gospel-centered sermons each week? Chapell is worth reading and rereading because he offers a wealth of insight on how to turn biblical theology into wise practices on Sundays and in the pulpit. If we desire to make our meetings reflective of our gospel convictions, we would do well to read and reference *Christ-Centered Worship* and *Christ-Centered Preaching* over and over again.

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13. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 21.

# A VOICE OF CLARITY IN AN AGE OF CONFUSION

THE WRITINGS OF KEVIN DeYOUNG

*Jared Mellinger*

*Senior Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)*

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**M**ost of the theologians and authors who have influenced Sovereign Grace Churches have either gone to be with the Lord or are advanced in years. An exception to this is Kevin DeYoung. DeYoung is very much a contemporary of mine—in fact, we got married within a month of each other and our kids are the same ages. Although I tapped out after six kids, and he currently has nine. One of us has been more productive than the other in a number of ways.

Over the past 15 years, DeYoung's writing has made him one of the most helpful and trusted voices for the pastors and members of Sovereign Grace. His books on the church, the pursuit of holiness, Reformed theology, complementarianism, and busyness are well known in many of our churches. Most of his books are relatively short, which makes them all the more valuable as a pastoral tool.

DeYoung is the senior pastor at Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, and associate professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte. He received his Ph.D. in early modern history at the University of Leicester (UK). His dissertation on the Presbyterian theologian John Witherspoon was published as an academic book entitled *The Religious Formation of John Witherspoon*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Kevin DeYoung, *The Religious Formation of John Witherspoon* (London, UK: Routledge, 2021).

DeYoung has written over a dozen books, and his ministry is called Clearly Reformed. I really like this ministry. If you visit [ClearlyReformed.org](http://ClearlyReformed.org), you will find thousands of pieces of content he has produced, including sermons, articles, book reviews, videos, and interviews. The website explains:

In an age of confusion and complication, we believe one of the great needs in our day is for clarity. People need Bible truths and good theology presented clearly and applied carefully—to their lives and to the problems of our day.<sup>2</sup>

My goal in this article is to provide an overview of DeYoung’s writing, with the hope that our churches continue to benefit from his ministry.

### ***The Church and Its Mission***

The book that first put Kevin DeYoung on the map was *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*. Coauthored with Ted Kluck, this book was written with a concern that the Emerging Church movement was undermining the knowability of God, the importance of doctrine, the reality of hell, the centrality of preaching in worship, and the need for faithful pastoral leadership. Questions had replaced propositions, dialogue replaced monologue, and social transformation replaced evangelism.

DeYoung believes, “Pastors are supposed to be more than lost travelers with more questions than answers.”<sup>3</sup> The book has an excellent epilogue on Revelation 2–3, entitled “Listening to All the Churches of Revelation.” Church leaders today “need a vision for the church that encompasses all the letters of Revelation.”<sup>4</sup>

This was followed with *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion*. The goal of this book was to challenge the assumption that

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2. Kevin DeYoung, “About,” [clearlyreformed.org](http://clearlyreformed.org).

3. Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 160.

4. *Ibid.*, 247.

church is lame and that the institutional church in America is categorically failing. DeYoung writes, “I see the church derided with mockery and scorn. I see critics exaggerating her weaknesses and incapable of affirming any of her strengths.”<sup>5</sup> “We could all use a little less complaining and a little more gratitude. It’s easy to blast the church for all its failures. It’s harder to live in it day after day, year after year, with all its ho-hum humdrum and slowly, consistently make a difference.”<sup>6</sup> This remains one of my favorite books on the church.

In 2011 DeYoung coauthored a book with Greg Gilbert that proved to be tremendously important, and protected many churches. *What is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* was written out of a concern that many define the mission of the church too broadly, in a way that centers social transformation and marginalizes the essential tasks of proclamation, witness, and disciple making. The book has helped a generation of pastors and churches remain faithful to the distinct mission Christ has given to the church.

All of DeYoung’s writings on the church and its mission articulate what we in Sovereign Grace have long believed regarding the importance of the church, a love for the church, and the mission of the church.

## ***Two Timely Books for our Churches***

There are a few books by DeYoung that are especially important for our churches because of the definition they bring to particular issues. One of these books is *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*. “The hole in our holiness is that we don’t really care much about it. Passionate exhortation to pursue gospel-driven holiness is barely heard in most of our churches.”<sup>7</sup> The book was timely because some

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5. Kevin DeYoung, *Why We Love the Church: In Praise of Institutions and Organized Religion* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2009), 138.

6. *Ibid.*, 221.

7. Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 10.

Christians were embracing erroneous ideas about effort, the law, rules, good works, and pleasing God.

While the pursuit of holiness was not a new emphasis in our churches, having been influenced by Jerry Bridges, J. C. Ryle, John Owen, and J. I. Packer, *The Hole in our Holiness* is a fresh articulation of this theme for a new generation. If you haven't read anything by DeYoung, this book is a great place to start.

Another book that brings timely definition to a disputed area of Christian living is *Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction*. DeYoung walks through all the primary passages in Scripture that teach complementarianism, explains what it means to be a man or a woman, and makes pastoral application throughout. The appendix on women preaching is excellent ("Should Complementarian Churches Allow a Woman to Give the Sunday Sermon?"). This resource was intentionally created for the interested layperson, and can be read in a few hours. It is the first book I recommend on the topic of gender.<sup>8</sup>

Given the prevalence of egalitarianism and gender confusion in our day, it would be tempting to write a book that is largely critical and reactive. Happily, DeYoung took a different approach in *Men and Women in the Church*.

If [our] vision of sexual complementarity . . . is to have any persuasive power in the years ahead . . . it must be tender, winsome, and warm. It must be grounded in Scripture and sensitive to people. It must be tough but never triumphalistic. It must be convictional, not merely traditional. It must be attuned to the mood of the culture and resolutely unwilling to give in to the culture's demands.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Related to gender and sexuality, DeYoung also wrote *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

9. Kevin DeYoung, *Men and Women in the Church: A Short, Biblical, Practical Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 131.

## ***Celebrating Ordinary Christianity***

In the book *Impossible Christianity*, DeYoung says a theme that runs through his writings is this:

Following Christ is never easy, but it does not have to be impenetrably mysterious, exceedingly complex, and relentlessly guilt-producing. Normal people can walk in God's will (*Just Do Something*) and live a holy life (*The Hole in Our Holiness*) without being frantic all the time (*Crazy Busy*). Normal churches are worth celebrating (*Why We Love the Church*), and the mission of the church is not everything under the sun (*What Is the Mission of the Church?*). Ordinary Christians and ordinary churches can be faithful, fruitful, and pleasing to God.<sup>10</sup>

DeYoung desires faithful Christians and faithful churches to be free from the burdens of false guilt or feeling like we are never enough. Humility does not mean we should feel like spiritual failures all the time. God does not receive our best works as filthy, but as a fragrant offering that is pleasing in Christ. And pastors need to commend their churches where they are faithful.

Part of the problem is the way many pastors talk about these things. As a preacher, I know how to deliver a sermon so that everyone feels convicted. It's tempting to think that every good sermon leaves every Christian feeling guilty for something . . . That's not healthy preaching, and it doesn't make for healthy congregations.<sup>11</sup>

In all of his writing, DeYoung writes with this pastoral sensitivity. The result is that his books are consistently refreshing and gracious, even when they are challenging. DeYoung celebrates ordinary Christianity in a world loaded with guilt.

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10. Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity: Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 7.

11. *Ibid.*, 55.

Another example of this, and one of my favorite books by DeYoung, is *Crazy Busy: A (Mercifully) Short Book About a (Really) Big Problem*. Chapter 6 on parenting (“A Cruel Kindergarchy”) is one my wife and I have often returned to. The subtitle is “You Need to Stop Freaking Out about Your Kids.” The chapter is gold. Here is a sample:

We live in a strange new world . . . We have put unheard amounts of energy, time, and focus into our children. And yet, we assume their failures will almost certainly be our fault for not doing enough. . . . By trying to do so much for them, we are actually making our kids less happy. It would be better for us and for our kids if we planned fewer outings, got involved in fewer activities, took more breaks from the kids, did whatever we could to get more help around the house, and made parental sanity a higher priority.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Fundamentals of the Faith***

The basics of the Christian faith have long been taught in Reformed catechisms by expounding the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. DeYoung has written two books on doctrinal statements, a book on the Ten Commandments, and a book on the Lord’s Prayer.

His guide to the Heidelberg Catechism is *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism*. The Heidelberg Catechism is a glorious introduction to the gospel, and includes 129 questions and answers focusing on the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. DeYoung’s guide to the Canons of Dort is *Grace Defined and Defended: What a 400-Year-Old Confession Teaches Us about Sin, Salvation, and the Sovereignty of God*.

In addition to his books on the creeds, DeYoung has an excellent treatment of the Ten Commandments: *The Ten Commandments: What They Mean, Why They Matter, and Why We Should Obey Them*. His book on the Lord’s Prayer is, *The Lord’s Prayer: Learning from Jesus on What, Why, and How to Pray*.

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12. Kevin DeYoung, *Crazy Busy: A Mercifully Short Book About a (Really) Big Problem*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 65, 70–71.

Related to the fundamentals of the faith, DeYoung also has a short introduction to the doctrine of Scripture, *Taking God At His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me*, and a children's Bible, *The Biggest Story Bible Storybook*. He has recently released a devotional aimed at teaching theology, called *Daily Doctrine: A One-Year Guide to Systematic Theology*.

## ***The Art of Gracious Polemics***

I appreciate that DeYoung does not shy away from polemics. Polemics in theology means promoting the truth by correcting error and engaging controversy. It is an essential part of Christian ministry. Following Jude's practice in the New Testament, DeYoung is most eager to write about our common salvation, but willing to contend for the faith as necessary (Jude 1:3).

He is willing to say things that he knows will not be popular among large segments of the social media world, and we love him all the more for this. Yet DeYoung remains gracious even when he is criticizing and correcting. He is skilled at contending without being contentious. He does this largely in occasional book reviews and blog posts.

His critical book reviews include "*The Making of Biblical Womanhood: A Review*,"<sup>13</sup> which is a helpful critique of an influential book by Beth Allison Barr, and "*The Rise of Right-Wing Wokeism: A Review of Stephen Wolfe's The Case for Christian Nationalism*."<sup>14</sup> He has also critiqued an unhelpful Gospel Coalition article, at the same time critiquing the even less helpful mob reaction to the article.<sup>15</sup>

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13. Themelios, Volume 46, Issue 2, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-making-of-biblical-womanhood-a-review/>

14. <https://media.thegospelcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/02195248/The-Rise-of-Right-Wing-Wokeism.pdf>

15. Kevin DeYoung, "What About that TGC Article on Sex?", Clearly Reformed, March 7, 2023, <https://clearlyreformed.org/so-what-about-that-tgc-article-on-sex/>

DeYoung has written a friendly and fair critique of Doug Wilson and Canon Press, called “On Culture War, Doug Wilson, and the Moscow Mood.”<sup>16</sup> He says that for all of Wilson’s strengths and for all the ways we can benefit from his ministry, his concern is that the vibe or tone of Wilson’s public ministry is “too often incompatible with Christian virtue” and is “inconsiderate of other Christians.”

## ***Navigating Current Issues***

DeYoung is able to speak to current issues in a way that is informed by historic and systematic theology, sensitive to cultural dynamics, relentlessly clear, fair to those he disagrees with, and accessible to a broad audience.

A blog post I have often recommended is “Why Reformed Evangelicalism Has Splintered: Four Approaches to Race, Politics, and Gender.”<sup>17</sup> This article addresses the growing factionalism among conservative evangelical Reformed Christians who share similar doctrinal commitments.

“Toward a Better Discussion about Abuse” addresses the problem of abuse in the church and the need to help victims, focusing on DeYoung’s concern “that correcting the church’s failures when it comes to abuse has given way in some places to an unhealthy overcorrection.” DeYoung writes, “We must correct abuse where it exists, without overstating the problem, without calling all authority into question, and without damaging the reputations of those who don’t deserve to be pilloried.”<sup>18</sup>

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16. Kevin DeYoung, “On Culture War, Doug Wilson, and the Moscow Mood,” *Clearly Reformed*, November 27, 2023, <https://clearlyreformed.org/on-culture-war-doug-wilson-and-the-moscow-mood/>

17. Kevin DeYoung, “Why Reformed Evangelicalism Has Splintered,” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/why-reformed-evangelicalism-has-splintered-four-approaches-to-race-politics-and-gender/>.

18. Kevin DeYoung, “Toward a Better Discussion About Abuse,” *The Gospel Coalition*, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/toward-a-better-discussion-about-abuse/>.

DeYoung has also addressed issues related to race and ethnicity with wisdom. I recommend “Racial Reconciliation: What We (Mostly, Almost) All Agree On, and What We (Likely) Still Don’t Agree On,”<sup>19</sup> and “We Must Find a Better Way to Talk about Race.”<sup>20</sup>

On matters of the church and politics, DeYoung is a reliable guide. “The Church at Election Time”<sup>21</sup> provides wise counsel on how pastors can “lead their churches in our politically polarized culture.” Pastors will also benefit from “The Preacher and Politics: Seven Thoughts.”<sup>22</sup> “When You Say Nothing at All”<sup>23</sup> explains why we shouldn’t weigh in on every political matter, and praises the often-neglected value of saying nothing.

Finally, DeYoung has shared examples of pastoral prayers that provide a model for how to honor the Lord and care for the flock while addressing current issues. One example is his prayer on ethnic harmony and abortion: “A Prayer on Race and Roe.”<sup>24</sup>

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19. Kevin DeYoung, “Racial Reconciliation,” The Gospel Coalition, April 17, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/racial-reconciliation-mostly-almost-agree-likely-still-dont-agree/>.

20. Kevin DeYoung, “We Must Find a Better Way to Talk About Race,” The Gospel Coalition, January 6, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/we-must-find-a-better-way-to-talk-about-race/>.

21. Kevin DeYoung, “The Church at Election Time,” The Gospel Coalition, October 3, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/church-election-time/>.

22. Kevin DeYoung, “The Preacher and Politics,” The Gospel Coalition, May 1, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/preacher-politics-seven-thoughts/>.

23. Kevin DeYoung, “When You Say Nothing at All,” The Gospel Coalition, November 10, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/when-you-say-nothing-at-all/>.

24. Kevin DeYoung, “A Prayer on Race and Roe,” The Gospel Coalition, January 21, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/a-prayer-on-race-and-ro/>.

## *A Gift to the Church*

At a time when too many Christians are shifting and compromising, Kevin DeYoung is a tremendous gift from God to the church in general, and to the churches of Sovereign Grace in particular. Thank God for a voice marked by biblical conviction, clarity, and kindness.

One of the points of counsel I've given younger people in our church is to read everything they can by Kevin DeYoung—I think his ministry is especially important for a younger generation. And for pastors and leaders, I consider his pastoral voice an example to be followed. Reading DeYoung has helped me personally to think through issues with greater precision, and lead the church I serve with greater care.

Already, DeYoung's output has been impressive. Yet it could be that the bulk of his writings have yet to be written. I pray that God continues to bless the work of DeYoung's hands, to give him wisdom and energy, and that God continues to use him to strengthen churches and to influence many for the glory of Christ, for decades to come.



## **Other Journals from Sovereign Grace**

- Christ Our Treasure (Spring 2021)
- A Christ-Centered People (Summer 2021)
- Our Statement of Faith (December 2021)
- Our Shared Values (June 2022)
- Our Shaping Virtues (October 2022)
- A Passion for the Church (March 2023)
- Churches in Partnership (August 2023)



We plant and strengthen  
CHURCHES  
for the glory of God.

Sovereign Grace Churches is a confessional community of congregations, united in theology, fellowship, and mission. We treasure the sovereign grace of God in Christ, and we are committed to gospel-centered doctrine, preaching, and living.

Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation, to relationships that foster mutual encouragement, care, and a glad pursuit of Christlikeness.

We are continuationist in our pursuit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts, complementarian in convictions on gender, and elder-governed in our polity, with some carefully delineated areas of shared governance. Our passion is to see churches planted and nurtured throughout the world.

To learn more about our churches, including our Statement of Faith and how to join us, visit [sovereigngrace.com](http://sovereigngrace.com).



## Equipping pastors to keep watch over their life and doctrine.

The Sovereign Grace Pastors College exists to train men for pastoral ministry. We are a confessional institution, founded upon the beliefs and values of Sovereign Grace Churches. Our 10-month program combines careful scholarship, intentional discipleship, and practical training, all in the context of a specific local church.

At the Pastors College, students learn how to build their lives, families, and churches upon the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel produces a particular kind of pastor—joyful, grateful, servant-hearted shepherds who faithfully lead and care for “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

To learn more, visit us at [sgcpastorscollege.com](http://sgcpastorscollege.com).



## **Sovereign Grace Music**

Producing Christ-exalting  
songs and training  
for the Church.

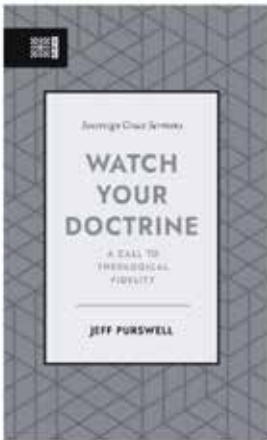
We call it Sound+Doctrine, and we've been doing it for decades.

Our music and training emerges from Sovereign Grace Churches and exists primarily to serve our churches. Sovereign Grace is a denomination joined together by a Statement of Faith, a passion for Christ, and a mission to plant churches rooted in and sustained by the gospel.

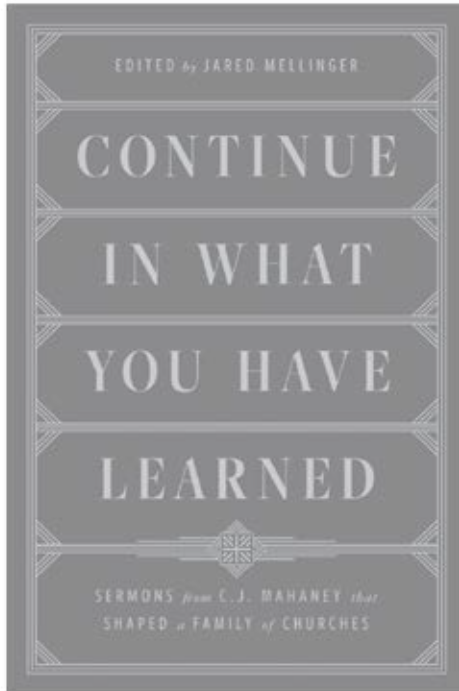
We're grateful our songs and resources are reaching an audience far beyond our churches, and thank God we can join with other churches, ministries, and artists to encourage theologically driven, Christ-exalting, congregationally accessible, heart impacting singing in the church.

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Also available from Sovereign Grace:



*Continue in What You Have Learned:  
Sermons from C. J. Mahaney that Shaped a  
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