

# *Theodidaktos* *Taught by God*

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**The**

**Evangelical or  
Anabaptist?**



**Great**

**Henry Friesen and  
Michael Zwaagstra  
square off over  
*The Activist Impulse***

pp. 3–10



**Debate**

# Editorial

## Saving the Soul

**T**HE SCOURGE OF THE EARLY Church in the second century continues to influence the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Gnosticism grew out of Platonism, the philosophy based on Plato's thought on life, particularly the dual natures of the spiritual and material worlds.

This Greek philosophy seeped into the Church and influenced Christianity so that a dualism developed declaring the body to be utterly sinful and the soul needing redemption from the body and this world. In other words, body = evil, soul = good.

Serious consequences arise when followers of Jesus begin to think in dualistic terms. What happens to the soul of our loved ones—believers in Christ—who die? Our “natural” tendency is to say that the body is laid to rest in the ground and the soul goes to heaven to be with God. Some sentimentalize this extremely when they imagine Grandma and Grandpa reunited on the streets of glory and, if they were wheelchair-bound, skipping along with Jesus. We find this comforting. But is it true?

Common pastoral theology at a funeral suggests that the deceased will receive a new body, implying that the old, worn-out body is of no further use. This is misleading and disrespectful to the original body God created.

Proper exegesis of 1 Cor. 15:35–44 tells us that God is not done with this body; Paul uses the metaphor of a seed to illustrate the transformation of the perishable body into an imperishable one.

Even though the body continues to decay in the grave it is reserved in God's plan for resurrection on the day Christ returns. What of the soul in the meantime?

This is where it gets tricky. Ancient Greeks speak of the soul as being separate from the body and yearning to escape the corruptible flesh. Scripture, on the other hand, speaks more often about the partnership of body and soul in praising the Lord, calling on his name, dedicating oneself to Christ's service and pouring out our souls.

What is the soul? Originally the Greek New Testament word for *soul* is “breath,” “breath of life,” or “life.” The soul is considered the seat of the will, desires and affections. It is a way of saying “person.” Some would say the soul is your personality.

What happens to the soul when we die? Job was

concerned that his soul would not go down to the pit (33:28–30), and the Psalmist praised the LORD for delivering his soul from death (116:8). We derive great meanings from our interpretations of these verses.

The Apostle Peter adds to this when he explains that the goal of our faith is the salvation of our souls (1 Pet. 1:9). Unfortunately, it seems that we are missing something in these passages that has been replaced by the old Greek dualism.

The Evangelical Church needs to revisit the theology of dying. Increasingly, books on the popular market are appearing rapidly and teaching an unorthodox view of death and heaven. Some have hinted at second chances beyond death in their near-death accounts.

Others speak of visions where Jesus meets them and gives them tours of heaven. They write books about this, explaining every detail, whereas when Paul alludes to his heavenly visit he heard things that one dare not repeat (2 Cor. 12:4).

We applaud the testimony of a four-year-old boy who declares, “Heaven is for real,” even though the validation of heaven comes from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Church is too sensitive or politically correct to challenge these testimonies and consequently silent

on the matter.

Returning to the question of the soul's place after death, I would suggest a theology in progress that may not seem immediately comforting. I think the soul dies.

If the soul is the personality of the individual then, when the person dies, his soul dies. Or as Paul says to the Thessalonians, it “sleeps” until the day of resurrection (1 Thess. 4:13–15).

And if the body and soul both die at death, how amazing is it that God who holds the power of resurrection raises not just the body, but the body and the soul, the whole person to life and to a glorious new reality.

Heaven is where God dwells; earth was meant for human beings. Fitting then that God will create a new heaven and a new earth that join together in a dwelling place for both God and humans who believed in his Son, Jesus Christ.

What do you think? *e*

Darryl G. Klassen



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**If the soul is the personality of the individual then, when the person dies, his soul dies.**

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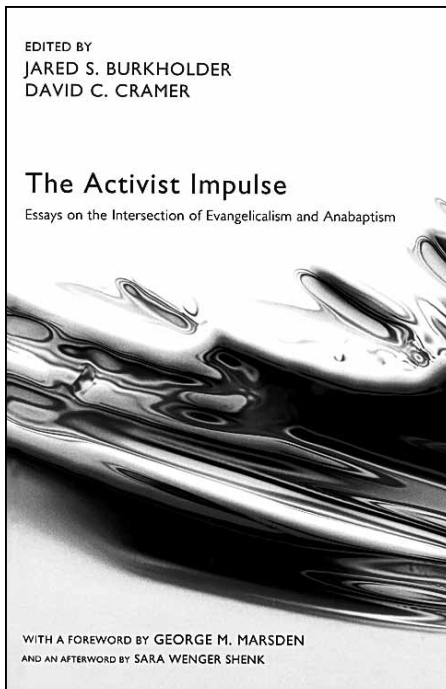
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## On Being the *Evangelical Mennonite* Conference



**Introduction:** The EMC has both *Evangelical* and *Mennonite* in our official name. By having both terms present, what sort of convictions do we stand for as a conference? To assist in answering this question, it was thought that we would invite two leaders to review a book that, while not produced by the EMC, does speak to questions that resonate within our context. The book is *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, eds. Jared S. Burkholder and David C. Cramer (Pickwick Publications, 2012). 444 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 9781608993305.

*The reviewers were asked to critique the book and then to respond to each other's review.*



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# A Laudable Contribution to an Enhanced Understanding

by Henry Friesen

Henry Friesen holds a BA in biblical and theological studies (Briercrest Bible College) and a Master of Philosophical Foundations in philosophical theology (Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto). He was involved in doctoral studies in philosophical theology.

**THE ACTIVIST IMPULSE IS** a collection of essays on the intersection of evangelicalism and Anabaptism. These essays are divided into four sections and preceded by a helpful introduction that provides preliminary characterizations of an activist impulse: a desire to engage American society through religiously motivated activism (2), Evangelicalism, an emphasis on divine redemption and personal conversion, biblical orthodoxy, evangelism/missions, and recently gravitating to political involvement (2); and Anabaptism, an emphasis on community, two-kingdom theology, global non-violence and social justice as a natural result of the radical discipleship that follows the teaching and example of Jesus (3). These

fundamental definitions are fleshed out in essays as deemed appropriate by the writers.

## Perceptive and Honest

In the first section, “Intersecting Stories: Historical Reflection on the Nexus of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism,” the writers are commendably perceptive and honest with regard to the historical suspicions and affinities that have been expressed.

Nolt offers a particularly helpful survey of the rich breadth of evangelical expression, and notes the historical concern Anabaptists have had regarding the distraction posed by an evangelical fixation on inerrancy (25, 26). At

the same time Nolt reminds us that Anabaptists benefitted from biblical studies at the conservative yet tolerant evangelical Biblical Seminary that included women on the faculty (27).

Roth reviews the shifts in perspective that have occurred with regard to the impact and value of evangelical Anabaptist interactions. While Mennonite communities at times experienced renewal under evangelical influence, this influence was also at times regarded with concern as it eroded historical Anabaptist commitments (49ff). He also notes the pivotal role of hermeneutics in some of the tensions experienced (60, 66).

A professor of American history at Messiah College, Fea presents a provocative case for a perspective on history that challenges many of the assumptions that currently hold sway with regard to America’s history as a nation favoured with divine approval. His challenge is directed at both Anabaptist



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critiques that are based on dualistic presuppositions, and the propensity of evangelicals to want to steer America back to supposed Christian origins.

## A Whitewash

Section Two is entitled “Intersecting Challenges: Anabaptism and the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy.” While the early characterizations of evangelicalism and Anabaptism are helpful and relatively accurate, the consistency with which a recognition of Anabaptist core values are operative in the essays is unsatisfactory.

Particularly in the second section that reviews the specific Anabaptist interaction with the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy there is a tendency for support of Anabaptist distinctives (eg., pacifism, 181, 186, 220) to count as modeling Anabaptist core values (placing a high value on the life and teaching of Jesus as regulative for understanding all of scripture). Much of this section came across as an attempt to whitewash some fundamentalist/evangelical Anabaptist history.

## Variants Gain a Voice

The third section, “Intersecting Concerns: Anabaptist and Evangelical Public Witness,” marks a turn in which the fundamentally variant accounts of the relation of Christ and scripture in evangelical and Anabaptist thought gains a voice.

Curiously, it is the same writer who posits the articulation of a peace position as a litmus test for Anabaptist commitments (220) who also notes that the most commonly cited reason for the evil of war (in Mennonite Brethren in Christ [MBIC] history) is the contradiction between war and the nature of the God we see in Jesus (225). This recognition raises troubling questions about the MBIC’s eventual abandoning of the Mennonite name and pacifism in favour of evangelism, which are not addressed at length.

Swartz highlights the affinities of Anabaptist thought with the “Evangelical left” as well as broader core evangelical theology (274, 285). References to the example, life, and teachings of Jesus become more frequent (267, 270f, 276f,

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## Erdel concludes that evangelical passion for the Great Commission is best fulfilled by living according to the Sermon on the Mount.

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280), which reflect a commensurately enhanced grasp of the core of Anabaptist theology that has been lacking to this point in the book.

Bowden’s review of the evangelical-Anabaptist spectrum by means of a comparison of Schaeffer, Yoder, and Wallis is also excellent—careful and informative—and, ultimately, he prefers Yoder’s position because he judges it to be most authentically rooted in scripture (293n1), while Schaeffer’s *Christian Manifesto* contains no significant discussion of Jesus (300).

## The Final Section

The Final Section is entitled “Intersecting Trajectories: Toward an Evangelical Anabaptist Theology and Praxis.” Erdel reflects on the practicality and advisability of running a nation by the principles outlined in Jesus’ teaching, particularly given that few Christians actually live by those teachings and many evangelicals debate whether Jesus, in fact, intended them to direct daily life. He concludes that evangelical passion for the Great Commission is best fulfilled by living according to the Sermon on the Mount (346).

While utilizing a decidedly evangelical hermeneutic—“inerrancy and the grammatico-historical exegesis” (357)—MacGregor proposes a biblical theology


of the atonement that studiously avoids the violence inherent in some current evangelical theories. The review of history is abbreviated but helpful, and he also takes pains to analyze the roots of evangelical and Anabaptist differences on theories of the atonement.

The last chapter contains a surprising twist. Cramer’s background is evangelical though he finds increasing affinity for Anabaptist ethical-theological commitments (380n7). Cramer understands that the evangelical hermeneutic is generally presumed to mitigate against pacifism, but he proposes to show that a careful reading of scripture that stays consistently within an evangelical hermeneutic necessarily results in precisely the Anabaptist ethic, and he cites Yoder extensively in support of this thesis.

## A Laudable Contribution

The varied nature of this book means that it contains something for almost everyone interested in some aspect of the intersection of evangelical and Anabaptist concern. The extensive notes and bibliographies are a rich resource for those who would like to do additional research.

This book makes a laudable contribution to an enhanced recognition and understanding of the intersection of evangelical and Anabaptist thought. While not all essays are equally current or insightful, later chapters are increasingly realistic about the intersection of these approaches to scripture, and offer provocatively fecund directions for further exploration and dialogue.

My own journey through evangelical and Reformed educational institutions has immeasurably sharpened my appreciation and respect for the profoundly biblical roots of my own Anabaptist heritage, and I wholeheartedly recommend further exploration of these traditions. This book provides a good entry into the conversation. 

# Anabaptism Without Evangelicalism is Dead

by Michael Zwaagstra

Michael Zwaagstra holds a Bachelor of Education degree, a Post Baccalaureate Certificate in Education, and a Master of Education degree (all University of Manitoba).

**W**HICH COMES FIRST, Anabaptism or evangelicalism? To some Christians, asking this question is much like trying to figure out whether the chicken or the egg came first.

Every chicken is hatched from an egg, but you can't get eggs without chickens to lay them. Similarly, many scholars struggle over how best to reconcile evangelicalism and Anabaptism and which doctrines should receive highest priority.

Judging by the length of their book, the editors of *The Activist Impulse* obviously feel there are no simple answers to these questions. On one level, they are correct. After all, there are many different forms of Anabaptism, each with its own unique history.

Some Anabaptists have always identified with evangelicalism while others eschew the label and feel that evangelicalism is harmful to their identity. A proper analysis of the theological evolution of the different Anabaptist churches warrants a volume of considerable length.

## Simple Indeed

On the other hand, answering some of these fundamental questions may actually turn out to be quite simple indeed. Let's go back to the chicken and egg paradox. If we accept the biblical creation account as presented, we know what came first.

Genesis 1:20 tells us that birds, including chickens, came directly into existence on the fifth day of creation. So the chicken came first and the seemingly unsolvable paradox is resolved.



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**Evangelicalism is most closely identified with the following four areas of emphasis—the need for personal conversion, a high regard for biblical authority, acceptance of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the need to tell others about the Gospel.**

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By the same token, I believe that the proper relationship between Anabaptism and evangelicalism is clear. Evangelicalism comes before Anabaptism.

While evangelicalism has acquired many meanings over the years, it is most closely identified with the following four areas of emphasis—the need for personal conversion, a high regard for biblical authority, acceptance of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the need to tell others about the Gospel. It is

difficult to see how anyone could reject these tenets of evangelicalism and still be considered a Christian in the biblical sense.

As a case in point, consider how much emphasis the Apostle Paul places on the bodily resurrection of Jesus. “And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished” (1 Cor. 15:16–17).

According to Paul, the resurrection is not an optional doctrine. Reject it and

you reject Christianity itself. This is why evangelicals place so much emphasis on the acceptance of this doctrine.

### **Tree Branches Without the Trunk**

In contrast, while a solid biblical case can be made for various Anabaptist doctrines (i.e., believers' baptism, non-resistance, priesthood of believers, non-swearing of oaths, etc.), none are so important that Christianity is impossible without them. In fact, it is perfectly possible to be a devoted follower of Christ while attending an evangelical church with a different set of theological distinctives.

However, being Anabaptist without being evangelical is like having tree branches without a trunk. What good is it to practice non-resistance if you don't believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead?

What's the point of proclaiming a priesthood of believers if you don't think there's any need to tell anyone outside the church about Jesus? Why bother performing believers' baptism if you think the Bible is merely a human book? Anabaptism cannot be properly practiced in isolation from evangelicalism.

### **Not Two Distinct Groups**

Many of the authors in *The Activist Impulse* regularly talk about evangelicals and Anabaptists as if they were two separate groups. And yet this is the wrong

way to think about the relationship between them. Far from being distinct groups of people, Anabaptists are evangelicals who happen to hold to several key theological distinctives. In fact, evangelicalism cannot be separated from Anabaptism unless we are prepared to sacrifice its very essence.

The same holds true of other Christian denominations and groups. Pentecostals are evangelicals who hold to distinctive beliefs about spiritual gifts, particularly speaking in tongues. Baptists are evangelicals who believe immersion is the only proper mode of baptism.

Reformed Church members are evangelicals who accept the doctrine of eternal security. If any of these other denominations sought to separate themselves from the core evangelical beliefs, their very identity as Christians would crumble.

Seventh-day Adventists are a good example of another denomination that's had to struggle with balancing its theological distinctives with evangelical essentials. While they share core beliefs with other Christians, Adventists also hold a set of unique doctrines such as the seventh-day Sabbath, conditional immortality, a pre-advent judgment, and the prophetic ministry of Ellen G. White. These distinctives caused many evangelicals to look at Adventists with suspicion and classify them as a non-Christian cult.

However, when cult expert Walter Martin interviewed Adventist church leaders in the 1950s, he found that Adventists held to the same core beliefs shared by other Christians. On the basis of these interviews, Martin became convinced that Adventists were evangelical Christians.

Adventists further affirmed their evangelicalism with the publication of their seminal book, *Questions on Doctrine*, in 1959. In that book, Adventists strongly defended their distinctive beliefs, but took pains to emphasize the shared beliefs they held with other evangelical Christians. In other words, they put evangelicalism before Adventism.

### **A Similar Choice**

A similar choice faces Anabaptists today. While there is little danger of being labeled as a non-Christian cult, Anabaptists can either embrace evangelical beliefs, or they can totally separate from evangelicalism and lose their core purpose. After all, what point is there in peacemaking if the ultimate peacemaker, Jesus Christ, still lies dead in a human grave? Evangelicalism gives Anabaptist vitality and purpose.

None of this means that Anabaptist beliefs, or the distinctive beliefs of any other denomination for that matter, are unimportant. They just don't carry the same level of importance as the key evangelical doctrines. Denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus is much more serious than challenging the Anabaptist doctrine of non-resistance.

As noted earlier, sometimes there is an easy solution to a seemingly unsolvable paradox. Just as we know the chicken came before the egg, we can also affirm that evangelicalism comes before Anabaptism. No denomination, including our own, should ever allow an emphasis on its theological distinctives to overshadow its evangelical identity. **e**

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# Response by Henry Friesen

I WISH TO THANK *THEO-didaktos* and Michael Zwaagstra for this opportunity to engage in dialogue. I believe conversation makes us stronger, and that conversation across significantly different perspectives can sharpen us as iron sharpens iron.

Although what follows will make it clear that I take issue with a number of points in Zwaagstra's review, I do consider him a sincere, good-hearted, fellow believer whose passion for his beliefs I find admirable. I commend him for a courageous response that reflects a popular evangelical perspective.

## A Polemic

"Anabaptism without evangelicalism is dead" (hereafter AWE) as a "review" of *The Anabaptist Impulse* (hereafter TAI) is more a polemic extolling evangelicalism over Anabaptism, which is a startling contrast to the spirit of the book supposedly reviewed. TAI explores the intersection of evangelicalism and Anabaptism, and that is a project I wholeheartedly endorse without denying that significant differences do exist between these camps on some matters.

## A Revisionist Distraction

Nevertheless, the analogy of which comes first, the chicken or the egg, is an ill-conceived historically revisionist distraction that does not serve to clarify any issues. Chronologically and theologically one would be hard-

pressed to muster any credible support for a priority of evangelicalism, and it is entirely unsurprising that no substantive support is offered.

The historical truth of the matter is that chronologically Anabaptists do come first, and evangelicals almost exclusively stand in the stream of theological thought whose genesis is Anabaptism. What AWE does attempt is a definition that basically casts evangelicalism as a placeholder for orthodox Christianity.

It is astonishing to read that there is no biblical Christianity outside of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism is defined so minimally that almost all variations of Christian theology hold the four "evangelical distinctives," and then any school of thought that holds these views is deemed to be evangelical, resulting in a caricature that grossly exaggerates the stature of evangelicalism within Christianity.

This is an entirely disingenuous move that is the exemplar par excellence of a definition that defines nothing, and therefore says nothing of substance regarding the relative merits of evangelicalism and Anabaptism.

## An Over-Simplification

What makes this oversimplification of evangelicalism especially problematic is that few evangelicals would actually be satisfied with this description. As just one example, particularly in North America (less so in the rest of the world)

most evangelicals are tenacious in their insistence that one subscribe to biblical inerrancy in order to claim a high view of scripture.

Many Christians (in addition to Anabaptists and emergent evangelicals like Brian McLaren) enthusiastically endorse a high view of scripture, but see the evangelical obsession with inerrancy as a red herring that actually distracts from the authority of scripture (e.g., see next paragraph). This reality renders this definition of evangelicalism rather duplicitous.

## Distinctives Grow From Core

AWE replicates the same error noted in some of the TAI contributions—that of mistaking Anabaptist distinctives (quote: believers' baptism, non-resistance, priesthood of believers, non-swearing of oaths, etc.) for core Anabaptist values. These distinctives are often the most recognized feature of Anabaptist thought, but they are not the core of Anabaptist theology.

These distinctives grow out of core Anabaptist theology, which takes scripture very seriously, recognizes a trajectory of God's self-revelation in scripture that begins in Genesis and moves through all of the texts of scripture to culminate in God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ. This recognition compels Anabaptists to take Jesus very seriously, and it is this careful attention to the life and teachings of Jesus that gives rise to the distinctives as the luscious fruit nurtured by a deeply rooted vine.

## Flippant Dismissal

As such, AWE's flippant dismissal of these distinctives as entirely superfluous to Christian expression, immediately after acknowledging solid biblical warrant for the

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distinctives, raises troubling questions about the importance (in AWE) of actually following Christ and scripture.

Furthermore, this casual dismissal underscores the concern previously noted regarding the real value of inerrancy as a safeguard for maintaining biblical authority.

While AWE does pay lip service to the folly of casting evangelicals and Anabaptists as opposing groups, it is done in a fashion that undermines the unique strengths of each, and appears deliberately designed to discount Anabaptist thought as a robust and distinct voice within the larger family of Christian theology.

This extremely impoverished recognition of the potential symbiosis between evangelicalism and Anabaptism, in fact, diminishes both, and risks denuding either of any possibility of entering into a robust conversation that is anything more than narcissism in the case

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## It is patently not the case that Anabaptism without evangelicalism is dead. It most certainly is the case that Anabaptism is dead without Jesus Christ.

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of evangelicals, or subservient pawns in the case of Anabaptists.

### Patently Not the Case

It is patently not the case that Anabaptism without evangelicalism is dead. It most certainly is the case that Anabaptism is dead without Jesus Christ. The quickest way to the death of any tradition is to move towards an insular position that considers itself above and beyond learning from other voices that present a challenge to its hegemony; and that is a very real danger for evangelicalism in the mold of AWE.

### Beyond Petty Arguments

In the spirit of *TAI* I would plead for a robust conversation respecting biblical

truth, based on convictions that are strong enough to entertain challenges from various voices. There is much of merit in both evangelical and Anabaptist traditions. Nothing is gained by petty arguments about which tradition has priority.

We need to listen to both traditions, as well as other voices, for any help on how to follow Christ more transparently so that when people see us, they see Jesus. I plead for a conversation that is not just about words and texts and doctrines, but the kind of conversation that listens and learns together—the conversation that is a radical discipleship that follows the Truth Who is the Way and the Life. *☉*

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## Response by Michael Zwaagstra

**H**ENRY FRIESEN HAS written a thoughtful and insightful review of *The Activist Impulse*. I first met Henry about seven years ago when we served together on the Evangelical Anabaptist Committee, and I was impressed by his substantial theological knowledge and respectful tone. Since that time, I've had the opportunity to dialogue with Henry on a number of occasions and always came away enriched by the experience.

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**I would argue inerrancy simply reflects the historic, orthodox Christian position on biblical inspiration.**

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Because of the point-counterpoint format of this dialogue, my response to Henry's review focuses primarily on areas of disagreement. This should not be taken as disagreement with all his views, nor does it mean his analysis of *The Activist Impulse* is flawed.

In fact, I think Henry fairly and accurately summarizes the key points within it. Nevertheless, Henry and I do disagree on some significant theological issues.

### Inerrancy

For example, while Henry dismisses the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as a "distraction," I would argue inerrancy simply reflects the historic, orthodox Christian position on biblical inspiration. As the Apostle Paul states, "All scripture is breathed out by God..." (2 Tim. 3:16a).

In other words, every word in the Bible precisely reflects God's message to humanity. Since God does not err, it is logical to conclude his Word does not err either. This applies not only to faith and practice but to science and history as well.

Although the word inerrancy may have been coined in the nineteenth

century, theologians throughout the ages held to the view that the Bible is true in everything it affirms. In his classic tract, *Against Heresies*, second-century theologian Irenaeus stated, “The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and his Spirit.”

Fourth-century theologian St. Augustine also affirmed the absolute perfection of scripture. In a letter to St. Jerome, he declared “For I confess to your charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honour to the canonical books of Scripture; of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.” Clearly, biblical inerrancy is not a new doctrine.

### A Modern Notion

What is new is the modern-day notion that we should distinguish between biblical infallibility and biblical inerrancy. Unfortunately, many Christians, including a significant number of Anabaptists, claim the Bible is correct when describing salvation but contains incorrect historical facts, outdated scientific concepts, and inaccurate statements.

Such a distinction was absolutely foreign to the Early Church Fathers and to the Bible writers themselves. As a case in point, Paul built an entire argument around the identity of Jesus on the absence of one letter from one word in the book of Genesis (Gal. 3:16).

### A Concern

I noted that Henry criticized the second section of *The Activist Impulse* for conflating support of Anabaptist distinctives (i.e., peace) with the Anabaptist core value of “placing a high value on the life and teaching of Jesus as regulative for understanding all of Scripture.”

To be honest, I find it concerning when some Anabaptists claim the words of Jesus are more important than the words throughout the rest of the New Testament. Every word in each of the New Testament (and Old Testament) books reflects what God chose to say. “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:21).

While it makes sense to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament (i.e., reading Matthew to better understand the messianic prophecies of

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**Placing the writings of Paul at a lower level than the Gospels ignores the fact that Paul spoke under direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit and as a representative of Jesus Christ.**

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Isaiah), nowhere does the Bible validate a hermeneutic that values the four Gospels more than the letters of Paul.

Placing the writings of Paul at a lower level than the Gospels ignores the fact that Paul spoke under direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit and as a representative of Jesus Christ. Within the New Testament, the words of Paul are the very words of God and we dare not minimize their importance.

### The Larger Picture

So while I agree with Henry that *The Activist Impulse* provides some useful insights into the historical background of Anabaptism, I also think we need to be careful not to lose sight of the larger picture. At the end of the day, it is far more important to preach the evangelical essentials than to dwell on the doctrinal distinctives that separate Anabaptists from other Christians. *o*

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# A Theology of Yes and No



by Dr. Ed Neufeld

Ed Neufeld is the pastor of Kleefeld Community Church (connected with the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada) and a professor of biblical studies at Providence University College and Theological Seminary, both in southern Manitoba. He holds a Diploma (Millar Memorial Bible Institute) and three degrees: BTh (Providence University College), MA (Providence Theological Seminary), and PhD (Marquette University).

**I AM A PAID MINISTER.** I had assumed that my job description at its core was to serve people and meet their needs. It did not occur to me that I should ever say “no” to loving and serving people, or that loving and serving Jesus Christ could take me away from the people in front of me. Three mistaken assumptions took me in this direction.

Firstly, I had muddled Jesus’ two great commands. What he said first was: “love God with all you have and with all your might”; and then he said: “love your neighbour as yourself.” I twisted these in such a way that I ended up with something like: “love your neighbour with all you have and with all your might.” That is quite different, and it is dark.

Secondly, I believed that work is spiritual and rest is selfish. The lie is that simple, and I believed it.

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**It did not occur to me that I should ever say “no” to loving and serving people, or that loving and serving Jesus Christ could take me away from the people in front of me.**

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Thirdly, I lost track of who was my master. I thought my master was the church, or the needy people in front of me. If I was not pleasing them I was not

servicing them. Sometimes the need itself was my master. Not good.

We are all servants whom Christ sent to serve the church. We are not the church’s servants, but Christ’s. I know a pitfall hides here, that of distancing ourselves from the body of Christ and not being accountable within the Lord’s family. Still, at the end, we will answer only to our Lord.

## A Better Compass

Living these out nearly ruined me. So I searched the Gospels for some precedent in the Lord’s life to provide a better compass for my disordered life. I discovered that Jesus had the common chances to say “yes” and “no,” and regularly made choices that surprised me. Here is what I found.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found

him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:32–38 NIV).

During that evening at the house, Jesus’ “yes” to God coincided with “yes” to many sick and many demonized. But the next day those two calls, God and needs, separated. The next morning “everyone” gathered again, and wanted Jesus. More sick people came that morning, some probably seriously ill, and more with demons.

Jesus knew that if he went back, he could heal those people and free those with demons. (We normally know less when we respond to people’s needs.) But Jesus did not go back, because that was not “why I have come.” By the next morning, “yes” to Capernaum’s needy people would have been a “no” to God, and “yes” to God meant “no” to those needy people searching for him.

To be fair, “no” to those Capernaum people gathered in the morning was “yes” not only to God, but “yes” also to the people in other towns, so they also could hear the gospel and be healed. But Jesus had an invitation—“everyone is looking for you”—and Jesus’ path led away from immediate needs with invitation, toward distant needs without invitation.

## Probably a Typical Day

Mark records this incident already in his first chapter, and in Mark the sequence of day-evening-dawn-day does not occur again until Jesus' last week. That is, Mark I probably intends to show us not an isolated event, but a typical day for this part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus said "no" to a crowd that needed and wanted him, so that he could go to others, and he probably did so regularly, because that is why he had come.

Later on Jesus withdrew from public ministry almost completely, once the twelve realized that he was the Christ. He did so in order to teach his disciples about his own death, and about what following him entailed for them. Mark 8:31 says, "He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things." They already were in Gentile territory,

Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27), away from Jewish crowds.

In 9:30 this continued: Jesus and the twelve "left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples." We no longer read much about Jesus with great crowds, because Jesus' agenda changed to focus on his established followers.

Remember, the crowds still wanted teaching and still needed healing. The disciples were not asking to learn about the coming sufferings. But Jesus left the crowds to teach the disciples.

## Almost Inconceivable

Why is something Jesus did regularly almost inconceivable to us? People were hungrily looking for him, wanting more of what they got from him yesterday:

powerful preaching and healing. Jesus regularly walked away. The call to steadily serve the neediest has too much voice, and the call to be a man of God or woman of God has not enough voice.

To what or whom are we saying "yes"? Jesus did not walk away from compassionate care or from loving his neighbour as himself, but God directed this care and love, and Jesus did not assume God's call was always the urgent need.

## Morning Prayer

We have not yet mentioned the early morning prayer, which comes between the late night ministry and the morning conversation with his disciples. The order of events in the Mark paragraph just quoted suggests that this morning prayer in some way led to the move away from Capernaum's hungry people and toward

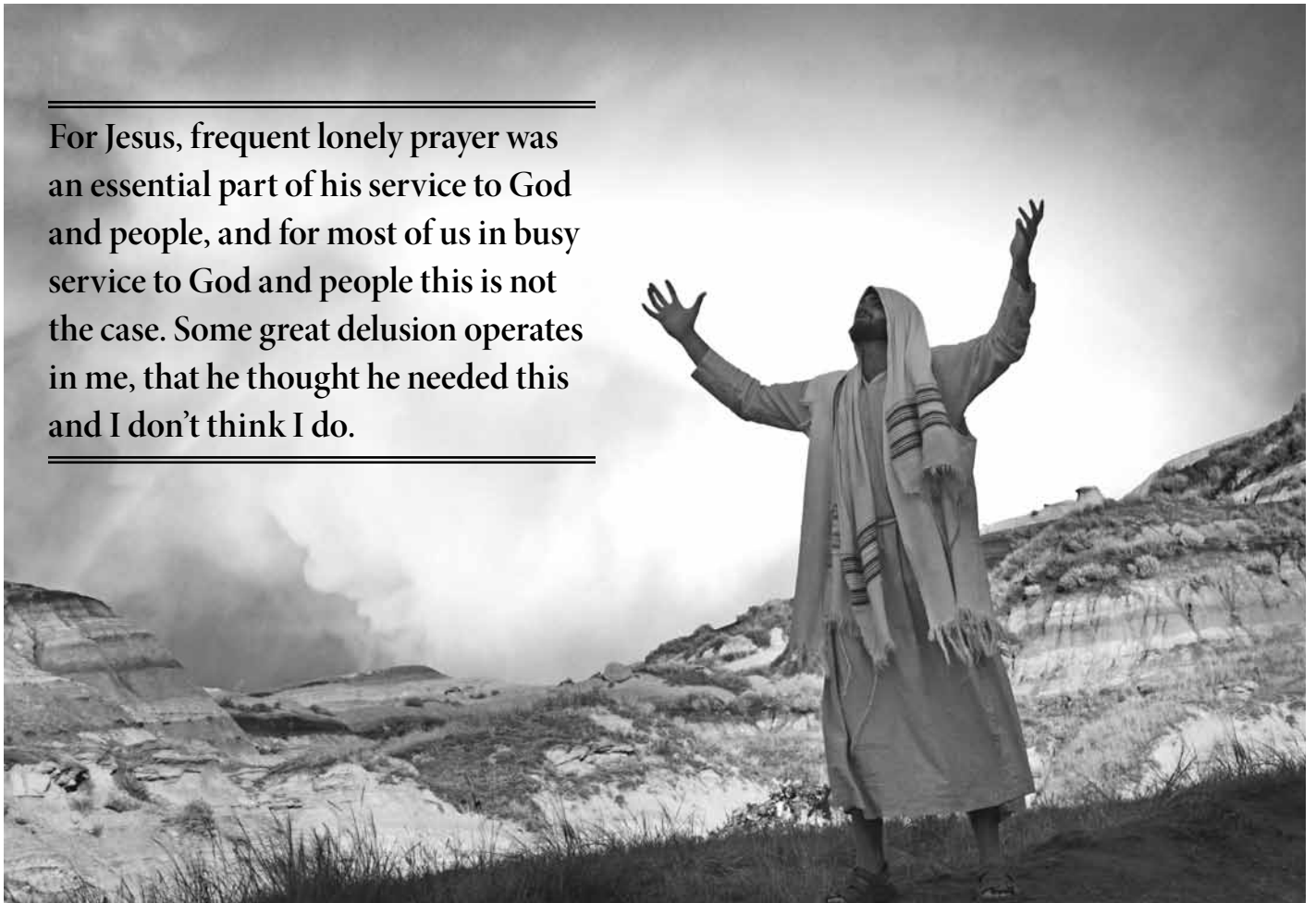
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For Jesus, frequent lonely prayer was an essential part of his service to God and people, and for most of us in busy service to God and people this is not the case. Some great delusion operates in me, that he thought he needed this and I don't think I do.

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the next town. Likely more went on in that early prayer than just direction for the day, but it seems that guidance about “why I have come” came in that prayer time.

A text in Luke gives the same impression of Jesus’ theology of yes and no: “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (5:15–16).

Let’s begin with the second line: “but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” Something in Jesus frequently compelled him to withdraw for prayer. Jesus needed to do this often.

### **A Delusion**

Why do I not feel this need or compulsion? I do not know. For Jesus, frequent lonely prayer was an essential part of his service to God and people, and for most of us in busy service to God and people this is not the case. Some great delusion operates in me, that he thought he needed this and I don’t think I do.

Prayer is not a discipline. Most of us eat several times a day, and on a generally regular schedule, but people watching do not consider us disciplined on this account. Something else moves us.

When my children were younger and wanted something from me, they pestered me often as long as there was any chance. This came out of desire, not discipline. Jesus had the authority of the Messiah and the power of the Spirit’s presence. In spite of this, or maybe because of this, he often tore himself away from the crowds that loved his words and touch, to pray in a lonely place.

### **Jesus’ Model Prayer**

Jesus probably prayed something much like the Lord’s Prayer. The Scripture gives us only a few examples of his praying, but they point to him saying what he taught us to pray. Craig Blomberg, in *Jesus and the Gospels*, shows how Jesus’ John 17 prayer contains most of the elements

of the Lord’s Prayer, and generally in the same order. That is, Jesus’ only long recorded prayer to his Father parallels how he taught us to pray to our Father.

In Matthew 26:42 Jesus prays, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” In Greek, the last five words, *may your will be done*, are identical to *your will be done* in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6.

### **Temptations of Success**

Imagine all the temptations that go with a hugely “successful” ministry, which our Lord’s was in the early days, and remember that Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was tempted in all the common ways. That certainly includes, not probably but certainly, all the common temptations that go with an immensely popular ministry.

So in response Jesus prayed: “My Father in heaven, *your* name be revered, *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done, provide for me, may I forgive those who sin against me, don’t lead me into testing (like those forty days after my baptism), keep me from evil and the evil one” (emphasis added). Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

That line, “Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed,” could occur anywhere in Luke’s Gospel and tell us something important about how Jesus managed his life. But it does not occur just anywhere. This line gains weight by where Luke puts it: “Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”

Jesus’ withdrawal for prayer occurs in a specific context: crowds coming for his healing touch and life-giving words. They were always coming, and he was often withdrawing. It was not a freak occurrence, not an escape Jesus used when it was all just too much. Rather, he did this often, regularly. It was a

recognizable trait of his ministry, a known pattern that no longer surprised people.

### **The Disciples’ Imitation**

The disciples noted this and imitated it. In Acts 6, the young Jerusalem church had a unity problem. The Grecian Jewish widows were being neglected in the daily food distribution, and complained against the rest of the church. The apostles responded, “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and *will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word*” (emphasis added).

“The ministry of the word” in this context means preaching the gospel. The apostles understood themselves to be mandated to pray and to preach the gospel. This sounds like Jesus, who healed and preached and regularly withdrew to pray.

There was a real need in front of the apostles, and they felt some expectation from the situation or from the church that they themselves should serve the widows. But they said “no” to this need and expectation, and “yes” to their calling. They chose to delegate because they had a mandate. Their mandate did not come from the church they served.

### **Not Getting Anything Done?**

Back to Jesus. Prayer may be hard work for us, and withdrawing regularly to pray may feel every bit as demanding as ministry. For now we’ll let that stand. Most of us are willing to work hard, and we show it; that is no reason to avoid prayer.

I think the bigger problem with our praying is that somehow we don’t think we are getting anything done when we spend time in prayer. We think we get more done by not praying. More of what? How have ministers in the kingdom come to believe and guide themselves like this?

### **Our Work or His?**

The problem is not that we’re undisciplined, because undisciplined people

are often focused and hardworking and accomplish a great deal. If undisciplined people believed they need to pray much to accomplish what mattered to them, they would pray, no less than disciplined people. Their prayer might not be disciplined, but they would pray as hard as they work.

Our problem is either that we are more interested in our kingdom than in God's kingdom, or that we think God's kingdom depends on our work more than his. Big problem either way.

But I'm not sure prayer needs to be demanding work, or that Jesus normally experienced it that way. Prayer can be leisurely, and I suspect Jesus' prayer was often relaxed. My father died and is with the Lord. But when he lived, my conversation with him was usually relaxed and pleasant.

Prayer to the Father in heaven should include large amounts of this easy posture, and let's assume this in much of Jesus' prayer. "Jesus often withdrew to the lonely places and prayed." A text in Mark suggests that this withdrawing for prayer was rest for Jesus.

In Mark 6 Jesus sent out the twelve in pairs to preach and heal. When they came back they found Jesus in the thick of things with crowds. In Mark 6:31 we read, "because so many people were coming and going that [the twelve] did not even have a chance to eat, Jesus said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'" In Luke 5:16, what the NIV calls "lonely places" is *erēmos*, in Greek, "wilderness." That's where Jesus often withdrew to pray.

When Jesus says to the weary disciples, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest, "a quiet place" is the same word, "an *erēmos* place," "a wilderness place," where Jesus often went to pray. Jesus viewed the wilderness as good place for both prayer and for rest. Probably both happened at the same time.

### Yes Can Mean Yes and No

Jesus' "yes" to God meant a lot of "yes" to teaching and healing, and Jesus'

"yes" to God also meant a lot of "no" to teaching and healing and "yes" to leaving the hungry, hurting people in order to withdraw for prayer and rest. It jolts us to say it like that, but the example of Jesus requires no less. We've seen that the apostles in Acts 6 understood themselves to be bound by this regular rhythm of Jesus.

How did Jesus understand "love your neighbour as yourself" to fit together with his leaving the crowds behind? We do not know how Jesus would answer that. We do know that for the One who loved perfectly, "love your neighbour as yourself" harmonized naturally with regular retreat from needy people, for his own prayer and rest.

He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26–29).

In this parable, Jesus puts a gap between kingdom *work* and kingdom *growth*. Three lines convey this: (1) "night and day, *whether he sleeps or gets up*, the seed sprouts and grows; (2) "*he does not know how*"; and (3) "*all by itself* the soil produces grain" (emphasis added).

These lines separate the farmer's labour from the crop's development. *The kingdom grows whether we sleep or get up; we do not know how it grows; all by itself it produces*. Kingdom workers want kingdom growth, and labour to that end. The farmer must plant the seed.

Kingdom work matters for kingdom growth, but in this parable Jesus likens all kingdom work to planting seed. Most of Jesus' kingdom parables begin with planting seed. What this parable adds to the kingdom parables generally is that the worker's responsibility ends with planting



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## Jesus' "yes" to God also meant a lot of "no" to teaching and healing.

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the seed. From that point on other forces take over.

### Why a Minister Can Rest

I have never heard anyone say that ministers should not rest because Satan does not rest. But two different pastors that I know were told this early in their ministries. It may or may not be true that Satan does not rest. (How does anyone know that?)

But let us assume that Satan does not rest; does it follow that ministers not rest either? No, according to this paragraph, because the seed this farmer planted in the ground carries on nicely when the man sleeps.

The soil does not sleep, nor the seed. The Spirit does not sleep, nor the word of God. So the minister rests. That's why Jesus wanted to take the Twelve to a quiet place to rest. That's why Jesus told the disciples that he was going to the back of the boat to sleep, and did so. Jesus took a long nap while Satan worked.

This does not mean that once a person has heard the gospel and repented and believed, kingdom workers will have nothing more to do with the person. Rather, all that goes into helping and discipling and nurturing is itself planting

seed, and nothing more. Actual growth will still be unexplainable and dependent on something else (the Spirit and the word of God working in people).

*Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows.* Regular rhythms of rest and work do not disrupt kingdom progress. The Spirit works as well with the sown seed when the planter sleeps and rests as when the planter works during the day.

### Wrong and Presumptuous

According to this parable, the notion that kingdom progress rests on kingdom work is at least wrong and presumptuous, and nearly blasphemous. Kingdom growth does depend on our faithfulness, but in this story Jesus sharply distinguished model faithfulness from endless labour.

Again I say: Jesus sharply distinguished model faithfulness from endless labour. Kingdom growth requires faithfulness from the kingdom worker in planting seed. But labour beyond faithfulness is useless, and probably disrupts growth.

Paul uses this parable in 1 Corinthians 3 to call the cliquish Corinthian church toward unity. He changes the image a little from the Mark 4 parable we just read, but the same basis truth emerges.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour. For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building (1 Cor. 3:6-9).

"God has been making it grow," he says in v. 6, and again in v. 7, "God makes things grow." In the Mark 4 parable, all kingdom work came under the image of planting,

but here Paul broadens that into planting and watering. Each kingdom worker will be rewarded according to their own labour, that is, their own faithfulness.

Basic gardening experience teaches that at some point more seed and more watering no longer helps, but becomes a problem. The winner is not the one who plants the most seeds or pours on the most water, but rather the one who is faithful. "Yes" to faithfulness. "No" to more work means "yes" to kingdom growth.

### Hard Work

Kingdom work can be hard work, and I do not mean to make hard kingdom work illegitimate. Jesus worked hard, and so did Paul, and others. But our hard work must be tied to obeying Jesus the Lord, not tied to the assumption that kingdom growth depends on our hard work.

Kingdom growth is a mystery, coming from the resources of God himself. By God's mercy we are also kingdom workers, God's co-workers, and in unexplainable ways God uses our faithfulness to produce kingdom growth. Our faithfulness includes night and day, rest and work, sleeping and getting up.

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## Our hard work must be tied to obeying Jesus the Lord, not tied to the assumption that kingdom growth depends on our hard work.

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### Two Great Commands

Jesus' two great commands (Mark 12) are "love God" and "love your neighbour." Each command supplies a boundary. The boundary of "love God" is the extreme limit of human ability: "with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your might." To God we always say "yes," never "no."

Everything Jesus did in the Gospels was his "yes" to God. His teaching, healing, sleeping in the boat, traveling

with the twelve, eating with sinners, regular retreat for prayer and rest—all was "yes" to God.

The imperative "love your neighbour" also has a boundary: "as yourself." It is a high call, but self-care is not the extreme limit. For Jesus, loving his neighbour as himself, and always doing it perfectly, included time with the crowds, time with his inner circle of followers, and time for private prayer and rest.


Jesus alternated between these settings by his own act, not by what those around him preferred. He chose to go where the crowds could find him, he chose to withdraw to pray, and he chose to lead his disciples into remote places.

Sometimes events thwarted Jesus' plans and he found himself doing one thing when he had chosen another. This he accepted graciously. But he also adapted, and found ways to do the things he was called to do in spite of resistant forces around him. We must do the same.

### Tilted Invitations

Life presents us with many opportunities, and these invitations often come not straight on, but tilted, pressured, so that "yes" is good and "no" is bad. We get the feeling that "yes" is spiritual and "no" is selfish, "yes" is "yes to God" and "no" is "no to God." But it is not so. All of us say "yes" and "no" exactly the same number of times.

Every time we say "yes" to one thing, by that very "yes" we also say "no" to what we would have done but won't. Every time we say "no" to one thing we say "yes" to whatever we do in its place, even if that is nothing.

Those who only say "yes" to the invitations in front of them invariably say "no" every single time to a quieter invitation happening at exactly the same time. There is no getting away from this. So we can do better than just to say "yes" to whatever invites us most loudly. Let's follow Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord from heaven. Let's serve him, and imitate him. 



# A Creed for Jon

by Rev. Terry M. Smith



Terry M. Smith joined the EMC in 1979, became a minister in 1985, served as a pastor from 1985–1996, and became a national staff member in 1997. He has a two-year journalism diploma from SAIT, holds BRS degrees from SBC and MBBC, and is an MA student at Providence Theological Seminary.

Preamble: This confession was prepared for my then fifteen-year-old son Jonathan. By then he knew *The Apostles' Creed* by rote, and—like many of us—he continues to grapple with its substance.<sup>1</sup> The format was chosen to provoke thought.<sup>2</sup>

## I believe...

Do I really?  
How do I know?  
By what I think?  
Or by what I do?  
Do I do because of what I think?  
Or think because of what I do?  
I reason,<sup>3</sup>  
and don't believe that I do that  
in a universe ultimately absurd  
I believe in morality,  
and can't believe that  
it's ultimately up for grabs  
I can see beauty,  
which I defend, and  
thereby witness that it's real  
Believe? Oh yes, I do!

## In God...

Not just in my version, or  
your version, but a Reality  
beyond all versions

## The Father...

Not male or female,  
Not it,  
Not just spirit like electricity,

But personal, accessible,  
available, relational

## Almighty...

Able to do what is possible  
Not what is not  
Not brute force,  
Or raw power,  
But sovereign,  
A ruler,  
Providential (he provides),  
Caring for our good future<sup>4</sup>

## Maker of Heaven and Earth

Six days, six seconds,  
six billion years—No matter.  
A statement of purpose, not  
process  
No accident,  
Far from absurd  
A focus on  
the Who and the Why,  
Not the How and the When.  
Cosmos—“whole created  
order” (John 3:16)  
People, animals, nature,  
planet, heavens, angels—more  
A God who enjoys seeing  
flowers on mountaintops

that humankind will never  
reach.<sup>5</sup>

An expanding universe that  
can never exhaust  
the One who called  
it into being *ex nihilo*  
(out of nothing).

## And in Jesus Christ

The movement into history  
Foretold among many  
nations by the stars (general  
revelation)  
Revealed within  
Israel/Judah (historical  
argument)<sup>6</sup>  
Israel argued with God  
Why the Jews? Why not?<sup>7</sup>  
Jews say, “Pick on someone  
else.”<sup>8</sup>  
God says, “We're stuck with  
each other.”  
“Through you all peoples will  
be blessed.”  
Improbable heroes, Rabbi  
Plaut says<sup>9</sup>  
Indefensible land  
Moral failures  
People exiled  
Spiritual crisis (John Bright)<sup>10</sup>



A spiritual blackout (Bernhard Anderson)<sup>11</sup>  
*Yet in the dark street shineth...*  
(Christmas song)<sup>12</sup>  
A crying baby, helpless infant  
Master of the universe  
True God, True Man  
Saviour (Jesus)  
Fulfilment of Israel's hopes (Christ)

### **His Only Son**

Unique  
Monogenesis (one of a kind)  
Image of the Father  
True Adam<sup>13</sup>  
*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see*  
*Hail, the incarnate Deity*<sup>14</sup>

### **Our Lord**

Sustaining the universe (Heb. 1:3)  
Dry heaving in the sub-Sahara<sup>15</sup>  
Deus revelatus  
(Luther said God was partly revealed)  
Deus absconditus  
(Luther said God was partly hidden)<sup>16</sup>

### **Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit**

Improbable<sup>17</sup>  
Possible<sup>18</sup>  
Likely  
Unusual entrance fits unusual identity and exit<sup>19</sup>  
Actual

### **Born of the Virgin Mary**

Teenager  
Vulnerable  
Trembling  
Faithful  
Wary of Co-Redemptrix and of Mediatrix but not of Theotokos (Mother of God) because God dared to become human

### **Suffered under Pontius Pilate**

Notched into history  
Pilate's weakest hour—and ours  
What is truth?

### **Was crucified**

Truth revealed in blood-stained agony  
Execution  
Jewish hopes of glory turned gory  
At-one-ment  
Reconciliation  
Honour repaid (says Anselm)  
Expiation (removes offense)  
Propitiation (removes anger)  
Suffering Victor (says Aulen)  
Triumphing over Powers (says Walter Wink, so *think!*)  
Love revealed (says Abelard)  
Objective, subjective

### **Dead**

No playacting  
No swoon  
Kaput! (German)  
Gone.  
Finito! (Italian)  
Dust to dust!  
Tasted for us (Heb. 2:9),  
To deliver us (Heb. 2:14–15)

### **And buried**

Permission granted  
Hasty burial  
No professional mourners  
No kind words  
Borrowed tomb  
No time for details

### **He descended into hell**

Unclear journey<sup>20</sup>  
Suffering hell on cross (Calvin)<sup>21</sup>  
The Harrowing of Hell<sup>22</sup>  
Announcing forgiveness to forgiven  
Announcing forgiveness to those

who will yet respond?  
Second chance? Unclear, not to be relied upon.  
Sheol, place of shadows, Bliss or agony (Luke 16)  
Descended to where we need not be<sup>23</sup>

### **The third day he rose again from the dead**

Raised by Father  
Raised by Spirit (Rom. 8:11)  
Raised by Self (John 10:18)  
Revelation  
Vindication of claims and actions  
Unlike Widow of Shuman's son (2 Kings 4),  
Unlike Widow of Nain's son (Luke 7),  
Unlike Paul's sermon victim (Acts 20),  
Raised to be mortal no more  
World changed in an instant  
Blasphemer revealed as Vindicated  
One cursed by God was actually cursed for our sins (Gal. 3:13)<sup>24</sup>  
No failure, but part of plan.

### **He ascended into heaven**

No space shuttle<sup>25</sup>  
Historical, yet pictorial (Acts 1)  
Gone, but not gone (John 14:16)  
Gone, but not forgotten

### **And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty**

Equal nature  
Equal glory  
Honoured  
Triumphant  
Resting  
Waiting  
Eager  
His presence intervening  
Nail prints pleading



Prayers interceding  
Sufferer is Almighty  
Unreal! Yet real.

### **From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead**

Thence—old word, older truth  
Returning one day  
Timetable not needed,  
Faithfulness is.  
Judge is coming  
Prepare ye!  
Living will not escape  
Neither the dead  
Typing is no defence  
Jesus alone is our advocate (1  
John 2:1–2),  
Our defender (Heb. 4:14–16)  
If we defend him among people,  
He will defend us  
If we deny him, he will deny us,  
But not himself, for he  
cannot deny who he is (2 Tim.  
2:11–13)

### **I believe in the Holy Spirit**

Proceeds from the Father and  
the Son  
Filioque (from the Son too)  
Not just love between Father and  
Son (*contra* Grenz),<sup>26</sup>  
But Jesus here and now  
*Paracletos*—a comforter,  
Just like Jesus  
Christ in us,  
The power we need,  
Sustaining grace,  
Inward changes,  
Down payment of future glory  
(Eph. 1:14)  
Inward witness (Rom. 8:16)  
Hope is poured into  
us (Rom. 15:13)

### **The holy catholic church**

Ultimately one  
Catholic,

not Protestant (Anabaptist) or  
Roman  
Holy,  
Devoted, set apart, dedicated,  
claimed  
Ecclesia,  
Called out ones,  
assembled in Christ  
Christ's blood thicker than water  
(and other blood too)  
Followers united to Christ and  
each other  
Nachfolge<sup>27</sup> (discipleship)  
Eternal linkages  
Divine plan  
International  
Cosmic  
Visible need  
Visible unity needed (John  
16:23)<sup>28</sup>

### **The communion of saints**

Common union  
Koinonia  
Shared life (Acts 2 and 4)  
Togetherness across  
countries, continents,  
races, genders, centuries  
(Gal. 3:28; Heb. 12:1)  
Sinners,  
Scarred  
Treasured  
Redeemed  
Rejoicing  
Indivisible unity  
Invisible unity

### **The forgiveness of sins**

What have I done?  
No worse than some  
No better than others  
Not enough  
Confrontation (Rom. 3:23)  
Intervention (Rom. 3:24)  
Atonement (Rom. 3:25)  
Mercy unexpected  
Grace unanticipated  
Both revealed

Tough to receive  
Tougher to give  
Openly offered  
Accepted  
Proleptic (the future is  
anticipated now)  
Actual  
Transforming

### **The resurrection of the body**

Continuity  
Discontinuity  
A seed (1 Cor. 15:42)  
Spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44).  
Complete person  
Renewed  
Recreated  
Word become flesh,  
Honoured in  
our flesh (Rom. 6:13).  
Divinization  
(we are not God, but made more  
like Christ's beautiful humanity)

### **And the life everlasting**

"I have come that they might  
have life, and have it to the full"  
(John 10:10)<sup>29</sup>  
More than unending existence  
Creation's intention fulfilled  
Humanity recreated  
Cosmos healed  
God glorified  
"Come, you blessed" (Matt.  
25:34)  
"What is the chief end [purpose]  
of humankind?"  
(politically correct Westminster)  
"To glorify God and to enjoy  
him forever."<sup>30</sup>

### **Amen**

Not just "10-4, over and out."  
Not just "The End."  
But, "In You, O Lord, I have  
hoped, I shall never be put to  
shame."<sup>31</sup> *Θ*



# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The precedence for using the Apostles' Creed as a structure for making a confession of faith can be found in Balthasar Hubmaier's use of it in the baptismal order followed at Nicolsburg, cited in Rollin Stely Armour, *Anabaptist Baptism: A Representative Study* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1966), 143; Peter Rideman's use of the creed's structure in his *Confession of Faith* (New York: Plough Publishing House, 1970), with the table of contents introduced with the comment: "First come the 12 essentials of the confession of faith" (5); and C. Arnold Snyder, "The Confession of the Swiss Brethren in Hesse, 1578," in *Anabaptism Revisited*, Walter Klaassen, ed. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1992), 29-41. The brethren in Hesse built their confession "around a core...the Apostles' Creed" when "pressed into creedal statements of orthodoxy" (32-33). "However, where the Hessian Anabaptists did encounter trouble was not in the affirmation of the orthodox creed, but in what they wished to affirm beyond the creed" (33). Though aware of Anabaptist use of The Apostles' Creed, I was reminded of it through John Howard Yoder's use of the creeds for ecumenical discussion and challenge, required reading in a seminary class.

For the wisdom of a confession of faith being directed to one person, consider the Talmudic saying that if a person saves one individual, it is as if they have rescued the entire world. Seeing one person enriched in their faith is a victory.

<sup>2</sup>The format is influenced by the style of Nazarene chaplain Reuben Welch, *We Really Do Need Each Other* (Nashville: Impact Books, n.d., but known since 1977), though his eloquence is untouched. The style is perhaps also influenced by that of Hans Kung, two of whose writings in English translation are later drawn upon.

<sup>3</sup>For arguments for natural revelation from reason, morality, and beauty, see Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (London: SCM Press, 1947), 120-126. See also D. Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957), including a discussion on "The Objectivity of Beauty," 122-127. There is indebtedness here to Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?* (New York: Vintage, 1981) for "nihilism is factually overcome by fundamental trust," 476.

<sup>4</sup>"Very often we hear people say, 'I believe in divine providence,' meaning, of course, that they believe in the farsighted goodness of God. This means God cares for us and looks out for us and provides for our needs." Mozella Mitchell, "Pro-vi-dence," in *Those Preaching Women: More Sermons by Black Women Preachers*, vol. 2., ed. Ella Pearson Mitchell (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988), 48.

<sup>5</sup>Source unknown, but not original.

<sup>6</sup>For the historical argument based on Israel and Christ, see Trueblood, 131-140.

<sup>7</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, *The Significance of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 33-36: "How odd of God / to choose the Jews." – Houseman. "But not so odd / As those who choose the Jewish God / And spurn the Jews" – Anonymous (34). See also Richardson, 139-142: "That we cannot explain why God chose the Jewish people to be the special instrument of His purpose in history is no reason for denying the plentiful evidence that He did so choose them" (141).

<sup>8</sup>Teyve in *The Fiddler on the Roof* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965) says, "It's true we are the Chosen People. But once in a while can't You choose someone else?" (54).

<sup>9</sup>W. Gunther Plaut, *The Case for the Chosen People* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), chapter one "Impossible History," 5-38.

<sup>10</sup>John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 130.

<sup>11</sup>Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Unfolding Drama of the Bible*. Third ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 46.

<sup>12</sup>Probably influenced by Dr. Terry Hiebert, "This Christmas in Bethlehem," *The Messenger* December 22, 2004, 5.

<sup>13</sup>See Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Vancouver, BC: Regent, 1994), 279-285, for discussion of Jesus' being, and claim to be, the true Adam.

<sup>14</sup>Charles Wesley, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," *The Hymnary of the United Church of Canada* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1930), Hymn 59.

<sup>15</sup>Walter J. Burghardt, "Hope for the Hungry?" *Grace on Crutches* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 23: "Today's Gospel warns us to be alert, on watch for the Messiah. Don't look for him in a Christmas crib; he left that 20 centuries ago. He's heaving dry on the dried-up soil of the sub-Sahara."

<sup>16</sup>This thought goes back to Martin Luther, but the exact reference is uncertain. For the terms *Deus absconditus/Deus*

revelatus, see somewhat brief varying perspectives in Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 85; and Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 75. For Luther's sense of God as revealed and hidden in Christ, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700), The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Vol. 4, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1984), 166–167; and Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 20–24.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1974), 457: “No one can be obliged to believe in the biological fact of a virginal conception or birth.”

<sup>18</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973): “My judgment, in conclusion, is that the totality of the *scientifically controllable* [his emphasis] evidence leaves an unresolved problem.” He apparently defers ultimately to church authority and tradition, 66–67.

<sup>19</sup> William J. March, *Christian Belief and Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 125: “To me, the Virgin Birth is but the forerunner of the Resurrection of Jesus.” March is a United Church minister. James D. Smart, *The Creed in Christian Teaching* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 116: “...the Gospels are most restrained, asserting only that, just as the miracle of the resurrection stood at the point of Jesus' exit from the world, so the miracle of the virgin birth stood at the point of his entrance into our human life. Both miracles alike were intended to bear witness that Jesus came from God and returned to God.”

<sup>20</sup> See various views presented in chapter 10, “He Descended Into Hell,” William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at The Apostles' Creed* (Glasgow: Fount, 1967), 119–133.

<sup>21</sup> Barclay, 127. See also William Klempa, “The Descent Into Hell,” *The Presbyterian Record*, September 1977, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Barclay, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 25:41, “Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and the angels” (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> Exploring the relationship between 1 Cor. 12:3 (“Jesus be cursed”) and Gal. 3:13 (“becoming a curse for us”) is indebted to a scholar whose name eludes my memory.

<sup>25</sup> The caution comes via Reginald H. Fuller, exact reference unknown.

<sup>26</sup> The Shorter Catechism [1648], answer to Question One, *The Confession of Faith* (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1959), 115.

<sup>27</sup> See Grenz's overemphasis on the Social Trinity, with the view that the Spirit is the love between Father and Son: “the Holy Spirit is the bond between the Father and the Son...Consequently, the essence of God does indeed lie in the relationship between the Father and the Son (love) which is the Spirit” (71–72). All confessions are written both to emphasize what is believed and, by implication, what is not believed. Some beliefs countered are identified in confessions.

<sup>28</sup> For *nachfolge* as an emphasis, see Robert Friedman, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 19, 44–45. “...it is important to realize that the words ‘follow me’ appear more frequently in the New Testament than ‘born again,’” Paul M. Lederach, *A Third Way* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980), 21.

<sup>29</sup> For the Believers Church emphasis on the need for the church, see Grenz, with his emphasis on “the eschatological community.” For the emphasis on the visible church, rather than the invisible, see Lederach, 37–48.

<sup>30</sup> Burghardt, “The Love We Celebrate,” *Grace on Crutches*, 85: “It is, I insisted, a monosyllable that alone makes sense out of Calvary, a monosyllable that alone can explain why you gather here each Sunday, a monosyllable that alone gives point to the way we Christians think and act. That monosyllable...is love.” He quotes John 10:10.

<sup>31</sup> The ending of Hans Kung, *Does God Exist?* 702. It's to be acknowledged that my indebtedness to others is more extensive than these few notes indicate.



# Book Reviews

**Joshua**, Gordon Matties (Herald Press, 2012), 528 pp., \$29.99 ISBN: 9780836195675. Reviewed by Zac Klassen (The ConneXion), BA Honours (CMU).

*Joshua 6:20–21: “...The people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”*

*Matthew 5:1–2, 5, 9: “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth....Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.’”*

**H**OW MIGHT CHURCH-  
Es within a conference that is Evangelical and Anabaptist-Mennonite approach the book of Joshua?

As Evangelicals we have a high regard for scripture and its authority in the life of the Church. As Anabaptists we have an especially high regard for Jesus (as witnessed in Scripture) and the life of meekness and peace he taught us to practice. Approaching Joshua, we might be led to the conclusion that our dual identities may violently clash in our reading.

Must we accept the *herem* in Joshua (the command to “utterly destroy” the inhabitants of the land) as simply the divine prerogative and leave it unquestioned? Similarly, must we try to find some way to reconcile how God can command such acts while still affirming that who God is is fully known in Jesus?

Is there any other way of reading the

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**Matties begins his commentary by outlining both why a faithful reading of the text of Joshua will not avoid or eliminate the violence found therein, and why it will not simply justify the violence either.**

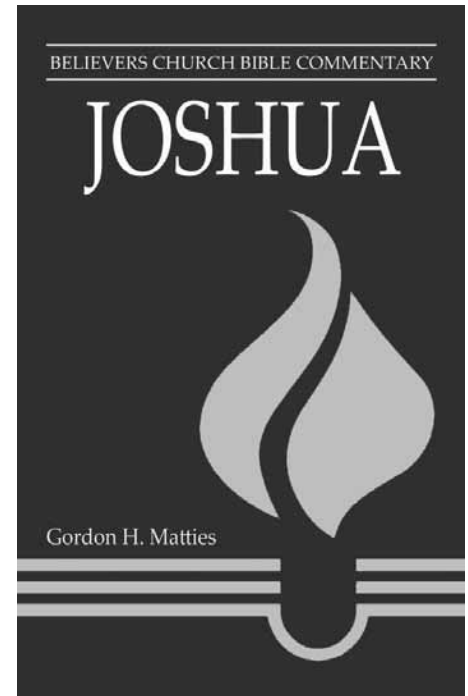
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text as Evangelicals? Must we leave our Anabaptist-Mennonite identity at the door, so to speak, as we read Joshua, accepting without question that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ commanded his people to slaughter not only the armies of men, but also women and children?

Gordon Matties, in his commentary on Joshua, shows that our options need not be thus limited. Throughout his commentary on Joshua, Matties shows a twin commitment to the authority of scripture and to an Anabaptist hermeneutic while not letting either over-determine the interpretation of the text.

While Matties is not writing specifically within an EMC context, his commentary is part of the Believers Church Bible Commentary series and so is situated within an Anabaptist framework. Matties himself is a member of the Mennonite Brethren Conference and a professor of biblical and theological studies at Canadian Mennonite University.

Matties begins his commentary by outlining both why a faithful reading of the text of Joshua will not avoid or eliminate the violence found therein, and why it will not simply justify the violence either (17–37). And so he draws the reader into what he believes the book of



Joshua calls us to as believers: “a difficult” and “intra-biblical” conversation with no “simple resolution” (18–19, 30).

As might be guessed by now, Matties’ *Joshua* does not assume a “flat reading” of the Bible in which every page of Scripture represents coherently who God is and what God’s ultimate purposes are independent of other texts. As he notes: “The book of Joshua is not an end in itself...” (21).

Believing that all of Scripture, including Joshua, has a trajectory within it that grants us a fuller understanding of who God is, we must not be satisfied with remaining at one point along the trajectory even if we may need to stay a while at one point to truly understand what was going on there. As Anabaptists we do well not to part ways with a Christo-centric reading of scripture; indeed, if we are to understand Joshua faithfully, we must not look away from the “new Joshua” (31).

Matties points out that even within the book of Joshua there are tensions in the story that do not lend themselves to the common assumptions many bring to the book. This is perhaps one of the most delightful aspects to this commentary. Instead of focusing attention on questions of dating or authorship, Matties jumps right into this work focusing on the “literary and theological character of the book of Joshua” (15).

Many unthinkingly assume that the main thrust of the book of Joshua is simply a historical recounting of a brutal military conquest. Since this is offensive to modern ears, we tend to extract sanitized “nuggets” from the Joshua story (“Be strong and courageous” or “as for me and my household we will serve the Lord”) and leave the hard work of engaging difficult texts to someone else (144, 356).

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## **Matties wonders if we do not already begin to see in Joshua how there is at work “a larger vision of the purposes of God” than simply the victory of the chosen people over the pagan inhabitants of the land.**

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Matties disagrees that Joshua is mostly about a brutal conquest and suggests that, while one cannot and should not gloss over or cut out the violence in the book, a hospitable reading of Joshua will avoid bringing a “problem” to bear on the text as our starting point as interpreters (27). Instead, we should take Joshua’s narrative as a whole seriously as it is and ask questions regarding the theological claims being made therein.

Matties then goes on to demonstrate that at its core Joshua articulates a theology rooted in the book of Deuteronomy and stresses themes of “rest,” “instruction (Torah), obedience, God’s presence, promise, leadership, and the gift of land” (57). It is from within

these themes, and not from some abstract reference point about the “justifiability of war” or the divine prerogative for war, that we need to enter into the “difficult conversation” Joshua initiates.

Matties demonstrates how taking this route reveals surprising and fruitful tensions in the book of Joshua. In respect to Torah and obedience to God’s commands, we discover early on a unique tension in the story of the prostitute Rahab. He notes that “understanding Rahab’s story in its larger biblical context creates a problem...when compared to Deuteronomy’s instructions to utterly destroy the inhabitants of the land (Deut 7:2, ch. 20)” (78).

As the story goes, Israel makes a deal with Rahab to spare her and her family and eventually she becomes incorporated into Israel. Rahab confesses faith in Israel’s God and thereby demonstrates

how the “clear” boundaries to who is included and who is excluded with respects to the community of faith in Joshua are not so “clear” after all (83).

Even more surprising is Rahab’s appearance throughout the New Testament, starting with her mention in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus and in Hebrews and James as one who modeled faith in God. For a Canaanite who was destined for *herem*, she ended up with quite the positive story within the larger biblical narrative.

Matties wonders if we do not already begin to see in Joshua how there is at work “a larger vision of the purposes of God” than simply the victory of the chosen people over the pagan inhabitants

of the land (82). Similarly, he points out the stories of the Transjordan tribes (53–60) and the Gibeonites (211–227) to illustrate, in a fashion similar to the Rahab story, how those occupying an “outside” position become “insiders” in the narrative (63).

In respect to promise and the gift of the land, Matties notes that a tension exists between “the completeness and the incompleteness of the conquest” (453). While it is noted in 11:23 that “Joshua took the whole land,” it is said only two chapters later that more of the land needed to be possessed (13:1) and that all of the inhabitants had not been driven out (13:13, 15:63, 16:10).

Matties points to this tension not to highlight a contradiction as such, but to note in harmony with his initial convictions that Joshua presents us with an intra-biblical conversation in which land is a gift contingent upon faithfulness to the covenant. That Israel would face the loss of their land years down the road illustrates that God’s promise is not an absolute guarantee, and neither is it license to claim special privilege as a nation.

Indeed, where God “fought” for Israel in Joshua, He ends up later fighting against Judah using Nebuchadnezzar as his agent (460). God’s sovereign work is above all nations and, although God calls Israel and makes promises to them as his special people, how Israel lives into that promise matters for how God brings his ultimate purposes to fulfillment.

In this way, at the heart of the themes of promise and the gift of the land in Joshua is a call to understand faithfulness to the instruction of God as foundational to what it means to live into God’s promises and gifts. And yet what the tensions in Joshua begin to suggest is that the instruction of God is not always clearly understood by Israel.

At the very least the scope of understanding regarding God’s intention for the nations seems to be quite

limited at this stage in the story. While provocative exceptions (such as Rahab) occur in Joshua, the reader is not yet in Isaiah where, as Matties points out, the nations make peace (460).

Beyond the enjoyable and at times surprising discoveries made in his analysis of the text of Joshua, Matties also provides 81 pages of short essays on topics and themes relevant to Joshua studies. Readers would do well to attend to these essays as they can only enrich the exploration of the texts as they are treated throughout the commentary.

Matties also includes a challenge at the end of each chapter, admonishing the

Church to use these texts in a way fitting to our commitment to the Prince of Peace.

I recommend that pastors, leaders, and teachers within the EMC use Matties' commentary. While some may find his hermeneutical approach unfamiliar, or at times uncomfortable, determination and persistence in engaging this work promises theological and spiritual enrichment through the challenge of the difficult conversation that is the book of Joshua. *☪*

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**The Gift of Difference: Radical Orthodoxy, Radical Reformation**, Chris K. Huebner and Tripp York (CMU Press, 2010). ISBN 978-0920718858. 240 pp. \$29.50. Reviewed by Wes Kroeker (Steinbach EFC), minister, Sunday School teacher, and Board of Church Ministries chairperson.

**W**HAT IS THE DIFFERENCE between Radical Orthodoxy and Radical Reformation theology? This book tackles the question in ten essays that act as a dialogue between the two schools of theology.

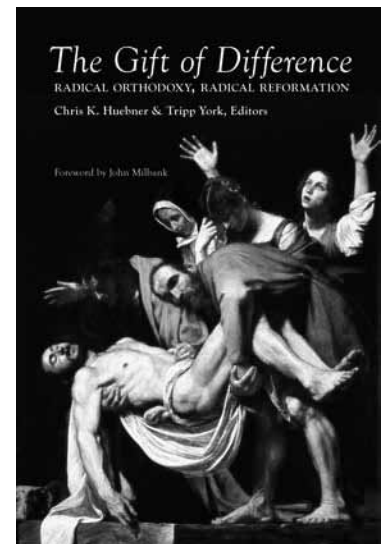
At times it feels like you are watching a fishing show and having an ornithologist (a scientist who studies birds) point out all the inaccurate comments the

fishermen make about birds. Both have their special areas of emphasis and therefore find the view of the other insufficient for the question at hand.

Highlights include an informative and challenging chapter concerning music, liturgy and theology. Dr. Cheryl Pauls reminds us to not mistake music, theology or the blending of the two for God.

C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell contributes an excellent essay on Christian identity and Scripture. The call is to faithfully apply Scripture to the challenges of life on earth. To complete the book, editor Chris K. Huebner, provides a useful essay on what the two schools of theology can contribute to each other.

For a non-academic person, several of the first chapters



were tough work because I lacked familiarity with the main proponent of Radical Orthodoxy (John Milbank). At the end of the book I felt that it would be better to read it backwards chapter by chapter. This would build a better foundation for understanding and wrestling with the first chapters.

Overall it was a worthwhile read that created interest in Radical Orthodoxy and provided a useful exercise in theological wrestling. *☪*

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**Highlights include an informative and challenging chapter concerning music, liturgy and theology. Dr. Cheryl Pauls reminds us to not mistake music, theology or the blending of the two for God.**

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# Feature Sermon

1 Kings 8:10–11; Malachi 2:17–3:1; Luke 2:29–32, 38; Philippians 1:6

## Prepare to be Surprised

by Pastor Darryl G. Klassen



Rev. Darryl G. Klassen, BRS (Steinbach Bible College), MA (Providence Theological Seminary), is the senior pastor of Kleefeld EMC. This sermon was presented at Kleefeld EMC.

**S**UPPOSE YOUR GOOD FRIEND TELLS YOU that she is going to throw you a surprise party, but doesn't tell you when. This is very exciting. You feel great appreciation for the honor your friend is paying you.

Days pass. Days turn into weeks and then months. Your expectation begins to flag and your doubts mount that this party in your honour will ever take place. You have given up walking into darkened rooms wondering if people are going to pop out and yell your name. Has your friend forgotten about her promise? Was she full of hot air?

Years go by. You remember the promise bitterly-sweetly, but it is a pale memory. Life goes on. You have really lost faith that there ever will be a party. Hoping that it will come is futile. Trusting your friend again is challenging; that too seems futile.

Can you imagine such a promise? How would it feel to be told a surprise is coming at an unknown date and time? How would you prepare for such an event? Would you even know what to look for?

The season of Advent is a season of expectancy. The prophets of old had seen a day when the Messiah would come, but the people didn't know what to expect. If the season of advent is a season of expectancy for us as well, what is it we expect? We have Jesus, yet we wait for him to come again. He will come when we least expect him. Are we prepared to be surprised?

### 1. Signs of a Waning Faith

In the days of Malachi the





prophet expectancy was at an all-time low. Israel's faith in God was growing cold. People were becoming cynical and unbelieving.

Let's put this in perspective. After generations of their disobeying God's laws, God sent Israel into exile in the land of Babylon. Their temple was destroyed; their way of life in ruins. After 70 years of exile the Israelites were allowed to go back to the land of Israel and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the temple.

The temple was a central icon in the faith of Israel. When a Jew saw the temple he was assured that God was with his people. With God on their side they were invincible, they believed. The temple symbolized "God with us."

So they rebuilt the temple, but from what their grandfathers told them the original temple was glorious. It was a beautiful thing to behold. In comparison, the second temple was functional, but gray and drab—anything but beautiful.

Their grandfathers also told them how God was present in that temple. *Read 1 Kings 8:10–11.* When Solomon dedicated this first temple the cloud was so thick the priests could not perform and God's glory stopped them in their tracks. There must have been some visible manifestation that continued to remind the Jews of God's presence thereafter.

Now with this second temple, the people expected God's glory to return to their midst. But it didn't. The prophets assured them God would return, but he didn't. Disillusionment had followed the rebuilding of the temple because, though decade after decade passed, no supernatural event marked the return of the Lord to Zion.

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**Does God grow tired of his people? He does when they keep raising doubts about his fairness. People were saying that the wicked do evil and grow rich. God must favour the irreverent. This kind of talk wearies God.**

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<sup>10</sup>When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. <sup>11</sup>And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.

– **1 Kings 8:10–11**

<sup>17</sup>You have wearied the Lord with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"

<sup>1</sup>"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

– **Malachi 2:17–3:1**

The Jews felt that they had been obedient and done their part, but God had failed them. His delays brought on apathy. God, they thought, favoured the wicked.

Malachi responded to the people. "You have wearied the Lord with your words. 'How have we wearied him?' you ask. By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD and he is pleased with them' or 'Where is the God of justice?'" (Mal. 2:17).

God is wearied by their words? Does God grow tired of his people? He does when they keep raising doubts about his fairness. People were saying that the

<sup>29</sup>"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss[a] your servant in peace.

<sup>30</sup>For my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

<sup>38</sup>Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

– **Luke 2:29–32, 38**

<sup>6</sup>Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

– **Philippians 1:6**

wicked do evil and grow rich. Why do the wicked prosper when the faithful grow hungry? God must favour the irreverent.

So the people decided that being faithful didn't carry any advantage for them. Let's break God's rules, live carelessly, forget our covenant relationships (marriage), because God is not just anyways. It makes no difference anyways. This kind of talk wearies God.

I think we can relate. We get tired of waiting for God to act on our behalf. And when we see the unbeliever get whatever they want without praying, without waiting upon God, and without faith, we lose hope. We don't expect God to answer our cries. Spiritual lethargy sets in, spiritual laziness.

Some of the warning signs of lethargy are these: when worship and your church life become a matter of taste and preference or duty; when faith is not at the top of your priority list in making life-long relationships; when injustice in

society doesn't faze us; or when giving becomes a chore. These are specifically results from Malachi. And we can see them in our generation too.

## 2. The Lord is Coming to His Temple

When the Jews were in the process of rebuilding the temple their prophets encouraged them. Haggai said, "I will shake all nations and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD Almighty," (Hag 2:7). And Zechariah too said,

"Shout and be glad, O daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you," declares the LORD" (Zech 2:10).

It was some decades later when they started losing hope. To be looking for God to do something greater than they had yet seen was a natural reaction. How many of us have prayed, "Lord, show me yourself today. Encourage my faith"?

Malachi echoed the prophets with his message, "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the

covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty," (3:1).

Here is something Isaiah (40:3) alluded to, but Malachi says even more clearly: a messenger will prepare the way. Look for him. At the end of Malachi we get a clue that this messenger is an Elijah-figure. When you see him, the Lord is close behind.

We know who this is: John the Baptist. When John was born his father, Zechariah, found his voice after months of silence and possible deafness. He sang about his son, "And you, my child, will be

called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him" (Luke 1:76). His job was to turn the hearts of the people to God in repentance before the Lord comes.

Think of it, from Malachi's day to the birth of John there were 400 more years of delay. If you read the spiritual history of the Jews in those days there was a real spiritual deadness among them. John was the messenger of the Lord sent to wake them up.

Then the Lord will suddenly come to his temple. Jews were expecting great glory; pomp and circumstance. But when the Lord finally came to his temple for the first time since the promise, he came as a nondescript, ordinary, little baby. And how glorious is that?

Few saw it. An old man named Simeon saw it. *Read Luke 2:29-32.* An old woman named Anna

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**When God showed you his glory in the baby Jesus, he showed you a human being. Hold a child in your arms and you behold the image of God, marred but still the image. Jesus came as one of us, the perfect image.**

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saw it. *Read Luke 2:38.* But they saw it; they saw the glory of the Lord!

Who would have expected this visitation? It's like that one day you walk into a party and you have no idea it's for you. Something glorious has happened and we missed it.

This is the messenger of the covenant—the promise. Jesus is the response of God to the question, “When and where will we see the glory of God in the midst of his people?” “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3).

This says so much I haven't got time to share it all. When you look for the flash, you may miss the ordinary. Glory may not be what you think it is. And a baby in your arms? Think of it: When God showed you his glory in the baby Jesus, he showed you a human being. Hold a child in your arms and you behold the image of God, marred but still the image. Jesus came as one of us, the perfect image.

Suddenly, the Lord will appear. What do you expect that will be like?

### 3. To Be Made Holy

Trouble and hardship come in many forms: sickness, money woes, relationships. At the root of most, if not all, of our troubles is spiritual difficulty. We fail to understand God and so we don't understand why we suffer. This is why we lose hope. If we could see life just a little clearer we might understand what God is doing, why he delays, or what he has in store for us.

Malachi asks who can endure the coming of the Lord or who can stand when he appears. These are battle terms. However, the battle with Jesus is not a swordfight; it is a battle of holiness. Who can stand and endure the holiness of

Jesus? Who can engage him and not be changed by him?

Two images are employed to help us understand this. The first is launderer's soap. The messenger is the launderer and he comes to clean us up, to make us presentable for the Lord. But they didn't have soap in those days, so don't think of *Tide*. Think of alkali. This stuff took the colours, or stains, right out of the cloth and made it white. It removed impurities. Think white like the transfiguration of Jesus—shining white!

The second image is of a refiner. The

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**Christmas time is a reminder not so much of angels, shepherds, and wise men, but that when Jesus came the first time it was a surprise. The Church has waited 2,000 years for Jesus to return and we continue to wait.**

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Lord sits and refines us as silver. Here's what this means: A certain woman was curious how the refining process worked. So the woman called up a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him while at work. As she watched the silversmith work, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire, where the flames were the hottest as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot, and then she thought again about the verse, “He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.” She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the entire time the silver was being refined. The man answered yes, that not only did he have to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on it the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left

even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, “But how do you know when the silver is fully refined?” He smiled at her and answered, “Oh, that's easy—when I see my image in it.”

Now we have come full circle. God is not pleased with evildoers or when the wicked prosper, as some were saying. Only people made righteous and pure by the refiner's fire and who reflect the image of Christ are acceptable to God.


Being a Christian today is not easy. At times it is just downright hard. Waiting on God takes patience and trust, especially when we see others take shortcuts and get what they want right now.

Preparing for the advent of Christ the first time was a long wait. From the moment God pronounced judgment on Adam and Eve following their sin, God also made a promise: that a descendent of theirs would crush Satan's head. It took several thousand years before Jesus came to his temple. Waiting required faithful living in the meantime.

Preparing for the Advent of Christ again has been a long wait. Christmas time is a reminder not so much of angels, shepherds, and wise men, but that when Jesus came the first time it was a surprise. The Church has waited 2,000 years for Jesus to return and we continue to wait.

The message of Advent/Christmas then is this: don't lose hope. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1).

Has God forgotten you? Certainly not. He is staring at the fiery trial of your life, not allowing it to destroy you, but holding on until he sees his image in the molten silver of your soul.

Paul was confident of this truth, “...that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Amen. 

# The Final Word

**B**ESIDES, STUDENTS SHOULD UNCEASINGLY have it impressed upon them that holy life is not of less consequence than diligence and study, indeed that study without piety is worthless....

*It would be especially useful if the professors would pay attention to the life as well as the studies of the students entrusted to them and would from time to time speak to those who need to be spoken to. The professors should act in such a way toward those students who, although they distinguish themselves in studying, also distinguish themselves in riotous living, tippling [drinking alcohol], bragging and boasting of academic and other pre-eminence (who, in short, demonstrate that they live according to the world and not according to Christ) that they must perceive that because of their behaviour they are looked down upon by their teachers, that their splendid talents and good academic record do not help by themselves, and that they are regarded as persons who will do harm in proportion to the gifts they receive.*

*On the other hand, the professors should openly and expressly show those who lead a godly life, even if they are behind others in their studies, how dear they are to their teachers and how very much they are to be preferred to the others. In fact, these students ought to be the first, or the only, ones to be promoted. The others ought to be excluded from all hope of promotion until they change their manner of life completely.*

*This is the way it ought in all fairness to be. It is certain that a young man who fervently loves God, although adorned with limited gifts, will be more useful to the church of God with his meager talent and academic achievement than a vain and worldly fool with double doctor's degrees who is very clever but has not been taught by God. The work of the former is blessed, and he is aided by the Holy Spirit. The latter has only a carnal knowledge, with which he can easily do more harm than good.*

Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, 1675. In William C. Placher, *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, Vol. 2: *From the Reformation to the Present* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 93–94. Spener (1635–1705) was a leader of the Pietist movement within German Lutheranism.

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