A Biography of *Mere Christianity*

By George Marsden

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A biography of a book may sound like an unusual concept, but books do have their own lives, and some books have shaped the world profoundly. That is especially true of religious books. Recognizing this, the religion editor of Princeton University Press instituted a series called the Lives of Great Religious Books. So far, the volumes include *The Book of Genesis, The Book of Job, The Book of Mormon, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, Augustine’s Confessions, Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologica, John Calvin’s Institutes,* among others published or forthcoming. When I was asked to contribute to this project, I saw C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity* as an appropriate addition to the series. Even though it is relatively new and is not, like many of the works, an official authoritative text of a religious movement, it has a claim to being one of the most important religious works of the twentieth century.

One of the remarkable features of the life of *Mere Christianity* is that, unlike most other books of its time, it is even more popular today than when it first came out. During the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, it sold more than 3.5 million copies in English alone. It has been translated into more than thirty languages. I have been told that, next to the Bible, it is the book most likely to have been read by educated Chinese Christians.

Lewis’s presentations were successful enough for the BBC to invite him back for some additional broadcasts. Eventually he offered four such series. He collected and edited the first two series into a little paperback, titled simply *Broadcast Talks*. These were soon published also in the States with the catchier title *The Case for Christianity*. Lewis had suddenly become well known for *The Screwtape Letters*, first published in book form in 1942. During the next couple of years, he published the third and fourth sets of BBC talks, adding a few extra chapters. These he titled *Christian Behaviour* and *Beyond Personality*.

It is not even clear whose idea it was to bring the three small paperbacks together as a single book. But in 1952 Lewis issued them together, lightly edited, and with an important new preface that explained the meaning of his new title: *Mere Christianity*.

The story of the life of *Mere Christianity* has a number of fascinating dimensions. First, there is the story of its origins. The setting during the trying days of World War II is particularly dramatic, and there is a good bit to say about Lewis’s view of his “war service” as an apologist for traditional Christianity. In addition to the broadcasts, he was traveling on many weekends to RAF camps to talk about Christianity to men whose life expectancies were appallingly short as they faced bombing raids over Germany. These experiences helped furnish Lewis with a good sense of how to communicate with the less educated, a skill that was essential for an Oxford don who wished to reach a wide audience with his broadcasts.

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Looking for Adventure?

We all long for adventure whether it is in real life or in our dreams! Why else would millions around the globe flock to theaters to see the latest sequel of Star Wars or the Jason Bourne series? And how many enjoy spending countless hours reading quest novels like Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* or even C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*?

We seem to be wired for adventure and the same basic storyline hooks us every time. As a writer friend shared with me, all good story telling follows this basic formula: A story begins with a character who wants something, struggles to overcome barriers that stand in the way of achieving it and moves through a series of actions to overcome them.

Yet even greater than living vicariously through a story or movie adventure is the joy, challenge and thrill of being part of a real life adventure yourself. The great British explorer, Ernest Shackleton, who managed to save his entire expeditionary team in Antarctica in an amazing adventure, was said to have recruited his crew with the following legendary advertisement:

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.”

Some of you, even today, would love to be part of Shackleton’s expeditionary team, while others would shiver at the thought and prefer to remain in the comfort of your own home. Yet, either way, whether you and I are aware of it or not, Jesus has offered us a real, not a virtual or vicarious, life of adventure in which we can experience the challenge, thrill and joy of being part of a purpose greater than ourselves and actually play a vital role. Jesus calls you and me with these words, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:23-24)

Often when we read these verses we speak of the cost of discipleship, the denial of self, the taking up of our cross and the hardships that are entailed in living our lives for Jesus in this fallen world. Yet that is all part of the adventure of discipleship in which a sure promise of great reward is given to all who commit – their very lives or souls are saved! There is no greater reward than that, and the alternative is far worse – the death of our souls. Yes, the Christian life may be hard at times, but this is part of the adventure and Jesus also tells us, “I came that they (his disciples) may have life and have it abundantly.” There is no greater joy and fulfillment than accepting Jesus’ call and even the hardships can be viewed as part of the adventure of discipleship!

C.S. Lewis puts it this way in *Mere Christianity*:

What we have been told is how we men can be drawn into Christ – can become part of the wonderful present which the young Prince of the universe wants to offer to His Father – that present which is Himself and therefore us in Him. It is the only thing we were made for. And there are strange, exciting hints in the Bible that when we are drawn in, a great many other things in Nature will begin to come right. The bad dream will be over: it will be morning.

Are you ready to be drawn into Christ and answer His adventurous call to discipleship? ☩

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The Emergence of Evangelical Discipleship: Learning to Walk with Jesus

by Tom Schwanda, Ph.D.

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In every age the followers of Jesus have been called disciples. Sometimes we in the contemporary church act as if we were the first serious believers of Jesus. In reality, we can learn a great deal from earlier Christians in how they sought to walk with Jesus. I have a particular interest in the early evangelicals of the eighteenth century; many of these key leaders have influenced us today. This article is based on my recent book, The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality: The Age of Edwards, Newton, and Whitefield.

True Disciples

To contrast the sharp distinction between faithful followers of Jesus and those only in name, early evangelicals often spoke of “true disciples.” Some actually referred to what we might call nominal Christians as “pretenders.” Jonathan Edwards asserted,

There is no man but a true disciple of Christ, that is willing thoroughly to deny himself for him, and follow him in a way of obedience to all his commands, unto the end, through all difficulties which Christ has given his followers reason to expect.

George Whitefield, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean six-and-a-half times (he died and was buried in Newburyport, Massachusetts), declared,

Not that all who followed him, were his true disciples. No, some followed him only for his loaves, others out of curiosity; though some undoubtedly followed to hear, and be edified by, the gracious words that proceeded out of his mouth.

Edwards cautioned his listeners that the world was not conducive to the gospel of Jesus Christ and that believers of Jesus must deny those earthly pleasures that hinder their growth in Christ. He declared,

I know of nothing that is more abundantly insisted on as a requisite and necessary work of a sincere disciple in the Scriptures than this is. It is a great thing to part with the world. The world is a natural man’s god, and it is his all. It is a great thing for a man to be cut down in this affair, and to be willing to cut himself off from the world for Christ’s sake, and so to give up all and reserve nothing.

Many eighteenth-century evangelicals stressed the critical nature of Luke 9:23, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me,” and similar passages. Francis Asbury, the leader of early Methodism in the American colonies and states, stressed this in his 1802 sermon: “The operations of grace upon believers, by which they live in self-denial of all evil; and bear the cross, enjoy the life of God, and exercise themselves in Christian temperance, justice, and holiness.” John Fletcher, John Wesley’s chief assistant in England, concluded his guidelines for self-examination—whether a person was a new creation in Christ—with these words:

Jesus, Lord of all, grant thy purest gifts to every waiting disciple. Enlighten us with the knowledge of thy will, and show us the mark of the prize of our high calling. Let us die to all thou art not; and seek thee with our whole heart.

Fletcher realistically understood that many could be followers of Jesus in name only. After affirming the importance of Luke 14:26, “If
"Lord, teach us to pray."

Luke says this simple request came after Jesus’ disciples had seen Him praying (11:1). Jesus, they had observed, was a man of prayer. Each of the Gospel writers emphasizes this point.

Mark describes the press of people coming to Jesus to be healed. On the next day, “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” (1:35).

Matthew writes that on one occasion Jesus, after preaching to great crowds, “went up on a mountainside by himself to pray” (14:23).

Luke draws attention to Jesus’ prayer life most of all. Eleven times in his Gospel he refers to Jesus praying. At Jesus’ baptism, it was as He was praying that the Holy Spirit came upon Him like a dove (3:21). Luke tells us that Jesus “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (5:16). On one occasion, before He chose the twelve apostles, Jesus “went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (6:12). It was “as he was praying,” that “the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning” (9:29). And Luke tells us that in the Garden of Gethsemane, “being in anguish, [Jesus] prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (22:44).

John in his Gospel devotes an entire chapter (17) to the text of one of Jesus’ prayers. Jesus prayed. For Him prayer was a priority; prayer was a passion; prayer was a part of Him, like lifeblood. We can say that Jesus lived a life of prayer. We might be tempted to wonder why. Wasn’t He the Son of God? Why did He need to pray? But that line of question gets it all wrong. Jesus lived a life of prayer precisely because He was the Son of God. For that’s what prayer is about. Prayer is engaging in a living relationship with God, communing with Him in love, as a child to a father.

That’s one thing His disciples couldn’t miss when they heard Jesus pray. He addressed God as His “Father.” The Aramaic word they heard was Abba. It was so distinctive that Mark, in recounting Jesus’ prayer in the garden, left it untranslated, just bringing it over into Greek: “Abba, Father,” Jesus said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (14:36).

For the Jews of Jesus’ day, Abba was a very unusual way of addressing God, almost unheard of. It was a familiar form of addressing one’s earthly father, often used in more informal family settings, almost like “Papa” or “Dad” but not quite. On Jesus’ lips it always had a respectful tone. Jesus joined it to terms like “Holy Father” (John 17:11) or “Righteous Father” (John 17:25) or “Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Luke 10:21). But it was still intimate and personal. Jesus prayed as one who really knew the One to whom He was praying. He knew Him as His Father. That’s how Jesus prayed—like no one they had ever before heard. It is no wonder that His disciples asked Him, “Lord, teach us...
to pray like that. We want to know God as You do.”

And that’s a request we share—at least I do. So what was it that Jesus taught them in response to that request, “Lord, teach us to pray”?

Let’s briefly consider Jesus’ best-known words on prayer, found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:5–15), as there we will see that the key to praying like Jesus is found in our relationship with God as our Father.

“But when you pray,” Jesus says, 

do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matt. 6:5–6)

Pray to the Right Person

In His instructions about prayer, the first common problem Jesus addresses concerns who is at the center of our praying. For hypocrites the focus is on self, rather than on God. They would rather be seen by others than be heard by God. They desire the reward of human accolades, and that, Jesus says, is all the reward they will get.

According to Jesus, performing a prayer is no meritorious act. Who do you think is impressed? Authentic prayer must come from a humble heart, not one interested in exalting itself. Authentic prayer must come from an honest heart, recognizing that God sees what is done in secret, in the secret recesses of the heart—the real you—not some pious mask you wear when you do something religious. Jesus speaks here of prayer as essentially a private matter. It’s a personal conversation, not a talk show.

Jesus is not ruling out public prayer. He engaged in public prayer Himself. He regularly participated in the worship of the synagogue, which included the public recitation of written prayers. And we need prayer in fellowship with others also. But even in public prayer, the focus must not be on the human listeners but on God.

When you pray—whether you literally enter into a closet or are among others in fellowship—you pray to God alone. We must pray to the right person. We must see God as our audience.

The key here is becoming so conscious of God that we cease being self-conscious. That’s why great teachers on prayer through the centuries have agreed that the first step in prayer ought to be what is called recollection; you start to pray by saying nothing, but recalling whom you are addressing.

Frequently the biblical prayers of God’s people begin with a recollection of who God is. And who is the God to whom we pray? Jesus says to His disciples, to those who have joined themselves to Him in faith, “Pray to your Father, who is unseen.” “This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:6, 9).

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The hypocrite comes to prayer and thinks only of self. The pagan comes to prayer and doesn’t think at all. Other gods may enjoy mindless and mechanical incantations.
The Wisdom of Jane Eyre

by Joe Kohm

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Imagine for a moment Charlotte Brontë’s famous character Jane Eyre, recently parted from Mr. Rochester after the discovery just moments before their wedding of Rochester’s still very alive albeit mentally incapacitated wife, sitting on the set of the popular television program The View. Shortly after their thwarted marriage ceremony—the brother of Rochester’s wife having declared an impediment to the marriage—Rochester approached a devastated Jane and offered to whisk her away to his Mediterranean villa, out of the sight of prying eyes.

Whoopi Goldberg—“But Jane, Rochester is handsome and rich. How can you just walk away from him?” Barbara Walters—“But Jane, you love each other! Why shouldn’t you be together?”

At this point in the novel, Jane Eyre found herself in a situation that would be the envy of many of her modern contemporaries. She and Rochester did love each other, and they had the financial resources to live and travel the world opulently. Remember, this was the world before Facebook, Twitter, and camera phones. Only a small circle of people would have ever known the truth. What then, is the value of a novel published almost 170 years ago, and what lessons could be applicable for us and how we are to live today?

In his attempt to persuade Jane to run away with him, Rochester was positively twenty-first century in his appeal. He asked, “Is it better to drive a fellow creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law—no man being injured in the breach?” In examining Rochester’s question, it’s important to recognize that it had two parts. First, he asked Jane whether his feelings and emotions, in this case his intense feelings for Jane, weren’t more important than a human law: the law that once a person is committed in matrimony, he or she must forsake all others. And second, he asked Jane what could be so wrong with their being together as long as no one else was being hurt. These are questions we hear asked frequently today by the enlightened voices of “progress” in culture. Why should long-standing traditions get in the way of my happiness? What’s the big deal if no one else is hurt by it?

Rochester’s appeal to emotion in the first half of his petition to Jane was rooted in a self-preoccupation that elevated emotional intensity above the God-ordained institution of holy matrimony. As we see currently, self-preoccupation and desires easily attach to the language of rights, in this case, Rochester believed he had the “right” to be happy, even though he was still married to someone else. His desires, feelings, and wishes congealed into a central inner force willing to discard one of the fundamental societal and theological tenets of civilization, as self-preoccupation and feelings generally treat any form of restraint as a barrier needing to be bulldozed. For Rochester, as with many today, the only requirement necessary for moral approval of a relationship is the consent of the parties.

The second half of Rochester’s question plays on the contemporary belief that if a behavior doesn’t harm anyone else, it must be permissible. Rochester believed that he and Jane could cocoon themselves in their own world, and no one else would have been hurt. Both Rochester and contemporary society fail to recognize that there are two components to the “no harm, no foul” moral standard, and both are based on theological inaccuracies. The first inaccuracy builds on the previously discussed elevation of the self. When an individual bases behavior on his or her belief that an action doesn’t harm another, the person making the statement sets him- or herself up as the arbiter of right and wrong. This is a role reserved for God alone. Psalm 119:142 reminds us that “thy law is the truth.” It’s not “my law is the truth.”

The second component of the “no harm, no foul” standard of morality is that it fails to take into account the spiritual effects of the behav-
ior upon the internal (and sometimes physical) person. There are consequences for following a standard other than the Lord’s standard. Scripture tells us that not following God’s law can lead to separation from God, a darkening of understanding (both Eph. 4:18), a decrease in our desire for God (Rom. 3:11), and a coarsening of our wills that causes a turning from God (Rom. 3:12).

As Jane buttressed herself against Rochester’s questions, she was confronted with considering both her personal happiness and her view of romantic love, two issues that have been elevated to divine status in today’s culture. For those who know the story, how is it that Jane was able to choose and adhere to a standard she knew to be right despite Rochester’s pressure and her own adoration of him? Perhaps a good place to look for the answer is to examine the life of the creator of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë.

Charlotte Brontë, the third of six children, was born to a poor English clergyman in 1816. When Charlotte was five, her mother died of cancer. Her two older sisters died when Charlotte was nine, from tuberculosis brought on as a result of the poor conditions at the boarding school the three attended. For a time, she worked intermittently as a governess, until she and her younger sisters, both of whom would enjoy literary success (Emily with *Wuthering Heights* and Anne with *Agnes Grey*), decided to start their own school. Their venture failed miserably. Despite their advertisements, they didn’t have a single enrollee. Fortunately for literature, the sisters focused on their writing, with Charlotte publishing under the pen name Currer Bell.

Just as *Jane Eyre* was experiencing commercial success, the specter of death appeared again for Charlotte. Her sisters Emily and Anne and brother Branwell all died during an eight-month period. The earlier tragedies Brontë had suffered bled into the themes of *Jane Eyre*—struggle, long-suffering, and endurance. Even C.S. Lewis, in a letter written to his lifelong friend Arthur Greeves (a letter, it is important to note, dated March 6, 1917, when Lewis did not yet believe in God), acknowledged the prolonged struggles of Charlotte Brontë. Lewis wrote, “When God can get hold of a really first rate character like Charlotte Brontë to torture, he’s just in his element: cruelty after cruelty without any escape.”

Through sufferings and hardships the roots of our faith often take hold and grow, manifesting themselves in our worldviews. Jane’s response to Rochester’s persuasive enticement appears to be a derivative of Charlotte Brontë’s personal orthodoxy, perhaps sourced in her own sorrows and difficulties. Encapsulated in this response is a theological underpinning that is almost nonexistent in our culture: the concept of self-denial.

*Since sin is an enslaving power (“people are slaves to whatever has mastered them,” 2 Pet. 2:19 NIV), it is only through and in Christ that we are truly set free.*

Jane responds to Rochester,

*I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man … Laws and principles are not for*
Speaking (not so) well of God

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophbic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”¹ So says Richard Dawkins, for whom God is a “moral monster.” Christopher Hitchens echoes the claim, entitling his own book God is Not Great.

One expects such bluster from overconfident atheists. More troubling are Christian biblical scholars and theologians who similarly stumble over biblical passages that speak of God’s jealousy, anger, grief and other emotions, and who speak of God not as a moral monster but as an emotional wreck.

How can pastors and others speak well of God in the light of biblical texts that depict God as having emotions, especially “negative” emotions? May we depart from the classical tradition’s affirmation of God’s divine impassibility (i.e., his imperviousness to suffering), as many today are inclined to do, and say instead that God suffers change? Or does this move confuse the God of the Old and New Testament with the gods of pagan myths, or worse, ourselves?

For various reasons, the doctrine of God is once again center Evangelical stage. This time the problem is not divine foreknowledge (as in Open Theism) but divine emotion, though the underlying issue is still the nature of the God who is love (1 Jn. 4:8). Does God’s love entail emotional change (i.e., suffering)? Contemporary opinion is divided. Hence the perennial challenge of theology: to speak well (i.e., truly, biblically; coherently; intelligibly) of the God of the gospel.

What biblical authors say

Last year’s Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting featured a provocative session on “The God Ezekiel wants us to meet.” Like Dawkins, a number of the scholars in that group view the God of Ezekiel as a narcissistic, self-absorbed, and ruthless deity – a jealous husband marked by an obsessive fear “that no one is going to know who he is.”² Some go even further, viewing God as an abusive husband so jealous of his holy name (Ezek. 39:25) that he is willing to punish Israel.³ Consider, for example, God’s promise to spare a remnant so that they would remember “how I was crushed by your unfaithful heart that has departed from me” (Ezek. 6:9).

The second commandment forbids idolatry because “I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (Ex. 20:5). Jealousy is a passion aroused when a loving relationship is threatened. This is why it is deeply woven into the story of God’s covenant with Israel. The Hebrew term for jealousy is based on an Arabic root qn that means “to become intensely red” – no doubt a reference to the effects of anger or deep feeling on one’s facial complexion. Hence my question: is being jealous – red-faced – a divine perfection?

The New Testament does not say whether or not Jesus was ever red-faced, but it does attribute emotion to him: “he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled… Jesus wept” (Jn. 11:33, 35). The eternal word of God has a human face. We don’t know what his face looked like as he cried “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” but it could well have been

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flushed. Scripture thus depicts both Yahweh and Yeshua as red-faced: in turmoil, even, in Jesus’ case, on the verge of despair. We can understand that: he was about to be crushed for our iniquities (Isa. 53:5). But can God himself – immortal, invisible – be crushed as well and, if so, does this mean that God despairs? Does a red-faced, jealous God sing the blues?

Listening to our Reformed elders

Calvin warns against taking anthropomorphisms – “forms” (morphe) drawn from the sphere of the human (anthropos) – as literal descriptions of God. God does not have arms. God does not literally break nor is he wrathful the way humans are. Indeed, according to Calvin we do not know what God is in himself, only how he appears to us. Calvin urges us to use great caution “that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends … Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself” (Inst. 1.13.21).

How then should we interpret God’s admission that Israel’s rejection “crushed” him, and all the other biblical “anthropopathisms” (i.e., attributions of humans passions, feelings, and suffering to God)? The Westminster Confession of Faith famously declares God to be “without body, parts, or passions.” Subsequent theologians agreed, taking care to distinguish “passions” from “affections” (i.e., positive dispositions). Fair enough: but which is the proper category for God’s love? And, if we’re not to take God’s being red-faced literally, then what does red-faced (jealous) mean?

Divine perfections: shapes of God’s being in communicative action

We speak well of God when we say who God is and what this “who” is like. Although we do not have exhaustive knowledge of God as he is in himself, we can know him truly, for everything God says and does reveals something of who and what God is.

God’s acts in history “communicate” his eternal nature. The way God is in time, especially in the history of Jesus, corresponds to the way he is in eternity. Jesus is the historical “exegesis” of the eternal Father (Jn. 1:18). Think of revelation and redemption alike as forms of communicative action.

God’s communicable attributes – perfections like goodness and love in which humans participate to a greater or lesser degree – are not “parts” of God but rather shapes of God’s indivisible communicative activity. As one whose being is communicative activity, God is like us; as the one who is the Author of all being, however, God is wholly unlike us. Everything that God does, all his communicative acts, must therefore be qualified by his Authorial status. God is good, but not in the same way in which humans are good. God’s goodness is Authorial (i.e., unoriginated and infinite).

The divine communicative acts that reveal God and propel the history of redemption forward are dynamic analogies of the eternal triune life. The work of Father, Son, and Spirit in history is a dramatic analogy (a being-in-temporal-act) of the light, life, and love that God is in himself (a being-in-eternal-act). So, while

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An Excerpt from Engaging with Jewish People: Understanding Their World, Sharing Good News

There are approximately 14 million Jewish people in our world of over 7 billion. That means my people make up less than one percent of the world’s population. Actually it’s a lot less than one percent. It’s two tenths of one percent. And yet, in ways that could fill entire books, Jewish people have had a disproportionate amount of influence in the worlds of politics, education, business, science, entertainment, literature, and numerous other fields. When you consider how so very few (none?) of the world’s other ancient peoples still exist (seen any Hittites or Jebusites lately?), you can see why some people see the hand of almighty God behind the people He calls “chosen.”

A little less than half of those 14 million live in Israel. Almost that same number live in the United States with almost half of those living in or near New York City. Most Jewish people live in or near cities such as Los Angeles, Paris, London, Toronto, Buenos Aires, and Moscow. Of course, by the time you read this, those locations may have shifted a bit. As I write this in early 2016, I hear about significant migrations of Jewish people from France to Israel because of rising anti-Semitism.

My people have always had to move because of hatred and persecution. Some of the numbers of change in population can stagger the imagination. Poland’s demographics disturb the most. In 1930, 3 million Jewish people lived in Poland. Today there are barely 3,000. Most were killed by the Nazis. The rest escaped to America, Israel and elsewhere. The combined populations of Jewish people in Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania had grown to over 2.5 million by 1930. Today, those locations account for less than 200,000.

Of course, these numbers all presume it’s easy to identify who is Jewish and who is not. They’re the biological descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, right? But such simplicity rarely occurs in the Jewish world. In fact, you could read lengthy discussions about “Who is a Jew?” that would make you wonder if you’ve stumbled into a law-school classroom or a Shakespearean tragedy.

Part of the problem developed when the newly established nation of Israel passed “the law of return.” This allowed Jewish people from all over the world to settle in Israel and claim automatic citizenship “if they identify themselves as Jewish.” You see the potential problems, don’t you? The Israeli government had to qualify that a bit. Eventually they landed on the view that you were Jewish if your mother was Jewish. Why your mother and not your father, since so many places in the Scriptures trace people’s ancestries through the line of the father? Because the centuries of persecution often included the raping of Jewish women by non-Jewish oppressors. This led to births of children who knew who their mother was but for whom identifying their father wasn’t so easy. So the rabbis decided that the way to keep our people intact and distinguish who “we” are from who “they” are was to keep track of the mothers and their children. God did raise up fathers to lead the families and communities from the survivors of such cruelty, but it all made for a rather messy situation. Perhaps this is why Jewish people now place such a high priority on the family. Perhaps this is why Jewish people now place such a high priority on the family. Then again, the Bible values the family rather highly as well.

For the purpose of this book, however, we don’t need to explore the debate about “Who is a Jew?” any further. The Jewish people you’re likely to meet won’t be wondering if they’re really Jewish. They’ll either identify themselves as such or not. Some, to be sure, may be wondering what that means. They may not have been raised in a very observant family and now they would like to connect to their roots. In fact, a growing number of Jewish people in America
are reclaiming or re-establishing or finding for the first time their Jewish roots during their middle age. These kinds of newfound identities could be fertile soil in which to cultivate conversations about the Messiah. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s wait a bit before we explore how we reach out.

For now, it’s worth reflecting further on understanding who we’re talking to. Jewish people love to point out that Judaism is more than a religion. And it’s more than a race. And it’s more than an ethnicity. Some like to say, “It’s a way of life.” Jewish people weave together doctrine, diet, humor, tone of voice, and a dozen other aspects of life all under the banner of “Jewish.” Part of the reason why Jewish evangelism is so difficult is that most Jewish people see Christianity as so alien. Being Jewish is not just having a different set of beliefs. It’s different flavors of food, different ways to tell jokes, different views about politics, and different planets of social customs. If I had to condense what it means to be Jewish to four prevailing themes, I’d say they’re pain, pride, pleasure, and promise.

Pain

I’ve already mentioned enough things to highlight the reality of pain in the Jewish mindset. A fair number of Jewish holidays commemorate times when enemies tried to wipe us out but God spared us. For Passover we remember our deliverance from slavery to the Egyptians with a feast called a seder. For Purim, we rejoice that wicked Haman’s plot to kill us didn’t succeed and we nosh on cookies called hamantaschen. For Hanukkah, we dedicate ourselves to God, who empowered us to retake the temple from Antiochus Epiphanies, and we eat potato pancakes. One Jewish comic quipped that most of our holidays could be summarized with three short sentences: “They tried to kill us. We won. Let’s eat.”

Pride

Because we have survived so much, against such odds, so many times, we have developed a kind of Jewish pride that has been, in my opinion, both a blessing and a curse. It’s a blessing because it builds upon itself. It looks at past accomplishments and spur us on to even greater ones. Not only do we survive persecutions but we also produce Nobel Prize winners, cure diseases, write masterpieces, advance social improvements, and rise above our circumstances. We can do anything—or so we think. This kind of pride has enabled the country of Israel to thrive economically and agriculturally even though it consists largely of desert. The Jewish people have developed a will to excel even when the odds are against them. When Jewish people reflect on their corporate rags-to-riches status, they grow more energized to excel still more.

But ethnic pride has also been a curse because, along the way, some Jewish people have forgotten God. Despite warnings like the one in Deuteronomy 8, it is easy to think we are the source of our success instead of appreciating the gracious hand of God. Through Moses, God warned:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God … Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied … then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Deuteronomy 8 v 11-14

This warning is for all of us, whether Jewish or Gentile. Everyone must be wary of a reliance on their own abilities to bring us victory.
The Priority of Prayer
by Thomas A. Tarrants, III, D.Min.
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A number of years ago, a well-known hamburger chain aired a TV commercial that focused on a simple question to favorably distinguish its product from all others on the market. The question was “Where's the beef?” It was an extremely successful commercial, still remembered by many people.

Those of us in the church need to ask a similar question today: Where's the power? Where is the power we read about in the book of Acts and the early church? Where is the power that propelled the church forward through the centuries against overwhelming resistance and opposition? Where is the power that distinguishes the followers of Jesus from those of Buddha, Muhammad, or Marx?

If you were to answer, “in the Holy Spirit,” you would of course be right. He is the source of power for all Christian life, witness, and mission. But that doesn’t exhaust the answer. There is more. And that “more” lies in the area of prayer. For as surely as the Spirit lies behind the moving of God's power, prayer lies behind the moving of the Spirit.

Throughout the Bible, the powerful working of the Holy Spirit is closely related to prayer. When God’s people earnestly pray, the Spirit works with power and God's kingdom advances. When they don’t, things seem to grind to a halt. Whether it be our personal lives or the ministry and mission of the church, earnest prayer is essential to the Spirit’s working in power.

Jesus teaches this very clearly in the Gospels. He tells us to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10 KJV), and He bids us to “ask the Lord of the harvest . . . to send out workers into his harvest field” (Matt. 9:38). By this He means for us to understand and take seriously the fact that our prayer is a major factor in advancing God’s kingdom in this world. Jesus elsewhere encourages prayer in the strongest terms imaginable by saying, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7). “Have faith in God . . . whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:22, 24). “If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer” (Matt. 21:22). The clear implication of these and similar passages is that God commands us to pray and promises to answer in power when we do so.

Jesus demonstrated this in His own life and ministry. We are all familiar with how Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, preached the gospel, fed the hungry, comforted the broken-hearted, healed the sick, cast out demons, gave sight to the blind, and raised the dead. But we sometimes overlook that these powerful deeds were the overflow of a life of prayer, lived in daily communion with God. The Gospels tell us that early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus would rise and spend time alone with God in prayer (Mark 1:35). And often, even in busy periods of ministry, He would withdraw to solitary places and pray (Luke 5:16). At times He even spent whole nights in prayer (Luke 6:12). By making prayer such a high priority, Jesus was able to maintain constant communion with His Father and draw upon God’s wisdom, guidance, and power to fulfill His mission (John 5:19–20).

The apostles demonstrate this same reliance on prayer. They were able to lead the church because they let nothing distract them from prayer. They understood what Jesus taught—and we seem to have forgotten—that God’s kingdom is advanced chiefly by prayer. And that leaders must first and foremost take counsel of God in prayer and draw upon His power. Therefore the apostles devoted themselves first to prayer and then to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4), knowing that truth without power is as dead as faith without works.
We see the outworking of this in the life of the early church. When Jesus ascended to heaven and left them on the Mount of Olives, the apostles returned to Jerusalem and with the other believers “joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14) to prepare for a mighty visitation of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, three thousand were converted through a single sermon (Acts 2:41). Under their leadership, the new converts “devoted themselves to ... prayer” (Acts 2:42), and the church grew rapidly. When persecution threatened to overwhelm them, they led the church to cry out to God in prayer, and they “were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31). Later, when Peter was arrested by Herod and held for execution, the whole church united in prayer, and God sent an angel to break him out of jail (Acts 12:5–11). Through prayer God also guided the church in important decisions, such as opening her doors to the Gentiles (Acts 10) and sending out Barnabas and Paul to expand the church throughout the Roman world (Acts 13:1–3). At every significant juncture, it was by means of prayer that the apostles and the church drew upon God’s almighty power. This was a vital key to their survival and success.

What was true of the original apostles and the Jerusalem church was also true of Paul and his churches. Paul, preeminently a man of prayer, interceded constantly for his churches and converts (Rom. 1:10; Eph. 1:16–17; Phil. 1:4; Col. 1:9; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:3) and urged them to devote themselves to prayer (Col. 4:2), to pray about everything (Phil. 4:6), and to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17 KJV). Often he sought their prayers for open doors and effective preaching in his ministry (Eph. 6:18–20; Col. 4:3–4; 2 Thess. 3:1–2). As a result, he was able to spread the church all over the Roman world.

And as one looks down the corridors of church history since the days of the apostles, the story is the same. The kingdom of God moves forward through prayer. Those who have been most used of God in every generation have been men and women of prayer. And the movements that have had the greatest impact for Christ have been those based in prayer. The consistent pattern is that those who have honored the Lord by earnest, believing prayer have been honored by Him with ministry that advances the kingdom of the One they love and serve.

Today we need to rediscover the power of prayer—earnest, prevailing prayer. In our educated, technological society, we find it natural to depend on our reason, education, abilities, training, and technology to do the work of God. As a result, we venture only as far as our rational headlights will shine and attempt only what our unaided strength can accomplish. It often seems that if we pray at all, it is to ask God to bless plans we have already made. Consequently we have little vision or power, and our efforts bear the mark of the human rather than the divine. Only a rediscovery of the power of prayer and the ministry of the Spirit can restore the fire of God to our lives and congregations and enable us once again to advance the kingdom of God.

For those who would recover this power, the path is clear and the way sure. We enter it by consecrating our lives afresh to the living God and to the glory of His Son, Jesus Christ. And then, with the apostles, we earnestly ask, “Lord, teach us to pray,” then devote ourselves to praying (Acts 2:42; Col. 4:2). To those who walk this path, the possibilities are limited only by the limitations of God. And nothing is impossible with Him (Luke 1:37).

Notes

1 Quotes from NIV 1984
A “Biography” of Mere Christianity
(continued from page 1)

Another significant part of the story has to do with the reception of the book. Lewis’s broadcasts and the original paperbacks served a felt need for many people during the war years. So the publications were, with a few notable exceptions, well received both in Great Britain and the United States. Interestingly, in the States his strongest following was among the more traditionally inclined mainline Protestant denominations than among self-identified fundamentalists or evangelicals. As someone known for smoking and drinking, Lewis did not quite fit the American evangelical mold. Though they liked his supernaturalism and frank gospel message, some were suspicious of a few aspects of his theology. It was only in the decade or so after Lewis’s death in 1963, a time when mainline interest in him was fading, that he emerged as an iconic figure for American evangelicals, eventually standing second only to Billy Graham in their hierarchy of “saints.”

One highlight of that story is the conversion of Charles Colson, convicted for involvement in the Watergate conspiracy. Colson’s best-selling book Born Again, emphasizing the role of Mere Christianity in his transformation, appeared in 1976. Since then other conversion narratives, such as that of Francis Collins and multi-millionaire Thomas S. Monaghan, founder of Domino’s Pizza, have added to the reputation of the book. Monaghan was one of many Catholic admirers of Lewis’s work.

Lewis also has some distinguished successor apologists who acknowledge the influence of his work. Among these are J.I. Packer, Peter Kreeft (another Catholic), Francis Collins, Alister McGrath, N.T. Wright, John Piper, and Timothy Keller.

Not everyone, of course, has liked the book. So another part of the story is the criticisms it has received. Interestingly, the argument that probably more people have found persuasive than any other has also been the most criticized. That is the famous “trilemma”—now popularly phrased that Jesus is either liar, lunatic, or Lord. Though the argument had been around for a long time, it became associated with Lewis. Critics point out that it is not an airtight logical argument, since there may be other explanations, such as that the Gospel writers only later attributed divinity to Jesus. One can, for instance, readily find websites such as “Atheism 101, how to respond to the Liar, Lunatic, or Lord argument.” Lewis was aware that the argument was not airtight. In fact, in his original radio script he alluded to and dismissed the fourth possibility, but he dropped that for the publications, probably thinking the point required more explanation. Despite criticisms, Lewis also has some very able philosophical defenders. And many readers continue to find his arguments compelling.

One challenge in writing this “biography” of Mere Christianity was to find a way to go beyond the stories of origins and reception, as interesting as each of those is. So I chose to consider the “life” of the book as also involving its “vitality.” What gives this book its ongoing vitality, contributing to its growth in popularity over the years? What is the genius of this book? The answers are, of course, not original with me. I am in a sense distilling what has been said by many writers who have reflected on Lewis’s marvelous effectiveness as an apologist. Here I’ll just summarize the seven traits I identify as contributing to the book’s genius in the hopes that these will whet the reader’s appetite for more.

1. Lewis looks for timeless truths as opposed to the culturally bound. Lewis is well known for his rejection of “chronological snob-
bery” or the idea that the latest fashionable ideas are likely to be the best. He maintained, rather, that the beliefs that had lasted the longest were more likely to be true. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, *Mere Christianity* is not dated in the way most other mid-twentieth-century books seem to be.

2. **Lewis uses common human nature as the point of contact with his audiences.** As a literary scholar, Lewis looked for what was common in human experience. He combined that expertise with a good ear for listening to his less-educated neighbors or tradespeople. So when it came to speaking on the BBC to just about every sort of person, he knew where to begin—with our common sense that there is a right and a wrong. And unlike what one might expect of a university don, he could speak in simple terms that just about everyone could understand. As in writing the Narnia tales, he knew how to put himself in the shoes of his audience.

3. **Lewis uses reason in the context of experience, affections, and the imagination.** Some people are reluctant to open *Mere Christianity*, because they think it is mostly a set of arguments. Lewis was indeed sharp in argument and debate. But he put whatever arguments he presented in the context of first appealing to his audiences’ imagination, longing, and desires. He used reason to remove some of the modern obstacles to belief. But his appeal is to the whole person who intuitively recognizes that there is more to reality than modern culture may allow. Lewis speaks of the disenchantment of the modern world, and one of the things he tries to do is to re-enchant it by, as he says in his sermon “The Weight of Glory,” weaving a spell.

4. **He is a poet at heart, using metaphor and the art of meaning in a universe that is alive.** Lewis’s first ambition was to be a poet, and he never lost the sensibility that realities are best expressed through images and analogies that awaken the imagination. Mickey Maudlin, the religion editor who oversees Lewis’s publications at HarperOne, has observed that in *Mere Christianity*, as in his fiction, Lewis invites the reader on an imaginative journey. Similarly, while one might pick up *Mere Christianity* “because people say it is the best summary of what it means to be a Christian and of what Christians believe,” Maudlin observes that soon you find that it is something more:

> What you find is the identification of a moral compass you did not realize existed, one that says you are not measuring up, the story of how God sent Jesus as an invasion into the world to start a revolution, that doctrines are really maps to show you your choices and to guide you forward on your journey, and that all this about God, Jesus, and the church is really about you: will you admit your need, receive God’s help, and start the process of being perfected, made into a little Christ, so that you can pursue further adventures with God in his heavenly realm, the world you were created to inhabit?

These poetic sensibilities underscore the previous point that, while Lewis appeals to the reason, he does so in the context of exciting the imagination. As in the Narnia tales, he invites his readers to see that the narrative of their own lives is set in the midst of a much larger real-life cosmic drama. They are invited to imaginatively see themselves as within a real cosmic drama in which a loving but dangerous God is inviting us to be remade.

5. **His subject is “mere” Christianity.** This point, which he elaborates in his 1952 preface, is closely related to his deep historical consciousness. By “mere Christianity” he meant the beliefs that Christians through the ages had shared, beliefs that had been around “long before I was born and whether I like it or not.” Contrary to those who thought that Christianity with the disputed points omitted would be only a “vague and bloodless” lowest common denominator, he was confident that the perennial common beliefs were in fact substantial and powerful.

The concept of “mere Christianity” as something that binds Christians of all sorts together may have even more resonance in the twenty-first century than it did in Lewis’s time. Today denominational loyalties have weakened, and most Christians are willing, as Lewis urged,
to be generous to those in other communions. Protestants and Catholics, for instance, are much more ready to recognize their commonalities than they were two generations ago. And as is illustrated by the various societies that bear his name or the organizations that describe their views as “mere Christian,” C.S. Lewis is one of the hallmarks that Christians of many communions have in common.

6. “Mere Christianity” is not “cheap grace.” “Mere” Christianity is not minimal Christianity. It does not offer “cheap grace,” to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s term. It is not easy or “safe.” Rather, readers find that they are being drawn in to an understanding of Christianity that is going to be extraordinarily demanding on them personally. They are being asked to give up their very “self” as a sovereign entity and to experience Christ living in them. “To become new men means losing what we now call ‘ourselves.’ Out of our selves, into Christ, we must go.”2 So part of the appeal of Mere Christianity is that the journey on which Lewis invites readers to join him is fulfilling because it is demanding.

7. Finally, the lasting appeal of Mere Christianity is based on the luminosity of the gospel message itself. In an essay on literary criticism (C.S. Lewis and E.M.W. Tillyard, The Personal Heresy: A Controversy), Lewis observed that the poet should not be inviting the reader to look at the poet, but rather pointing the reader to “look at that.” Lewis succeeds admirably in pointing the reader toward the subject. As others have observed, he does not simply present arguments; rather, he acts more like a friendly companion on a journey. To expand on that image: he is like a companion on a hike who is an expert naturalist and points out all sorts of flora or tiny flowers or rock formations that you would have missed on your own. When you see the wonders, you are duly impressed with your guide as an intermediary, but, particularly if that guide leads you to one of the most astonishing mountain peaks and sights that you have ever seen, the beauty of the objects themselves overwhelms your attention. You are deeply grateful to your guide, but that is not the essence of your unforgettable encounter with that beauty. So Lewis points his audiences toward seeing Christianity not as a set of abstract teachings but, rather, as something that can be experienced and enjoyed as the most basic and the most beautiful of all realities.

Notes:
1 Mickey Maudlin, “The Perennial Appeal of C.S. Lewis,” presentation at the C.S. Lewis festival, Petoskey, MI, October 2012. I am grateful to Maudlin for furnishing me with a typescript of his talk.

RECOMMENDED READING


Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis’s eloquent and winsome defense of the Christian faith, originated as a series of BBC radio talks broadcast during the dark days of World War Two. Here is the story of the extraordinary life and afterlife of this influential and much-beloved book.
anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple," he proclaimed, “Christ evidently means, that whosoever does not love his Father, and his own life less than him, cannot be his sincere disciple.”

In 1757 John Newton wrote a series of letters to a fellow minister. He began one epistle with an admonition to his friend and also himself: “I would earnestly press you and myself to be followers of those who have been followers of Christ; to aim at a life of self-denial; to renounce self-will, and to guard against self-wisdom.” Soon thereafter, Newton wrote again to this minister, expanding his explanation of a follower of Jesus:

The two great points we are called to pursue in this sinful divided world, are peace and holiness . . . these are the peculiar characteristics of a disciple of Jesus, they are the richest part of the enjoyments of heaven; and so far as they are received into the heart, they bring down heaven upon earth.”

While there are many benefits to walking with Jesus, early evangelicals also understood the cost of discipleship. Also writing in a letter, Whitefield reminded his friends of the lifelong practice of following Christ:

Let your obedience be constant, universal and uniform, founded on a living faith in Christ Jesus, that by well-doing you may put to silence the slanders of foolish and evil men. Let your speech, and all your actions, manifest whose disciples you are. Confess your Lord publicly before men, and be not afraid to tell those that have ears to hear, what God has done for your souls. It is good to keep close the secrets of a king, but it is honorable to reveal the works of the Almighty. Above all things, my brethren, have fervent charity among yourselves. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

Clearly discipleship included hardships and struggles as one attempted to faithfully obey Jesus Christ. Whitefield reinforced this truth in a sermon on Luke 9:23, simply titled “Self Denial,” in which he announced:

Our blessed Lord took all opportunities of reminding his disciples that his kingdom was not of this world: that his doctrine was a doctrine of the cross; and that their professing themselves to be his followers, would call them to a constant state of voluntary suffering and self-denial.

To summarize, early evangelicals recognized that a disciple was a true believer of Jesus Christ. That person desired to walk in the way that Jesus called His followers to walk.

Cultivating a Vital Faithfulness

During the early decades of the eighteenth century, church life lacked vibrancy, and cultural competition was often at odds with faithful discipleship. Not surprisingly the evangelical emphasis on new birth that is the expectation of readers of Knowing & Doing was a new message for many. How then did the early evangelicals seek to cultivate a vital faithfulness in following after Jesus? Noted evangelical scholar Mark Noll in his foreword to The Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality succinctly answers that question:

The book begins with a focus on “New Life in Christ,” where the standard themes of evangelical conversion predominate. The following sections—on the Holy Spirit, Scripture,
The Emergence of Evangelical Discipleship: Learning to Walk with Jesus

spiritual practices, love for God, and love for neighbor—represent the natural outgrowth of a converted life for evangelicals.¹²

This narrative shape of the Christian life invites us to consider our own pilgrimage and maturity in Christ.

**New Life in Christ:** Early evangelicals took sin seriously and understood its disastrous effects in splintering relationships with both God and humanity. The vivid language that described sin included worm of dust, lost, blind, wretched, pitiful, and starving. Evangelicals recognized that sin created doubt, fear, and numerous expressions of spiritual turmoil. Sin also could convince individuals that they could never escape this prison because they were unworthy. Fortunately these eighteenth-century believers were also cognizant of God’s grace and the promise of new life in Christ. Regardless of a person’s experience, God was rich in mercy and declared there was a better way of living. God’s outstretched arms of welcome were always extended with the invitation to come and be healed, restored, and forgiven. This was possible because Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, shed His blood on the cross to save all those who would believe and follow Him (John 1:29). For early evangelicals, this was truly “amazing grace” that redeemed and created assurance of peace and comfort to troubled souls. The proper response to Jesus’ invitation was sincere repentance that exchanged one’s old life for a life that through self-denial sought to follow Jesus daily. The result of being spiritually awakened challenged all who practiced a formalistic or “Pharisee-like faith,” especially ministers who had not experienced the spiritual rebirth. Without the new birth no one could be a disciple of Jesus Christ!

**The Holy Spirit:** The next three categories examine the means of growing in Christ. Early evangelicals affirmed the reality of the Trinity and recognized the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ promise of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer’s life was foundational. Evangelicals maintained that this gift was for every age and not just for the first century, a stance that resulted in their opponents accusing them of “enthusiasm.” But, while evangelicals emphasized the importance of being inspired by God to live a vital spiritual life, they distanced themselves from the excesses of spiritual excitement and fanaticism. This lived experience of faith was named experimental or heart religion and sought the integration of head and heart. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was and is varied, and eighteenth-century evangelical texts on this topic examine sanctification, the dynamic interaction of Scripture and Spirit in the inspiration of and proper use of the Bible, perseverance throughout life’s trials of affliction, sorrow, and doubt, and guidance to attain the eternal triumph and victory over sin. Writers stressed growing in holiness and conformity to the revealed will of God, with the resulting emphasis upon sorrow for sin and holy affections that would inspire deeper sanctification. In times of affliction and temptation, believers were counseled to stand firm and accept their suffering for Christ. Evangelicals were continually reminded to thirst for the Holy Spirit and to seek these manifestations of the Spirit’s presence and power in their daily lives.
Scripture: Scripture has always been central to the Christian faith. Because evangelicals affirmed the divine nature and inspiration of the Bible, they believed that it contained God’s dynamic and transformative word. Reading Scripture could make people wise, alert them to sin, and offer them the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. People were warned not to neglect Scripture; it could correct and comfort anyone in need. Scripture was read, prayed, studied, and preached; it formed the basis for commentaries, created the themes and images for hymns and letters, and became a source of conversation among people from every walk of life because it contained guidance for Christian living. Similar to many Christians in the early and medieval church, they prized humility and cautioned that a corrupt mind would distort the interpretation of the Bible. They approached the Scripture in both a literal and a historical manner but realized, especially in reading Old Testament passages, the need for a spiritual or typological reading. Other writers instructed people to read passages slowly, meditatively, dwelling over a few verses to soak up the maximum meaning. Engaging Scripture was often combined with other spiritual practices, especially prayer and fasting, to sensitize the readers to God’s presence in their daily lives. Each individual had a personal responsibility to come to know Jesus; all people were expected to search the Scriptures for the truth that would liberate them.

Spiritual Practices: Early evangelicals inherited the Puritan threefold classification of spiritual practices: (1) the closet or secret and personal prayer practiced by a single individual, (2) private prayer cultivated within a more intimate social structure, such as a family or religious society, and (3) public practice, which was the broadest gathering for nurturing of one’s faith with others, particularly in worship. Spiritual practices were highly prized because they had the potential to bring individuals or groups of people into God’s presence. Proper motivation and focus was critical. Because ministers and friends alike understood that spiritual practices were about God and not about the individual, the person would seek to come with the best posture of his or her heart. Many ministers served as spiritual guides for those who sought counsel through letters or personal sessions. Common wisdom recognized that it was not possible to create a standard rule that would guide everyone. Rather, flexibility and experimentation were encouraged with the reminder to consult one’s own temperament. Evangelicals engaged many spiritual practices still commonly used today, such as reading and praying Scripture, prayer and fasting, keeping a journal, meditation on creation, spiritual friendship, family worship, self-examination, spiritual direction, retreats, public worship, celebrating the sacraments and listening to sermons. But they also included forgotten practices: public days for prayer and fasting around national or state emergencies and the preparation displayed especially in the Scottish communion weekends.

Love for God: Faithful discipleship is always lived out in loving God and one’s neighbor. Early evangelicals demonstrated that their deep desire for communion with God was possible because they had first experienced God’s love in union with Christ. Since believers in Jesus Christ had already experienced God’s presence; their desires for a deeper delight and enjoyment of God were awakened. This created a yearning for heaven, not as an escape from the challenges of earth but rather as a fulfillment for their longings to know God more fully. Drawing from Scripture, evangelicals realized both the importance of a proper motivation for seeking God and the obstacles that they would face along their earthly pilgrimage. These believers valued the beauty, mystery, and ineffable nature of God. In responding to this awareness, they fully appreciated the proper posture of surrender to God, expressed through obedience, regular self-examination, and scrutiny of their souls, desire to grow in holiness, praise and glorifying worship, and grateful gazing on God in contem-
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pliation. But they were not naïve; they recognized the reality of residual sin following conversion and spiritual conflict that arose from persistent temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Periods of spiritual dryness were not uncommon, and friends were honest in confessing their struggles or offering words of encouragement to one another.

**Love for Neighbor:** One of the primary descriptors of early evangelicals was activism. Since they had experienced conversion through Jesus Christ, they recognized the importance of communicating that message to others. These writings explored a wide range of concerns that required the good news. The evils of slavery were debated on both sides of the Atlantic, although the British successfully abolished it decades before the United States did. Missionary efforts were encouraged and societies formed specifically to prepare and send men and women to countries that had not heard the gospel. Some of these writings sought to remove the excuses related to the danger, expense, and challenges of learning new languages and cultures. The importance of evangelism is demonstrated both in addressing a specific people group of their need to receive Jesus Christ as Savior and also in the narrative of a single person as he or she attempts to live a consistent life of faith that honors Christ amid the conflicts of business and daily life. The wealthy were reminded that religion was more than external formalism and that selfishness was the greatest barrier to vital Christianity. Those who had experienced abundant resources were challenged to practice benevolence to those less fortunate. Likewise, sermons proclaimed the necessity of charity to the poor. Giving to others was a direct biblical command of Jesus that also produced significant benefit to the benefactors themselves.

**Conclusion**

In 1776 John Newton penned a letter in which he reminded a woman that, despite the trials of life, Jesus “is always near.” He continued, the chief difference between us, and the disciples when our Savior was upon earth, is in this: They then walked by sight, and we are called to walk by faith . . . We conceive of him as at a distance; but when the heart is awakened, we begin to make Jacob’s reflection, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.” And when we receive faith, we begin to know that this ever present God is in Christ and will always lead us forward as His disciples. May we grow in that same ability to walk by faith in following Jesus Christ as His disciples.

**Notes**

5. All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.
13. The six themes beginning at this part of the article are condensed from Schwanda, *Emergence of Evangelical Spirituality*, 31, 71, 112, 153, 196, 240.
Growing in Prayer Part 2: Learning to Pray to Your Father

from His will. “Everything is possible” for Him (Mark 14:36). That great God is our Father, and it is to Him that we pray.

Praying to God as our Father—that’s the starting point of real prayer. As followers of Jesus, His Father is our Father. And like Jesus, we are to come to God as a Father who deserves our love, our honor, our respect.

I grew up in a home where my earthly father was greatly respected. One of my fundamental motivations in life was to bring him honor, to make him proud of me. I wanted to please him. And I grew up with a sense of security in the love of my father. I knew he would take care of me; he would be there in my time of need; he would come to my rescue. This is what sonship means—having a sense of dependence and trust resulting in a ready obedience with a desire to bring honor to one’s father.

My father was not perfect—no earthly father is. All fathers make mistakes; our motives are mixed and our actions are sometimes foolish or worse. Some people have wounds from their earthly fathers. But even those wounds are pointers to what a father ought to be—and therefore what God really is. He is a Father who always acts for our ultimate good, which also corresponds to His ultimate glory. He disciplines His children in perfect love; He never responds to us out of frustration or petty anger. His will is always wise beyond measure. He can be trusted, so He is worthy of our obedience. And He longs for us to come to Him in prayer.

That’s the relationship Jesus had with His Father—“The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (John 5:19). “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Jesus prayed, “Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:28). “Abba, Father”—this is the God to whom we pray.

Put aside all desire to develop a reputation as one who prays. Beware of the dangers of the hypocritical ones who want to look good to others so that they may think well of themselves. The one you should think well of is God, your Father in heaven. And from Him you shall receive a reward—the hidden reward of knowing the fatherly love of God almighty, of having your soul refreshed with His presence, experiencing the peace that surpasses comprehension as you entrust your cares into His hands. There are rewards in prayer for those who pray to the right person—who pray to your Father in heaven.

Pray with the Right Understanding

Continuing our look at Jesus, He says in Matthew 6:7–8, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Not only must we pray to the right person, but we must also pray with the right understanding. If the sin of the hypocrite is selfishness, the error of the heathen is mindlessness. The pagan approach to prayer is one of empty words: they “babble on” or they “heap up empty phrases” (RSV). Prayer must be thoughtful, Jesus says, engaging the mind. Avoid Eastern mystical meditation which seeks to disengage and empty the mind. That’s not Christian prayer at all. Empty words don’t mean anything to your heavenly Father.

Nor do a multitude of words. Prayer is not magic. We do not manipulate God by some in-
Pray for the Right Things

We are to engage our minds in prayer, and Jesus continues His instruction by giving us a model prayer, outlining the categories that we ought to think about when we pray. He tells us the right things to pray for.

This, then, is how you should pray:
Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.
(Matt. 6:9–13)

One is immediately struck by the fact that this prayer consists of two halves, marked by the possessive pronoun. The first three petitions use the second person—hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done. The second three use the first person—give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts; lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. So we are to pray, first, for God’s glory, and then, second, for our good.

Praying for God’s Honor

After focusing on whom we’re praying to—“Our Father in heaven”—our first concern in prayer ought to be God’s honor—“Hallowed be your name.” God’s name is His person, His character, His reputation. This is to be revered and honored and considered holy. Our first concern ought to be that God gets the respect that He deserves. It ought to grieve us when He doesn’t.

Then we are to pray that His kingdom will come. That is, that His rule would be acknowledged, that He would be obeyed. We are to pray that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. What could possibly be better than this? What-
ever else we ask of Him, this takes priority. And it must be a priority in our own hearts and lives. I think of the oft-quoted words of E. Stanley Jones:

Prayer is surrender—surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God.  

This is the kind of prayer that God honors—for it is the kind of prayer that honors God.

And this is the way Jesus prayed. This was the consuming passion of His life—“Father, glorify your name!” (John 12:28). His one desire was that all humanity might come to know that glory. And in the garden, He prays, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42 KJV).

This is a revolutionary way to pray, for it turns the concerns of our selfish secular society on their head.

Praying for Our Good

We begin with God’s honor, and only then do we think about ourselves, as we commit our needs to Him. First we bring our material needs. That is, we pray for God’s provision, recognizing our ultimate dependence on God to provide our daily bread. Notice, Jesus doesn’t say next year’s bread, but today’s bread. I don’t think Jesus means that we shouldn’t save for retirement, but simply that we ought to depend on Him daily.

Second, we are to pray for our spiritual needs; that is, for God’s purification in our lives, recognizing our spiritual bankruptcy before Him, the debt that we owe Him—that debt that deserves to be punished. He’s referring to our trespasses, our sins, and our need of His forgiving grace to purify our hearts and to wash us clean.

And our repentance, our turning from sin in seeking God’s mercy, must be real enough to affect our attitude toward others. If I can’t forgive others, then I’m in no position to receive God’s forgiveness.

And third, we pray for our moral needs; that is, we pray for God’s protection as we recognize our moral weakness. We need His power to deliver us from the evil that is all around and within us. Reading the New Testament prayers of Paul, we can see that this is what he most prays for when he thinks of his fellow believers scattered across Asia Minor. I think, for example, of his prayer for the Philippians:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9–11)

Would that our prayers were more concerned with issues of moral and spiritual health and not just material and psychological prosperity. To have daily bread, to have our sins forgiven, to be delivered from sin and the power of the evil one—God’s provision, God’s purification, God’s protection—these three categories capture all our personal needs, as taught here by Jesus. “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Take the Gospel Seriously!

If I had to sum up this whole matter of prayer, I’d say quite simply, to pray is to take your relationship with God seriously. Perhaps more specifically, to pray is to take the gospel seriously. For the gospel is the glorious good news that in and through Jesus Christ we who were alienated from God and subject to His eternal wrath have been rescued, reconciled, and restored—such that we are now sons and daughters of God. Prayer is simply the way we live out and experience this new relationship. Prayer is how we engage with God personally—and in a mysterious way we join with Him in His rule over creation.

I like how one writer has put it—prayer is simply the means God uses to give us what He wants? As the psalmist says, “Take delight in the
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Growing in Prayer Part 2: Learning to Pray to Your Father

LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). That’s what happens when we pray.

Prayer is hard. The battle to pray is the battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. It’s the battle to make our will God’s will; it’s the battle to turn from our rule of our world to God’s rule in His kingdom. It’s a battle that we must win. So don’t give up—begin again. That’s what I do. Confess your sin of prayerlessness and begin again.

Reflecting on this battle, I was reminded of a dear brother who was caught in the grip of alcohol. It had become a cruel idol to him. And I urged him to engage in that battle daily, diligently saying no to that idol and yes to what Jesus Christ wanted for him. I realize that I need to do the same thing. I have idols, too. Idols that need to be rooted out. Every day I need to say no to the world, the flesh, and the devil and yes to God in prayer.

The good news is that we aren’t in this battle alone. If you have put your trust in Christ, if you are a Christian united to Christ, you are a child of God—a son or daughter—and, as Paul tells us, “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal. 4:6). That Spirit within you is crying to God your Father. You have a deep longing to know Him and to love Him. The Lord is calling you to Himself. He desires your fellowship; you are His beloved son or daughter. He offers you an inexpressible and glorious joy. Don’t ignore Him. Don’t push Him away.

As John Wesley said—“O Begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercise...Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days.”

Do you want to be a trifler?

So don’t live like a spiritual orphan. Come to your heavenly Father in prayer. We have a great treasure right at our fingertips, but too often it goes untouched. So I say, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.
3 Ibid., 144.
6 Kent Hughes, Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1988), 73.
7 Hunter, The God Who Hears, 12.

RECOMMENDED READING

Tim Keller, Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God (Penguin Books, 2016)

Christians are taught in their churches and schools that prayer is the most powerful way to experience God. But few receive instruction or guidance in how to make prayer genuinely meaningful. In Prayer, renowned pastor Timothy Keller delves into the many facets of this everyday act. With his trademark insights and energy, Keller offers biblical guidance as well as specific prayers for certain situations, such as dealing with grief, loss, love, and forgiveness. He discusses ways to make prayers more personal and powerful, and how to establish a practice of prayer that works for each reader.
The Wisdom of Jane Eyre

(continued from page 7)

the times when there is no temptation; they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be.

In these words are the faint echoes of Jesus telling us, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it” (Luke 9:23–24 NIV).

Today self-denial stands almost no chance against the relentless pursuit of self-love, which is often fanned into a flame by technology and entertainment. J.R.R. Tolkien discussed the concept of denial in a letter to his son, Michael, dated March 1941. Interestingly, Tolkien is providing Michael with marriage advice. He writes, “the essence of a fallen world is that the best cannot be attained by free enjoyment, or by what is called ‘self-realization’ (usually a nice name for self-indulgence, wholly inimical to the realization of other selves); but by denial, by suffering.” Jane might have gone from poor governess to material wealth and comfort combined with an exciting life with the man she loved dearly if only she had succumbed to her emotions and Rochester’s persuasion. From a temporal standpoint, this seemed ideal, but from an eternal standpoint, Jane knew this wasn’t the “best,” to use Tolkien’s word. It was only by saying no to Rochester that she could ever hope to have this “best.”

In fact, this may lead to the greatest lesson we can learn from both the novel Jane Eyre and the character Jane Eyre. As we consider Mr. Rochester’s fixation on his emotional feelings, his elevation of the self as the judge of right and wrong, and Jane’s refusal of his offer of a life of seeming temporal happiness, it may appear to the untrained eye that the whole of Christian life consists of a long list of “thou shalt nots” capped with a resounding deistic no! The truth is quite the opposite. Since sin is an enslaving power (“people are slaves to whatever has mastered them,” 2 Pet. 2:19 NIV), it is only through and in Christ that we are truly set free. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1 NIV). “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36 NIV). Freedom as the world sees it is choosing to do what we think we like. Freedom in Christ gives us the resounding yes to live in obedience the life God has for us. We are free to choose God’s will for our lives, “his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2 NIV).

Those who have read Jane Eyre know how the book concludes. “Spoiler alert” for those who have not: Jane and Mr. Rochester finally end up together. After the thwarted wedding, Jane becomes a school teacher in another town. Then a distant relative leaves her a fortune. She returns to visit Mr. Rochester and while on her journey learns that his mentally incapacitated wife has perished in a fire and that Mr. Rochester lost his sight trying to save her. A happy reunion ensues, and it appears they lived happily ever after as husband and wife. In his essay “On Reading Old Books,” C.S. Lewis remarks that by reading old books, we can gain a “standard of plain, central Christianity … which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper perspective. ” Jane Eyre is an old book that certainly puts the controversies of the moment, such as the elevation of the self and the relentless preoccupation with feelings and happiness, in perspective. For this reason, I commend Jane Eyre and its wisdom to you.

Notes
The Wisdom of *Jane Eyre*

The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison… in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

*C.S Lewis*

**RECOMMENDED READING**


We’ve all heard about the classics and some of us have even read them on our own. But for those of us who remain a bit intimidated or simply want to get more out of our reading, this companion to Crossway’s Christian Guides to the Classics series is here to help. In this brief guidebook, popular professor, author, and literary expert Leland Ryken explains what the classics are, how to read them, and why they’re still valuable. Written to help you become a seasoned reader and featuring a list of books to get you started, this guide will give you the tools you need to read and enjoy some of history’s greatest literature.

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God’s acts in history may seem to resemble human acts, we must take care to keep in mind the “Authorial qualifier,” especially when we are confronted with the Bible’s anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. Speaking well of God means using human terms and remembering that God is the “wholly Author” in our midst.

What is an emotion?

Is “being moved by” among the perfections of God? Everything depends on whether we can rightly predicate motions, by which I here mean emotions, of God, and this in turn depends on our definition of emotion.

Robert Roberts, a philosopher and moral psychologist, thinks that emotions are primarily mental rather than physical. First and foremost, emotions are about things of which we are aware. Non-cognitivists are wrong to reduce emotions to the physical sensation, say, of being hit in the stomach. Emotions are cognitions that typically involve a person believing something (i.e., a proposition) about a particular person or object. Saul became jealous and angry with David because he believed that David’s success and the people’s celebration constituted a threat to his own status (1 Sam. 18:6–9).

Second, emotions are construals, ways of grasping one thing in terms of something else. To construe something is to characterize it in a certain way, to perceive or believe it as such-and-such. What distinguishes one emotion from another is not the content but the way in which one construes it. Emotions are perceptival evaluations of particular situations. David’s military victories (the proposition) led the people to rejoice (construal) but made Saul miserable (opposite construal).

Third, emotions are concern-based construals, value-laden judgments. Saul is jealous of David because he is personally invested in the situation. His construal of David as a threat is not that of a disinterested political analyst but of one who perceives something dear to his heart (viz., his own status) as endangered.

Divine emotions: covenantal concern–based dramatic construals

Roberts’s definition provides several helpful concepts with which to elaborate the Bible’s depictions of God’s “inner life” and minister understanding, though we also need to modify his account in light of the biblical material.

First, God has neither body nor biochemistry. God can nevertheless have emotions if we understand them as mental states, each with its own object and mode of awareness. God’s cognitions, volitions, and affections alike always have particular objects: “Jacob I loved . . . Esau I hated” (Rom. 9:13).

Second, God’s emotions are unintelligible apart from his construals of human history (e.g., God views Israel’s worship of the golden calf as heinous). In particular, God’s emotions proceed from his construals of the ways in which human beings respond to his words and deeds that comprise the drama of redemption, especially as these come to a climactic focus in Jesus Christ (call it theodramatic construal). Unlike our construals, however, God’s construals are always objective, hence his judgments about situations are always right and true (remember the “Authorial qualifier”).

Finally, God’s concerns are covenantal. Israel is the object of God’s intense concern inasmuch as she relates to God’s own important project: forming a people that will glorify him and be his. The theodrama is ultimately a love story. Better: it is the story of God’s marriage (a covenantal relationship) to his people, his treasured possession. It is surely significant that, with very few exceptions, almost all of the biblical depictions of divine emotions take place in the context of God’s covenant relationship to Israel (and later, the church). Even God’s “hating” reflects a covenantal concern, namely, that some people are “not my people” (Hos. 1:9) and are thus under judgment.

In a nutshell: God’s emotions, as covenantal concern-based construals of various scenes in the drama of redemption, display the whole panoply of divine perfections.
Conclusion: towards an Evangelical theology of the divine emotional attributes

The challenge for a theology of divine attributes is to avoid the two extremes of mythologizing and demythologizing. To “mythologize” biblical texts that attribute emotion to God is to see God as a larger-than-life Othello, tormented by a strong, possibly irrational, passion that causes him to suffer change and experience brokenness. Conversely, to “demythologize” God’s jealousy would be to see it as a mere figure of speech that neither means what it says nor is in any way reality-depicting.

The biblical ascription of jealousy to God is indeed reality-depicting: it represents God’s true construal of the theodramatic situation, his legitimate (and constant!) concern to preserve an exclusive relationship with Israel, and all the other perfections of his nature. God’s “feeling” jealous is his covenantally concerned cognition of Israel on the verge of transferring her allegiance. However, this feeling is not an instance of God changing emotional states. On the contrary, God is always and at all times fully himself. God’s jealousy is no irrational passion but rather a fitting display of his love, goodness, wisdom, righteousness, etc. – the sum total of the divine perfections.

The God of the Old and New Testaments is not “the most unpleasant character in all fiction” but rather the Holy One in our historical midst. The God of the gospel cannot be de-terred or diminished. To forget God’s Authorial status, his absolute perfection, is to forget that God is God, and that God is always and at all times everything that God is, including love. That God’s love is sovereign and impassible is good news, for it means that God’s face is never changing. God is always and everywhere and to everyone as he shows himself to be in the face of Jesus Christ: the impassible Author lovingly in our midst. ■


Notes:

RECOMMENDED READING
Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity (Brazos Press, 2016)

In recent years, notable scholars have argued that the Protestant Reformation unleashed interpretive anarchy on the church. Is it time to consider the Reformation to be a 500-year experiment gone wrong? World-renowned evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer thinks not. While he sees recent critiques as legitimate, he argues that retrieving the Reformation’s core principles offers an answer to critics of Protestant biblical interpretation.
First Steps to Loving and Understanding Our Jewish Neighbors

(continued from page 11)

on self that forgets our constant dependence on the One who gives us every breath, step and thought. Without Him, we cease to exist—both individually as persons and corporately as a people.

For some, this ethnic pride has theological roots—but not ones that accurately reflect the teaching of Scripture. God’s Word goes out of its way to say that God did not choose the nation of Israel because of any merit of its own.

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Deuteronomy 7 v 7-8

Tragically, for some, this pride has angry roots. I have interacted with enough Jewish people to hear a recurring theme of resentment that God didn’t prevent or stop the Holocaust and other evils. For these people, their success, especially the establishment, protection, and prosperity of the nation of Israel has been in spite of God rather than because of Him. Their cry of “Never again!” means that they will prevent another Holocaust by fighting to the death to provide a safe haven for Jewish people in Israel—even if God doesn’t come through for them. I write these words with tears and an ache in my heart but I know these sentiments are real for at least some of my people.

If you’re tempted to think condemning thoughts right now about Jewish pride, consider the universal and insidious nature of pride. And reflect carefully that you too may, from time to time, take credit for things that actually come from the hand of our gracious God. Examine your heart and see if you harbor any bitterness toward God for not always behaving the way you want Him to. Spend time considering how necessary the cross was to atone for your sins, and drink deeply from the well of gospel grace that chose to rescue you from your own self-reliance. And then ask God to give you the same burden for the Jewish people that Paul had, agreeing with his description of them as...

zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. Romans 10 v 2-4

Pleasure

I’ve already mentioned the close ties between Jewish holidays and food. But deliciousness is not just for ceremonial occasions. Who needs to wait for a wedding or a holiday to enjoy lean corned beef, fresh gefilte fish, stuffed cabbage, bagels, cream cheese and lox, or a dessert tray that’ll warrant a lecture from a cardiologist? And this goes beyond the calendar. It shapes a whole way of seeing. Many Jewish people see Gentile culture (which they do not distinguish from Christianity) as sterile, bland, and in desperate need of a new caterer. Such realities are not insignificant when it comes to reaching out with the gospel.

I’ve also mentioned our love for humor. We love to laugh and make others laugh. For many years, the stand-up comedy world was dominated by Jewish comedians. Perhaps we’re trying to counter our many years of trouble and sorrow. Or perhaps our times of lack propel us to go after more and more. I’ll save it for the cultural anthropologists to analyze the causes. For the sake
of this book, I want you to see that Jewish people like nice things, appreciate good music and art, love to celebrate with food and laughter, and think that life—this life—is a good thing. We don’t just sing “L’Chaim” (“To Life!”) because it was a nice show-tune in Fiddler on the Roof. That song was written for the musical because it reflects how Jewish people think and live. If you’re going to engage well with Jewish people, you’ll want to show and tell how the gospel is good news for this life as well as for the next. And you should probably do so over a nice meal.

Promise

The Jewish mindset, at its best, looks simultaneously backwards and forwards. For example, every year at Passover we retell the story of God’s miraculous deliverance of His people from slavery. Long ago he worked miracles to pour out judgment on Egypt’s false gods through the ten plagues, and displayed his power by parting the Red Sea. But we also look forward during that celebration to the time when all slavery, all oppression, all idolatry, and all wickedness will be wiped away. We end every Seder (Passover meal) with the words, “Next year in Jerusalem,” a shorthand reference to the time when the Messiah comes to set up His kingdom on earth.

Thus, Judaism has a forward-looking posture to it, even for some of the most secularized, non-observant Jews. And that future orientation has a strong aspect of hope to it. In fact, the Israeli national anthem is called “HaTikvah”, which means “The Hope”! Perhaps this is why Jewish people involve themselves in politics or pursue civic causes. There’s something in the Judaic DNA that longs for a better day when people “will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks” (Isaiah 2 v 4). For some of them, this taints their view of Christians who they see as only interested in life after death, only in heaven and not caring about earth, and “so heavenly minded as to be no earthly good.” Part of the task in proclaiming the gospel to Jewish people involves agreement that things are not as they should be while still pointing to eternity—the only time when all longings for heaven can be fulfilled.

As followers of the Messiah and lovers of all of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, we see even greater reasons for hope and looking forward. God has already sent His Messiah once, so we are confident that He’ll send Him again to fulfill all remaining prophecies. In the meantime, the promises of Romans 11 tell us that God is not finished with the Jewish people.

I ask, then: Did God reject his people? By no means! Romans 11 v 1

This verse answers Paul’s rhetorical question with a resounding “No!” Israel did not “stumble so as to fall beyond recovery (v 11).” The Bible gives us good reason to be optimistic about fruitfulness in proclaiming the good news to the Jewish people.

God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and that they will be a light to the Gentiles. Some interpreters believe that Messianic Jews will bring ultimate fulfillment to that promise when they, as followers of Jesus, will join all the proclaimers of the gospel, tell of the One who is “the light of the world,” and play important roles in the fulfillment of the great commission. Whatever the detail, we should be encouraged that God has not rejected our Jewish friends and neighbours, and that sharing the gospel with them is not a fruitless exercise. There will be many Jewish believers in the Messiah in the crowd who gather around the Lion of the tribe of Judah, singing His praise forever (see Revelation 5 v 5-13). Perhaps one of the Jewish people you know will be among them.


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