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**Knowing & Doing**

A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind

**PROFILE IN FAITH**

“What Bringest Thou?”
The Life and Ministry of Tiyo Soga

by David B. Calhoun

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In volume 5 of his *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Kenneth Scott Latourette writes a single sentence about Tiyo Soga, calling him “an outstanding product of the Presbyterian missions” in South Africa. Indeed, he was. Tiyo Soga was the first black South African to be educated overseas, the first black South African to be ordained overseas, and the subject of the first biography of a black South African. According to a modern African scholar, Tiyo Soga was “the most prominent African of his time.”

Tiyo Soga’s father was the husband of eight wives, and the father of thirty-nine children. Tiyo’s mother, Nosutu, had nine children, of whom Tiyo was the seventh. He was born in 1829 at Mgwali on the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony. His mother gave him the name Sani, which means “what bringest thou?” His father changed his name to Tiyo, for a hero of his people. Nosutu became a Christian; her husband, Old Soga, was at best a nominal Christian.

Tiyo was brought to Christian faith by Ntsikana, one of the first of the Xhosa to become a Christian. Ntsikana had been converted through the ministry of Johannes Theordore Van der Kemp, a Dutch missionary sent out by the London Missionary Society.

Young Tiyo became a student at the Chumie mission station, studying during the week, and worshiping in the mission’s octagonal church building on Sundays. About eight miles from Chumie was Lovedale, a more advanced school founded in 1841 by Scottish missionaries for European and African boys and girls. The African students were chosen by examination. Tiyo and one other boy were candidates for a place at the school. The missionary asked them both, “What is the greatest work of God?” The other boy answered, “The work of creation.” Tiyo replied, “The salvation of mankind, because it shows God’s love.” Tiyo was chosen.

In 1846 “the War of the Axe,” as it was called, began in the eastern part of the Cape Colony between the Africans and the English. Lovedale school was forced to close, and the missionaries and some Africans, including Tiyo and his mother, fled to safer places. The missionaries thought that Tiyo should be sent to Scotland to further his education. They sought his mother’s permission; she replied, “My son is the property of God; wherever he goes, God goes with him.”

(continued on page 10)
As I write my first “Notes from the President,” I want to use this opportunity to address the core purpose of the Institute and outline the exciting vision for the future.

Since its founding in 1976, CSLI has focused on making disciples of the heart and mind. Beginning in 1999, the Institute has done this primarily through the Fellows Program; we now have 540 Fellows who have gone through the program or are enrolled for this fall in D.C., Atlanta, or Annapolis. We supplement the Fellows Program with conferences, special events, and publications that encourage a deeper and more meaningful walk with Christ. All this effort is geared toward strengthening, not competing with, the church.

To broaden the impact of this program, starting next year we are launching Fellows Programs on Capitol Hill in D.C. and in Montgomery County, Maryland, to cover the Washington area more fully. We’re also seeking God’s provision and guidance for programs in Chicago and Seattle.

In addition, we are focused on producing solid teaching materials for churches, small groups, and individuals. Our C.S. Lewis Study Program series features DVD lectures on and discussion questions for C.S. Lewis’s most important works, starting with *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*. We’ve just completed a twenty-part DVD series on *Basic Apologetics*, and soon we will offer *Knowing God: The Essentials*, a series of seven modules on DVD that cover the gospel, spiritual formation, discipleship, worldview, calling, and missions. Each of these will serve as a core component of our broader, more effective discipleship ministry.

We believe we can make a huge impact for Christ by helping believers mature and by encouraging one another to use our training and God-given gifts in service to the Lord. Whether that means taking a leadership role in church, being salt and light in the workplace, transforming our family and neighborhoods, or going to the mission field, each of us can truly be a disciple in the best sense of the word.

Going forward, we will be looking for ways to challenge and inspire all who participate in our programs to live out their devotion to Christ.

In the legacy of C.S. Lewis, the Institute endeavors to develop disciples who can articulate, defend, and live faith in Christ through personal and public life.
The Credibility of the Christian Life in the Contemporary Narcissistic Society

by Dr. James M. Houston
Senior Fellow and Co-founder,
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The apostolic message to each of the early Christian churches is clearly prompted by the church’s cultural context. Sexual immorality prompted Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. In Rome the issues revolved around the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christian communities. Writing to the Ephesians, he addressed the civic pagan cult of the goddess Diana.

But today theological studies tend to become as specialized as all other academic studies; theology can be taught as an educational program like any other topic, without directly speaking to our way of life. This heightens our need to relate the gospel, not just to “church” or “the academy,” but to how we identify ourselves and how we actually live daily. To do so, theologians should be as much engaged with the disciplines of society—whether history, political science, sociology, [behavioral] economics, psychology, etc.—as with biblical scholarship per se. Otherwise Christian leaders can be unaware and uncritical of cultural influences and so succumb to the temptations they present.

Should we be surprised, then, to address attention to narcissism within the nation’s capital, when our whole culture has become narcissistic? Sociologists and psychotherapists have been addressing the issue now for at least four decades, but it has received scant theological attention, even though narcissism is now a cultural epidemic.

What Is Narcissism?

Specifically, the Mayo Clinic defines “narcissistic personality disorder” as a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance and a deep need for admiration. Those with narcissistic personality disorder (NDP) believe that they are superior to others and have little regard for other people’s feelings. But behind the mask of ultra-confidence lies a fragile self-esteem, vulnerable to the slightest criticism.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines NDP as:

- a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:
  - has a grandiose sense of self-importance
  - is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
  - belief that he/she is “special” and unique, and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other “special” or high-status people (or institutions)
  - requires excessive admiration
  - has a sense of entitlement
  - is interpersonally exploitative (or taking advantage of others to achieve his/her own ends)
  - lacks empathy, is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
  - shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

Implicit in this definition is the severe lack of empathy, and therefore of relational connectedness there is in NPD, so that narcissists are the least aware of their defect. The medical profession finds the narcissist untreatable; no drug can...
Mentoring

By Mona Lindeman and Susan O’Loughlin Ward, Year 2 Fellows

Gardening is the art that uses flowers and plants as paint, and the soil and sky as canvas.
—Elizabeth Murray

To be a gifted gardener is to be an artist of the earth and to be a gifted mentor is to be an artist of the soul. In fact, gardening is an apt metaphor for mentoring. The true gardener sees beauty before it’s visible, gets her hands dirty, and faithfully weeds, prunes, and waters. In awe, she recognizes that God causes the growth.

Following Christ’s command to disciple others, the C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows Program incorporates mentoring as a critical component of the Fellows experience. The Institute knows that disciples of Jesus are not made on their own. Jesus had a small group of men with whom he spent time, taught, and prayed. But the most significant way that they learned to become like him was by being invited into his life and ministry and observing how he followed his Father. So it is with mentoring—a mentor doesn’t so much give advice as serve as an example.

Virginia Watson is a living example of someone who, through a lifetime of obedience, has become a determined, devoted disciple of Jesus Christ. She is also a gifted gardener of both the soil and of souls. As C.S. Lewis Institute Fellows, we have been on the receiving end of the care given by her skilled hands for the past four years. She has patiently listened to us, consistently thought the best of us, and willingly walked in the tangled weeds of life with us. We would like to give you a glimpse of a master gardener at her work.

**Good Soil:** On a recent trip to Longwood Gardens, Virginia was taken with the quality of the rich, fertile top soil being applied to the flower beds. The soil was the composted result of all the flowers, including bulbs, that had shown forth their beauty in earlier plantings. What initially seemed a shocking waste made sense when the Longwood gardener explained that the bulbs never bloom a second time with the same timing and beauty as they do the first year. The spent bulbs are turned into the rich soil that nurtures the next crops. That soil is like Virginia’s life. Things had to die in her: many decisions to turn away from sin and despair have been mixed with decades of obedience, holy habits, and acts of service to create a life that is fruitful and fertile. Virginia has “good soil” and is generous in spreading it around in the gardens of our lives.

**Deeply Rooted Plants:** Virginia’s is a muscular faith, rooted in her desire to dig deep into her relationship with Christ. She is hungry to learn from life and puts feet to whatever she learns. There is no idle knowledge in Virginia’s life. If it is worth knowing, it is worth doing.

Her life is characterized by choices to develop holy habits day by day. She told us once about a commitment she made to pray for certain missionaries every time she put on her shoes. She had a revelation that if she wore sneakers that tied, she would have a little more time each day to pray for them. We were struck by the way Virginia turned a good habit into a better one.

One Thanksgiving years ago, Virginia decided to keep a journal for the month leading up to the holiday to ensure that no matter what her circumstances, she would have a ready supply of gratitude when the day came. Each day she wrote at least one thing for which she was grateful. That began an annual habit that she keeps faithfully. We still remember receiving an e-mail written while she sat by her husband’s hos-
hospital bed as he lay in a coma just before he died: “Even in these circumstances, there is always much to be thankful for.” The deep roots of this holy habit were evident even in the midst of heartache.

**Fertilizer and Water:** To Virginia, there are no ordinary days; all of life is sacred. The beauty of a garden, the unexpected kindness of a near-stranger shoveling her driveway during a blizzard, observing selfless gestures in others are all occasions for seeing Christ in our world.

Virginia is attentive to opportunities in the mundane, daily aspects of life to glorify God and to grow in love, obedience, and holiness. She is diligent in her own life in this way, and generous in encouraging this growth in her mentees. Throughout the Fellows Program, Virginia challenged our group to find one idea in each of our readings that God wanted to use to change us; she asked us to describe in our response papers how we were different as a result. Virginia faithfully read and commented on those papers. Our margins were filled with her comments: “Good idea”; “My prayer too”; “Great insight”; “I join you in this desire.” Through her remarks, she spoke grace into our hearts with words of encouragement, affirming that she was a witness to the evidence of God’s work in our lives. Virginia’s words were refreshing to our souls, examples of God’s own living water.

**Weeding and Pruning:** Pruning can sometimes be painful, but Virginia is a gentle gardener, giving us glimpses into her heart and mind or focusing on her own shortcomings. At one of our small group dinners, she shared her frustration at not always receiving acknowledgments for gifts she had given. We each said a mental “amen” to that, feeling quite justified. One breath later, however, Virginia shared that she realized her perspective was wrong. Instead of focusing on the lack of acknowledgment, she realized that she wanted to view her giving as reflective of the kind of loving and generous grandmother she wants to be. Her comment was both humbling and convicting.

**Patient Tending:** Some people at Virginia’s stage of life take joy in imparting their many years of hard-earned wisdom. Virginia seems unaware of hers. She simply sees herself as a fellow journeyer on the road to holiness. When told that she is who we’d like to be when we’re her age, she always tells us we should aim much higher. Her humility makes her approachable. She continually looks for grace in our lives and tells us of the beauty she sees. She pays attention, like a gardener noticing and celebrating each new bud.

Virginia is a master gardener, in that she has enhanced the soil, planted deeply, watered and fertilized, pruned and tended in each of us. The result is a harvest of beauty in our lives as we have drawn closer to the Lord and in turn share what we have caught from her with those we mentor. We do our best to follow Virginia’s example: to be honest about our own shortcomings, reflective about what God is teaching us, and affirming of what we see the Lord doing in the lives of those we mentor. It is a great gift to have such a mentor and also a great privilege to serve as a mentor. We believe that each role is an essential part of becoming a devoted disciple of Christ. God is in the business of growth and transformation, and we can all be the trowels, rakes, and pruners in his hands.

*Virginia is a master gardener, in that she has enhanced the soil, planted deeply, watered and fertilized, pruned and tended in each of us.*
An Apologetic from Ecclesiastes: Does Anything Make Sense?

by Stuart McAllister

Vice President, Training and Special Projects, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries

So recommends the last words of the Buddha. It sounds like good advice, but then the human heart invariably presses on to doubt itself! After all, what security, what authority, what kind of assurance can we have that this light is real light or true? The hunger for meaning, the quest for understanding, the search for answers and solutions are central features of the human condition. For instance, what is the nature of reality? What is it (existence) all about? What is the purpose of life (if any), and to what should we try to give answers? A much-neglected source and resource for reflection in this area, perhaps due to a more rationalistic approach to apologetics, is the book of Ecclesiastes or the Preacher (Qoheleth in Hebrew). It is a book that speaks profoundly to our times by asking questions, by setting out contradictions, and by forcing the reader to “feel” what absurdity as an outlook is really like.

As the book opens, we are confronted with its most famous words, “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Eccl. 1:2). Or in the New International Version: “ ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher, ‘Utterly Meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ ” Not a very inspiring start! Why does he say this? Well, he has devoted himself to explore life, to examine what is good for men to do under the sun, and his observations have yielded some depressing results.

• Everything in life seems to be fixed, determined, and bound (perhaps) by inevitability.
• Human freedom appears to be constrained by overwhelming necessities, leading to a sense of helplessness.
• The endless cycle of repetition leads to a sense of boredom, pointlessness, and despair.

Many a sage, philosopher, or guru has come to similar conclusions. What is unique to Ecclesiastes is how the author tackles the issues and what he leads us to see. The book was possibly written as an educational tool for young men entering into roles of leadership and responsibility. (This is not a sexist comment; it was just the dominant cultural reality of the time.) Some commentators consider Ecclesiastes as an Old Testament apologetic text. By laying out the vanities of life, the propensities of youth, the all-encompassing reach of death, and the vast urgency of wisdom (as a potential life philosophy), it engages a chaotic world with some serious reflections.

As to its relevance for our times, Peter Kreeft of Boston College writes, “Ecclesiastes is the one book in the Bible that modern man most needs to read, for it is Lesson One, and the rest of the Bible is Lesson Two, and modernity does not need Lesson Two because it does not heed Lesson One.”

In other words, our modern and postmodern worlds are steeped in distractions, diversions, and multitudes of self-help and self-improvement strategies. There is little felt need for God, little sense of our own fragility, little understanding of real need!
Kreeft continues: “Whenever I teach the Bible as a whole, I always begin with Ecclesiastes. In another age, we could begin with God’s beginning, Genesis. But in this age, the Age of Man, we must begin where our patient is: we must begin with Ecclesiastes.”

So Lesson One from this ancient writer for modern apologetics is “the art of effective diagnosis.” Chapter 2:1–10 is a case in point. Stepping into any bookstore today we are confronted with books and magazines that commend our culture’s priorities and values with a screaming urgency. But they are really no different from those of earlier times; the Preacher has tried them all. In fact, he calls them to the “witness stand.”

He explores laughter and humor (v. 2), projects and possessions (vv. 4–7), entertainment, sex, and sensuality (v. 8), and of course the pursuit of prestige and recognition (vv. 9–10).

He reminds us of Mark Twain’s insight, “You don’t know quite what it is you want, but it just fairly makes your heart ache you want it so.”

He presses us to face our hungers, our deepest longings, our expectations, and he puts them on trial. His conclusions are stark. In essence, he says he’s tried it all, evaluated it all, and it’s all pointless. There is a recurring word for pointless or vanity or meaningless used by the author; it is the Hebrew word hebel. Jacques Ellul comments on this word. He says,

In Qohelet as in Isaiah, everything concurs to suggest the idea of uselessness. This idea is so strong that we might conclude that hebel suggests the idea of nothingness: from the point of view of reality, unsubstantiality; from the point of view of the truth, a lie; from the point of view of efficiency, uselessness; and from the point of view of security, deceit.

The European existentialist writers and many postmodern film makers arrive at the same conclusion and lead us to the same place. This is where we learn Lesson Two from this ancient writer: the limits of reason, rationality, and analysis.

“Wait a minute! I thought RZIM [Ravi Zacharias International Ministries] fostered a more rational, a more reasonable, and a more analytical approach to the faith and questions?” We do, but we also recognize that they have limits and limitations. George Bernanos captures this well: “In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.”

A real danger I have come across (in this kind of ministry) is a type of person who first discovers apologetics, learns of its power and its use, but who then elevates it to more than it can deliver. And when the elevated expectations fail to deliver the unrealistic goals, the resulting backlash is anger, at times despair, and very often cynicism (see Eccl. 2:17–23).

Ecclesiastes is a hard book. As Brian Thomas says, “Reality is what we bump up against when our beliefs (often illusions) fail.” This writer believes in reality, even if facing it is tough and demanding at times.

Lesson Three is this: life from an earthly perspective so often seems pointless. Wisdom (it is said) is better than folly, but it too is limited. In the face of all that we must encounter, the Qoheleth states, “God exists.” After all, we are discussing or exploring “reality,” but what is it?

Lesson Four, I believe, is the necessity of an answer. Why do we seek meaning at all? Why do we so deeply long for answers?

- Perhaps it is a survival instinct and purely the result of our response to nature’s power and threats (naturalism).
One of the most memorable experiences of my doctoral studies was the annual gathering of Langham Scholars (UK) for three days of study, prayer, and encouragement. Doctoral students from all over the so-called developing world (which included my own Romania) were not only supported financially: we were also authentically cared for by our mentors. On one occasion, each scholar had to explain to the rest the thesis he or she was working on. Not a difficult task, I thought—until we were given the second part of the assignment: to explain the thesis’s practical and spiritual significance in our lives.

People who have come across doctoral theses at some point in their lives know that these are some of the most obscure, narrow, technical, and almost utterly unintelligible works. Sometimes it is even embarrassing to be asked, “And what is your doctorate on?”

Most of my fellow scholars had either very practical, or at least historical, topics, or they had straightforward exegetical theses. A small number of us were focusing on systematic theology, with only a couple on philosophical theology. My own work was on “postliberal theology,” and it was rather philosophical. As the students were explaining how learning from the experience of the church under communism has benefited their own spiritual life, or how they learned from the leadership mistakes of some regional body of believers in Ghana, or how a fresh exegesis of 1 Corinthians solves interesting practical quandaries, and so on, I was mind racing around these ideas: postliberal, spiritual, how do they go together?

When my turn came, I still had nothing. So I blurted out something like this: “I don’t see any immediate spiritual value to my work. It’s like the army (think compulsory military service): you just do what you gotta do. I need my doctorate to return to teach in Romania.”

As disappointing as my answer might have been to myself, as well as to others at that time, it was true. But I think it highlights an important thing about higher (especially doctoral) education. What starts out as a fad in the academia eventually influences the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the man in the street. The precise way in which highly abstract ideas will become relevant isn’t always transparent at the moment of their inception, when they are nothing but the latest theory. Hence my inability to predict exactly in what ways postliberal theology ‘cashes out’ in spiritual life. This is not true with all intellectual trends, but it is certainly true with this theological movement, also called narrative theology (if this rings more bells).

My challenge is to give a brief introduction to postliberal theology to a thoughtful, yet not necessarily philosophically trained, readership. As an academic, I shudder at the task of giving an introduction to a terribly complex school of philosophical theology. Not only is my space limited, but to fully understand postliberal theology one should first study a little bit of epistemology and philosophy of language, besides having a cursory idea of the history of modern theol-
ogy. The reader should therefore take this as an oversimplified and sketchy account that leaves out some important issues in the philosophy of language. It is best used as a guide or a map to a territory that one would have to explore on one’s own.

A Working Definition

As the name suggests, postliberalism is a reaction against liberalism. It is not a reaction in the name of a theological conservatism, or an “evangelical” theology. It is a “mainline” reaction against a mainline liberalism. While there are points of affinity with evangelical theology, the relationship is at best one of fruitful tension, and at worst outright antagonism.

Reactions against liberalism were being heard as early as Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans in the 1920s. The movement known as neo-orthodoxy had found a hospitable home on British and American soil, where it waged intellectual war with theologically liberal divinity schools and seminaries. But postliberalism intensified the opposition to liberalism by making it more intellectually respectable. Barth had reacted against liberalism in the name of a christocentric theology that seemed to many to be reactionary and insularist in its attitudes to philosophy and the sciences, which were still being regarded as the guardians of intelligibility and knowledge (scientism).

Meanwhile, however, a certain modern picture of rationality was beginning to crumble. It was precisely the picture that made Barth look reactionary, a prophet crying in the wilderness. Thinkers from Wittgenstein to Clifford Geertz to Thomas Kuhn were beginning to challenge modern theories of knowledge, which placed religion and tradition at a disadvantage vis-à-vis philosophy and particularly science. These postliberal thinkers upgraded neo-orthodoxy with this added legitimacy, transforming it in the process. We might start, then, by defining postliberalism as a theological school, or method, which applies a set of philosophical and sociological insights derived in particular from Wittgenstein and Geertz. As we progress, we shall notice that the philosophical influence is counterbalanced by a more theological emphasis, leading us to qualify our working definition.

The Philosophical Horizon

I will just briefly recount this transition from a modern, foundationalist outlook to a generically postmodern, postfoundationalist account of rationality. The project of modernity was that of finding a rationality untainted by tradition, by religion, by customary patterns of thought. It was a dream of securing the objectivity of knowledge, of ethics, of religion. It was thought possible to purify language of all unnecessary rhetorical ornament, to arrive at that purely scientific language, which mirrors reality exactly. In fact, this was one of the core aspects of modern epistemology: truth and knowledge amounts to correspondence between our language (words, sentences, theories) and reality (things, actions, values). It was thought that the task of the individual, precisely as individual (one had to be suspicious of tradition and community, to dare think for oneself), was to gaze at the world and then adjust her language and beliefs in accordance with it. It was (continued on page 22)
Profile in Faith: Tiyo Soga

John Street United Presbyterian Church in Glasgow adopted the young African boy and supported him during his stay in Scotland. He made a public profession of faith and was baptized on May 7, 1848. Tiyo did well in school, but he was homesick for “the free air of his native hills.” He returned to Africa with a missionary, George Brown, arriving at Port Elizabeth on January 31, 1849. Tiyo worked with Mr. Brown as his interpreter and was taught by the missionary, studying together such books as Jonathan Edwards’s “heart-searching” Religious Affections.

The years 1850 and 1851 were filled with battles and bloodshed over the eastern frontier of the Cape Colony. Again Tiyo had to flee for his life, as did the missionaries, who were blamed by both sides. It was decided that Tiyo should return to Scotland and study for the ministry.

In Scotland the John Street Church again gladly received their young African friend and provided support for him while he pursued his studies for the ministry. His goal, he said, was “to learn better how to preach Christ as my known Saviour to my heathen countrymen who know Him not.” As a student at Glasgow University, Tiyo was the first black to wear the red student toga, making his way through the foggy streets to the venerable college in High Street. He became a Sunday school teacher in a destitute part of the city. Many people were kind to him but at times he suffered ridicule and discrimination because of his color.

John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress was Tiyo’s constant companion. Later he would translate that book into Xhosa. The Pilgrim’s Progress depicted the struggles of a Christian and Soga saw a parallel with black Christians in Africa. The introduction to Soga’s translation stated:

Folks! Here is a book for you to examine. The book tells the story of a traveller who walks the road which many of you would like to travel. Accompany the traveller whilst slowly trying to make acquaintance with each other—stopping to take rest whilst listening to things the traveller tells and reports to you; move along with the traveller to his destination, the end of his journey.

After a short time in college, Tiyo entered the Theological Hall of the United Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh. He appeared before the Presbytery of Glasgow every other month for examination on his theological studies and for preaching sermons.

Tiyo completed his theological studies and was honored, with his friend Robert Johnston (who was going as a missionary to South Africa), by a reception for them, and the gift of thirty-eight theological books. Tiyo replied to a letter, signed by 186 students of his fellow students to their “beloved brother in Christ,” thanking them for their kindness, and promising to always remember Scotland as his second home. On December 23, 1856, he was ordained as a minister of the United Presbyterian Church. For a few months he preached in many places in Scotland to congregations eager to hear the “newly-fledged Kafir preacher.”

On February 27, 1857, he married a Scottish woman, Janet Burnside, a pretty Scots lass who was to be his faithful companion and a devoted mother to their children. Little is known about her background or her life in Africa. “But she was of sterling character and was to endure with fortitude the loneliness of isolated mission stations on an uneasy frontier, as well as the loneliness of a white woman married to a black man in a colour-conscious society.”
Tiyo and Janet Soga and Robert Johnston and his wife sailed from England on the *Lady of the Lake* on April 13, 1857, and after a long voyage of three months arrived in South Africa. Tiyo Soga returned to a people dispersed by war and demoralized by their recent religious practices that had promised so much but delivered only suffering and sorrow. He was not discouraged, however, because, as he said, “it is by terrible things that God sometimes accomplishes His purposes. In the present calamities I think I see the future salvation of my countrymen.”

Tiyo Soga and Robert Johnston began a new mission at Mgwali. Sunday services were held at the station; on other days the missionaries visited out-stations. On Saturdays the two men read their Hebrew and Greek Testaments and studied history and other subjects together.

A new church building opened on June 15, 1862, built through the efforts of Tiyo Soga, who had raised the money for the building and superintended the quarrying of stones and the making of bricks. It was, he said, “the most commodious and substantial, and the neatest native church in British Kaffraria.” (This church building is still in use today.)

In April 1864 “the good and honoured” Dr. Alexander Duff of Calcutta visited Tiyo Soga’s mission. “I shall not readily forget the shake of the good doctor’s hand on alighting from his mule wagon,” Tiyo wrote. “Interest, sympathy, and Christian brotherly love were in that shake.” Duff later wrote that in all of South Africa he had found no mission station “conducted in a more orderly, vigorous, systematic way, than that of my admirable brother, the Rev. Tiyo Soga.”

On June 4, 1868, Tiyo and his family left his beloved Mgwali to undertake a new and difficult work in Tutaka. He faced many disappointments and setbacks as he tried to reach his people with the gospel of Christ. “Nevertheless, to the true servant of the Lord Jesus, the sky which overhangs the missionary field is not all darkness and gloom,” he wrote, “but is often relieved with glimpses of glorious sunshine.” When faced with the complexities of the political situation in South Africa, he remembered that “the Lord is Governor among the nations. All these difficulties, like mountain mists, must vanish before the glorious rising of the Sun of righteousness.”

In July 1871 it was apparent that Tiyo Soga was dying. In his illness, he said, he found the greatest comfort in having no will of his own, but the Lord’s, as to life or death. His loving anxious wife and his faithful old mother watched over him. His bed was placed by the window of his study so he could look out in the direction of the country where he was born, and where he had labored as an ambassador for Christ for over ten years. On August 12 he died. John Chalmers wrote, “All the struggles, sorrows, sufferings, disappointments of 42 years were for ever hushed in death.” He was buried in an orchard of his own planting, just as their spring blossoms were appearing, and the trees were putting forth their tender buds.

On the wall of the church he had built at Mgwali, a tablet was placed by his fellow missionaries in the memory of the Reverend Tiyo Soga:

He was a friend of God, a lover of His Son, inspired by His Spirit, a disciple of His holy Word. A zealous churchman, an ardent patriot, a large-hearted philanthropist, a dutiful son, an affectionate … (continued on page 12)
Profile in Faith: Tiyo Soga  
(continued from page 11)  

brother, a tender husband, a loving father, a faithful friend, a learned scholar, an eloquent orator and in manners a gentleman. A model Caffrarian for the imitation and inspiration of his countrymen.

“A friend of God”; “a zealous churchman”; “an ardent patriot”—these phrases sum up Tiyo Soga’s life. He loved God, the church, and his country—in that order.

A Friend of God

Tiyo’s journal, reminiscent of those of David Brainerd and Henry Martyn, reveals his deep love for God and his earnest desire to live for him. We find many entries such as these:

Lord’s day evening, 7th March—O most merciful God and Father, I lay before Thee all my character. Have mercy upon me, a sinner. Bless Thy word to me, and may it overcome all evil that is within me.

Sabbath, 14th May—Preached today on the women who followed Christ, especially Mary Magdalene. Oh! My Heavenly Father, Thou knowest me. If Thou hast begun the good work in me, carry it on unto the day of the Lord Jesus. I desire earnestly to be Thine. But, oh! the hardness of my heart. By Thy blessed Spirit quicken me, and make me live.

A Zealous Churchman

Tiyo Soga loved the church and he served it faithfully as a missionary and a preacher. John Chalmers wrote of Soga’s preaching:

Whilst he could not be claimed as the most eloquent South African preacher in English, there was something about the whole man, his purity of life, his sincerity, his disinterestedness, his faithful dealing with men, which made every sentence that he uttered go home to the hearts of his hearers.

Saying good-bye to an English congregation he had served for some years, Tiyo Soga reviewed his ministry among them:

I have administered to you and to your children the sacraments of the Church, and have expounded the only rule of faith and duty, the Word of God. I have spoken to you of Jesus, our blessed Lord and Saviour. I have striven to lead your thoughts to dwell on that heavenly home which awaits the faithful worshippers in the Church below.

Tiyo Soga wrote more than thirty hymns, including “Heaven Is My Home,” “This Do in Remembrance of Me,” and “Christ, the Christian’s Inheritance.” His hymns, wrote John Chalmers, “shall continue to be sung as long as there are Kafir Christians to celebrate in the sanctuary, or in the home, the victories of the cross of Christ.” Soga happily worked with seven missionaries of seven denominations on a revision of the Kafir Bible.

Tiyo Soga was a faithful Presbyterian but he loved all parts of Christ’s church. “I have come in contact with Christians of all denominations,” he wrote,

and I have seen them all loving the same Bible, and holding it as the one rule of faith and practice. I have, as a Kafir, often wished that these good friends of all denominations had never perplexed my countrymen with their isms, that they had come here to evangelize the heathen, bearing only one name, and having only the one distinction of being Christians.

An Ardent Patriot

“A tone of sadness pervaded his whole missionary life,” writes Donavan Williams.

It was impossible to get at the cause, and yet, perhaps, it was the fact that he stood alone . . . He lived on a frontier—territorial and
psychological—which accepted the Western educated Christian black as much as it did the white. But beyond that frontier lay black pagan society on the one side, and white Christian society on the other. Tiyo Soga had strong bonds which made him the slave of both.  

“Whilst deeply attached to my people,” Soga wrote, “I am the loyal subject of the best government of the aborigines that ever existed under heaven.” He called Queen Victoria “the best friend of all people.” Prince Albert, later duke of Edinburgh (and second son of “our beloved Queen”) visited South Africa in 1860. He presented Tiyo Soga with “the most beautifully bound Bible” Tiyo had ever seen “here or in Scotland.” When Albert died early in 1862, Tiyo grieved deeply and preached on the words from Romans 13:7—“Honour to whom honour” is due. He ended: “Peace to his ashes! God’s own consolation to his bereaved family, and our sorrowing Sovereign. May God prove to them a present help; and may they, in ‘the Man of Sorrows,’ find that they have an High Priest who can be touched with the feeling of their infirmities.” His admiration for the queen and British rule was tempered, however, by the fact that British soldiers had conquered his homeland. He could not tolerate the singing of “Rule Britannia,” saying that there was “so much vain glory and pride about it.”

Soga appreciated what “civilization” could do for Africa, but only if it was accompanied by Christianity. “My faith in civilization alone, if it does not follow in the wake of Christianity, is gone,” he wrote. “Civilization is the handmaid of Christianity only when it is the result of Christianity.” He dreaded “the civilized, refined sins and immoralities of Europe,” he said, “more than the native vices of the Kafirs.”

Soga was proud of being an African, “a Kafir of the Kafirs,” he called himself. He loved his land and his people. He told them in a sermon, “I have seen other nations; but I love my own the more. I have seen other places; but I would not exchange the Mg-wali for them all.”

When three of his sons departed for study in Scotland, their father gave them a small notebook titled “The Inheritance of My Children,” containing sixty-two entries he had written for their guidance. He told them that there was among some whites a prejudice against black people and reminded them that “God has made no race mentally and morally superior to other races.” (Robert Burns’s song “A Man’s a Man for All That” was a great favorite with him.) Tiyo Soga told his sons that they would be greatly helped by an education in Scotland, but he warned them against an attitude of superiority toward black society or a tendency to separate themselves from it. He urged them to cherish the memory of their mother—“an upright, conscientious, thrifty, Christian Scot.” “You will ever be thankful for your connection by this tie to the white race,” but you should “take your place in the world as coloured, not as white men; as Kafirs, not as English.” “I consider it the height of ingratitude and impiety for any person to be discontented with the complexion which God has given him.”

Events in South Africa turned Tiyo Soga more and more toward black consciousness. He strongly defended the territorial and moral integrity of...
Profile in Faith: Tiyo Soga

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In May 1865 he wrote a letter to a newspaper in which he reviewed the wrongs done to Africans and the vices of civilization that had harmed them, but rejoiced in the fact that, despite all the disasters, Africa, he believed, had a bright future. He wrote, “I find the Negro in the present struggle in America looking forward—though still with chains on his hands and with chains on his feet—yet looking forward to the dawn of a better day for himself and all his sable brethren in Africa.”

Tiyo Soga not only believed that Africa possessed a brighter future but also a substantial past. He spent a great deal of time seeking to preserve the Xhosa heritage and urged the missionaries to “identify themselves with the people” and “reap a splendid harvest in the study of their history, prejudices, habits and customs.”

When Tiyo Soga visited his friend William Thompson in Cape Town in September 1860, his presence caused Thompson to remember “the names of Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine, and others of northern Africa, embalmed in the memory as among the noblest men of the primitive Church, and as the first-fruits unto God of the rich harvest this continent has yet to produce.”

Unknown by most of the Christian world today, Tiyo Soga was part of the rich harvest that Africa has produced and is still producing.

Notes

4. The Xhosa are people living in southeast South Africa who speak one of the Bantu languages.
6. Kafir, a term for a black African, was used proudly by Tiyo Soga for himself and his people, but has since become a racial epithet.
8. Ibid., p. 125.
9. Ndletyana claims that “Soga’s ideas were the precursor of nationalist thought, and sowed the seeds of black consciousness and black theology in South Africa” (African Intellectuals, p. 17).
10. Williams, Umfundisi, p. 96. Williams states that in Tiyo Soga one finds the “first evidence of Africa-consciousness on the part of a black in southern Africa” (p. 97).
12. Thanks to two of my students at Covenant Theological Seminary for drawing my attention to Tiyo Soga—Brad Wos, a missionary to South Africa, and Grant Owens, a South African.
The Credibility of the Christian Life

(continued from page 3)

treat it. The only treatment is centered on psychotherapy. As one psychiatrist communicated to me as I was writing this essay, “No narcissist has ever sought me to give treatment.” Within our churches, some of our most serious dysfunctions occur from narcissistic leaders who believe they have God on their side, because of their theological education and their professional mandate.

This personality disorder can be measured in its degree of severity, and treated in an individual way. But our concern is much more with the far wider issue of living within a whole society that is now suffering from a pandemic of narcissism, such as the Black Death of mid-fourteenth-century Europe. But that epidemic lasted only two years or so, while we are facing a relational affliction that could destroy our Western world, under an indebtedness of $2,000 trillion of card credit debt and $9 trillion of public debt in the United States alone.

This raises two questions: how did cultural narcissism arise in our late modern society? And what perpetuating factors are spreading the pandemic?

The Rise of Cultural Narcissism

One of the first social critics to blow the whistle was Christopher Lasch in his 1978 book *The Culture of Narcissism.* Deep discontinuities between childhood and adulthood had previously been explored, after the Second World War, by John Bowlby, Kenneth Kenniston, Heinz Kohut, among others. Some had reacted in revolt against parental authority. R.D. Laing and Wilhelm Reich claimed the freedom to criticize all established institutions, such as the nuclear family, educational institutions, and sexual norms. Abdication of authority at many levels ensued, during the 1960s. The contemporary climate became therapeutic, not religious, with “psychological Man” replacing “religious” or indeed “rational Man.” Lasch himself identified narcissism with a reaction to modern bureaucracy, and the pervasive distrust of those in institutionalized power. Perhaps he was too close to prevailing events to understand narcissism more profoundly, important as his pioneer work then was.

Narcissism as the love of self is as old as the origin of sin, in the temptation of Adam and Eve—“you shall be as gods”—or, within the same family, when in envy Cain killed his brother Abel. Surely then “a Christian narcissist” should be an oxymoron, in the context of Christ’s self-sacrificial love. Certainly in colonial America that is what Jonathan Edwards preached, that conversion was “a willingness to obliterate selfishness and give all to God.”

Perhaps it is Montaigne at the end of the sixteenth century who first realized that modern man’s identity was in flux, as he struggled by Stoic and Epicurean means to maintain a balanced sense of identity in his own particular experiences, without seeking superhuman standards. Pascal, early trained in Montaigne’s thought, then found that meditation on John 17, and with it his Christian conversion as a new economy of the soul, meant that “total submission to Jesus Christ” emancipates (continued on page 16)
“the self,” both from the flux of identity changes and the smug acceptance of the sovereignty of “the self.”

But beginning with Pascal’s enemy René Descartes, changing cultures have been profoundly associated with redefinitions of human identity, as Charles Taylor has traced in his important book *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity,* which we shall elaborate upon in our second essay.

Tocqueville noted the distinctive North American origins of “the rise of the individual,” which in the rural vastness of the New World was in danger of exaggerated tendencies without being checked by civic responsibilities. This was later promoted to build “character,” hard-working, moralistic, frugal, and emotionally restricted. But as secularization grew, so “the self” has become increasingly a problem.

Around 1890, argues Warren Susman, a new quality was brought in, not the moral strengthening of “character,” but the quality of “being somebody” or “a personality.” Then followed Hollywood in the 1920s, the rise of the advertising industry, the advancement of medical science, leading into the postwar “therapeutic revolution,” and the new cult of “self-fulfilment” for the “empty self.” Now the citizen became a consumer, with a growing capacity to convert the war-production factories into new potentials for insatiable consumption. Then in the late 1980s, big banks began the credit card commercial device to further promote how the “empty self” could quickly be refurnished by “authentic individuals” who are strong, independent, and who can do everything on their own.

Following Freudian theory, the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott analyzed the dynamics between the child and its mother. He argued that there was both a “true self,” fragile and needing nonrestrictions to unfold “naturally,” intuitively so, and the “false self,” which will do everything possible not to be separated from the mother, for it is both originally empty, yet strangely omnipotent. From this flowed the illusions of entitlement, grandiosity, and choice to be whatever you desire. Heinz Kohut, another psychoanalyst, even more forcefully argued for the centrality of “the self,” requiring the infant to cultivate a “healthy narcissism.” So it was deemed essential that the parents mirror their responses to every desire for self-esteem. Such advocates for both consumerism and narcissism have had enormous influence in the rise and dominance of the therapeutic revolution now so dominant in our culture.

Summarizing postwar trends, Cushman notes:

The post-World War II self has had many faces, such as the early fifties face, cautious, somewhat confused unsure of what would come next. The rebellious, unpredictable, colorful, naïve sixties face; the increasingly frustrated, angry, bitterly disappointed face of the seventies; the sad, self-involved, acquisitive face of the eighties. But the uniting of each of these public presentations has been consumerism . . . the belief one could find individual salvation through the liberation of one’s core essence, and that one could liberate that essence by purchasing and consuming the proper product or merging with the perfect celebrity, in other words by filling up the empty self—that, in our time, is the face of everyone.
The Socio-Economic Consequences of a Narcissistic Society

The financial crash of 2009 is a continuing reminder that “ideas have consequences.” The greed of the narcissistic self is being now punished. Living in an age of entitlement is bringing a heavy toll of social consequences. In parenting, we are seeing the breakdown of the family unit, with the increasing loss of parental authority. In media attention, “celebrities” destroy the possibility of genuine friendships, for they demand “glitter” and then they can only feed on it. In advertising, slogans shamelessly promote materialistic entitlement as a virtue, yet our credit card economy is forcing young and old to drown in debt.

Now the Internet revolution is generating devices to provide innumerable forms of self-exhibitionism and of pseudorelationships, which are dramatically changing the consciousness of children as well as youth; I think of Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube. What an older generation innocently thought might be time-saving ways of connecting with more people end up being major factors in spreading the pandemic of youthful narcissism. For in such forums everyone can promote one’s self to become a “celebrity.” And nudity—of body or of emotions—can be exhibited to all who seek it. The grandiose sense of self-importance—religious or secular—was never more accessible than Ipad or Iphone now permit. Even Christian “conversion” seems that much more convincing when narrated by a celebrity! Is it accidental that the newest electronic devices now begin with “I”? Could Ovid ever have anticipated how such devices would provide a better “pool” than that in which Narcissus saw his own reflection and then drowned?

Will eventually our whole Western world also drown—drown in narcissistic consumerism?

(This was Part One of a two-part series. Look for Part Two in the Winter issue.)

Notes


7. Ibid., p. 414.


11. Ibid., p. 83.


An Apologetic from Ecclesiastes: Does Anything Make Sense?

(continued from page 7)

- Perhaps the very desire itself is a symptom of our attachment and need, and enlightenment and liberation will resolve it (Buddhism).
- Perhaps we are ignorant of God’s will and ways, and by education and obedience we can find the solution (Islam).
- Perhaps it is all an illusion or the result of our failures to perform our duty, so we are locked in a cycle of bondage (Hinduism).

Social scientists also weigh in on these big issues. In fact, “the denial of death” is seen as a thoroughly modern preoccupation. Sam Keen comments, “The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.” This seems so blunt, so strong, so challenging . . . and yet?

This is hinted at here in the United States. Our movies are currently fixated on end-of-the-world disasters, vampires and their immortal pursuits, various super-smart killers or criminals whose main attraction is their limitless enthusiasm for death and destruction, which seems mirrored in the audience’s fascination with it all. If we allow Ecclesiastes to do its work, we come to some conclusions. We need to reflect on . . .

- God’s existence and overarching sovereignty.
- Death’s power and its all-consuming inevitability.
- Life’s overall incomprehensibility.
- History’s seeming unpredictability.
- Humanity’s incredible vulnerability.

Lesson Five from our wise counselor: accept and face the limits of knowledge (Eccl. 8:16–17). In the book of Genesis (3:4–6), we see a primal desire expressed to attain knowledge in order to be godlike. Knowledge, we are told, is power. This power attracts. It draws; it compels; it pulls on our hearts. It renders status; it yields success; it makes us look good and feel good, and we want as much of it as we can get. As with all idolatrous trends, we face a process that leads us to absolutize relative things while simultaneously relativizing absolute things. When knowledge is viewed as an instrument of order and control, when it becomes a demanding tyrant in our lives, it is time to take stock.

So where does this lead us? The writer takes us on a journey through life, and he deals with the questions and exasperations that we all inevitably encounter. His own desire was to try and figure things out so he could live well and be happy, and encourage others to do the same. I’m sure he hoped to discover the key, or the missing ingredient, or the clues to true and lasting success and happiness. He found it all right, but it is not as he expects.

What do I mean? The world he begins to “see” is one that displays both good and bad at the same time. He sees the superiority of wisdom, yet even the wise are reduced by death. He sees injustice being done and oppressors prevailing, yet he also notes there is a higher justice. He cites the sayings and actions of wise people but then goes on to point out how quickly they are forgotten! It is the tone that wears on us.

We see ambiguity, fuzziness, mixture, pain, and problems, but they are not alone. There is also fun, food, friends, wisdom, and most of all, God! These things all dwell in the same world, at the same time. This is hard for many of us to digest. We want better answers, we want tidier analyses, we want more comforting visions, and we have them, but not here.

Remember Peter Kreeft’s comments on Lesson One and Lesson Two: that Ecclesiastes

“The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.”
is diagnosis, and you can’t help patients who do not know they are sick. Speaking of Ecclesiastes as divine revelation, Kreeft writes,

*It is inspired monologue. God in His providence has arranged for this one book of mere rational philosophy to be included in the canon of Scripture because this too is divine revelation. It is divine revelation precisely in being the absence of divine revelation. It is like the silhouette of the rest of the Bible . . . In this book God reveals to us exactly what life is when God does not reveal to us what life is. Ecclesiastes frames the Bible as death frames life.⁶*

So what can we learn from this ancient book? First, I would recommend his strategy of exposure. There is nothing like “listening” to the famous or dominant voices of our era or context to expose what is often felt as missing in life. Let me share a few examples.

*The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.*  
—Vaclav Havel, Letters to Olga

*Exile accepted as a destiny, in the way we accept an incurable illness, should help us see through our self-delusions.*  
—Poet Czeslaw Milosz

*We are threatened with eviction, for this is a point of entry and departure, there are no permanent guests! And where else have we to go when we leave here? We’re lonely. We’re frightened.*  
—Tennessee Williams

These are just a few samples of the kind of thing that surrounds us, and what it points to: restlessness, longing, hunger, and human angst. Ecclesiastes points us to the human condition as an arena for careful reflection.

Second, I commend his strategy of relevant application. What do I mean? We are masters of escape, self-denial, and avoidance. Our willingness to judge others is matched by our unwillingness to be judged. Our ability to see through others’ hypocrisies is matched by our blindness to our own. Our skill at detecting others’ excuses is matched by our own careful use of rationalization. The apologetic task presented by the Qoheleth is the awakening of understanding and the dismantling of illusions that blind us to reality.

The third strategy is to remember the value and role of hope. The world as we know it is disordered, damaged, and fallen. Even prior to the coming of the Messiah, the writer closes with the vital reminder that God is sovereign, that he is the judge of all, and that everything will be accounted for (Eccl. 12:13–14). Now, we don’t end here. The Gospel reminds us: “the word became flesh and
An Apologetic from Ecclesiastes: Does Anything Make Sense?
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dwelt among us” (John 1:14; see Heb. 1:1–4; Col. 1:15–20). Ecclesiastes serves as good diagnosis, but we require the Gospels to offer the fuller picture of “hope” that the biblical narrative outlines.

It seems to me we have done a great disservice in our Christian communication by sometimes offering answers when the audiences have no sense of the questions and consequently little enthusiasm for the solutions, which can seem unrelated to anything in life they actually care about. In contrast, G.K. Chesterton wrote in What’s Wrong with the World: “Certainly, at least, we need a theorist. A practical man means a man accustomed to mere daily practice, to the way things commonly work. When things will not work, you must have the thinker, the man who has some doctrine about why they work at all.”

So what we have here is an ancient book for modern times. It offers a diagnosis, a prognosis, some exposure, and a jolt to our senses, our hopes (true and false), and our expectations. I commend this book to you as a useful apologetic strategy, and I’m confident that, though written so long ago, its timely feel will reach down into our time, and into the lives of those exposed to it. This is wisdom to walk by, and it does make sense.

Notes

Q: Are the Narnia Chronicles allegories?

A: If you mean by allegory, stories where each detail has a symbolic spiritual meaning, the answer is no. Lewis stressed that each volume started with pictures in his mind, which he turned into a story. For instance, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe started with the image in Lewis’s mind of a faun carrying packages, and he had been having dreams about lions. As he wrote, some of his Christian beliefs crept into the story, but it is important not to press every detail of the story as you might do with The Pilgrim’s Progress.

Q: Lewis was early in life drawn to the occult. What cured him of this fascination?

A: Lewis was drawn to the occult through exposure to a teacher while at boarding school. Lewis indicated that if he had not been prevented, he might have ended up a sorcerer or a lunatic. An experience prior to becoming a believer influenced Lewis to stay away from this pursuit. This was watching the decline of Dr. John Askins, Mrs. Moore’s brother. (Mrs. Moore, mother to Lewis’s college roommate, Paddy, lived with Lewis and his brother after Paddy was killed in World War I.) Askins had been wounded in World War I and never recovered physically or spiritually. Dr. Askins had become a psychoanalyst after the war and developed an obsession with spiritualism and contacting the dead. During one fourteen-day period, Lewis had to hold Askins while he kicked and wallowed on the floor, screaming out that devils were tearing him and that he was at that moment falling into hell. Although the atheistic Lewis was aware that there could be physical causes for Askins’s problems, he could not separate the man’s state from his passionate pursuit of the occult. Lewis decided to stick to the approved road. Walter Hooper says that it would be difficult to exaggerate the effect of this experience on Lewis.
Postliberal Theology: A Very Brief Presentation
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the task of the scientist to discover the true structure of reality, what things there are in the world; the task of the ethicist was to create a system of criteria that justified a universal morality; finally, the task of the theologian was that of discovering that which is universal in religion, that which is shared by all religious adherents in the world.

Let me say a little more about the religious aspect of the modern project. Modern liberal theology, following Schleiermacher, tended to regard all religions as being different symbolizations of a common and universal religious experience. The Muslim, Christian, and Hindu are all in touch with the same basic experience, but they choose to symbolize it differently. This approach is on a par with the Enlightenment disregard for the specificity, or positivity, of tradition. Religious people are naïve to think that their theological beliefs refer literally to their respective religious objects. Modernity thus operated a hermeneutics of suspicion with regard to religious adherents’ self-understanding. To remain actual, religion had to be rationalized, demythologized.

Two important things have to be noted here. First, the dualism between language and the world (or the experience of the divine) is still very clear: we are in a position to look at the experience, quite apart from the concepts that tradition symbolized it with, and then compare our symbols to the experience. The demythologizer is quite capable of sifting out the universal component in traditional religious affirmations. The school-of-religions scholar is also able to “discover” that fundamental and common religious experience.

Postliberal theology reacts against this modern project in religion. But it doesn’t simply react against its liberalism. It also reacts against its conservative alternative. In fact, postliberalism argues that both conservative evangelical theology as well as its liberal nemesis share a common but fundamentally mistaken philosophy of language. Whereas the evangelical theologian believes that theological statements are literal representations of theistic objects, the liberal believes that these are symbolic expressions of religious experiences. In both cases a language-world or language-experience dualism is present, such that in the first case doctrines can be compared to religious objects, and in the second symbols can be compared to elemental experiences.

However, the intellectual developments to which we have alluded have made this picture of our relationship to the world or to experience untenable. It is impossible in this context to give a full picture of this development, but it can be simplified in this way: *all our access to the world, including our experiences of the world is linguistic, and language is a public, not a private, thing.* We cannot compare our doctrines directly to our theistic objects, because we do not have an access to our theistic object that is independent of the language, concepts, and beliefs we already have about it. Similarly, there is no such thing as an experience that isn’t already conceptualized in some form. Thus it is futile to use the “experience” to justify the symbols we use to express it. Each experience is already conceptual, which means that it is already public in a very real sense.

The attentive reader already sees how this realization cripples the modern project: no universal rationality can be discovered, because rationality is always dependent on some language and some tradition. This holds for science, as well as it does for ethics and religion. That is why postmodernity is regarded as making fresh space for religion, having chastened the claims for the supremacy of science. But postmodernity also spells the end of the project of finding the universal component in all religions. Liberalism has failed in its attempt to secure
a stable foundation for theological justification. But conservatism has also missed the point that all our doctrines are themselves relative to the concepts we have at our disposal and cannot represent timeless representations of an independent reality.

The Narrative Quality of Scripture

George Lindbeck\(^2\) calls the conservative evangelical position cognitive-propositional and the liberal position experiential-expressivist. Hans Frei,\(^3\) representing what I and several other scholars see as the more theological strand of postliberal theology, reflects on the respective hermeneutics of evangelicals and postliberals. The conservatives, he notes, see biblical interpretation as a matter of discovering the things (e.g., people, events, histories) or the concepts (e.g., the attributes of God, righteousness) to which the texts refer. The meaning of the texts, in other words, is a function of its reference. Attention is fully focused on the “world behind the text,” to use a well-known phrase, either in reconstituting events that have happened (the historical Jesus) or recovering authorial intention (what did Paul mean here?). Liberals, on the other hand, care little about the events behind the text (these are not historically accurate) or authorial intention (Paul’s beliefs are antiquated), focusing on the experiences the texts give rise to, or the “world in front of the text.” Thus the point of the Scriptures is not to speak about a real historical person who was dead and subsequently raised by God, but about the experience of spiritual rejuvenation that all readers of the text can have as they read it.

In the process, Frei laments, both liberals and conservatives have lost sight of the texts as texts, as narrative structures. The narrative character of the Bible was lost, argues Frei. We have begun treating the Scriptures as what they are not: either treatises of history or theological textbooks. Frei counsels recovering the category of narrative (not history, yet history-like) for our sacred book. What do narratives do? They render a character. But the character is never available independently of the story itself; it is but a function of the story. For Frei, the historiographical concentration on the Jesus of history lost from sight the particular manner in which his identity is mediated to us through those texts.

Notice that this is consonant with the philosophical development: we do not have access to a Jesus, independently of our language, which we can then use as a foundation for our theologies. The only Jesus we have is already linguistically mediated by the realistic narratives we have in Scriptures.

Narrative, Ethics, and Character

Furthermore, the authority of the Scriptures consists in that they shape the Christian community. Their primary function is not to set before us a set of timeless propositions (they are themselves historical), but to shape the community, as it gathers around them and allows them to shape its character.

Ethical knowledge is itself community- and tradition-bound. It is never independent of the Christian practices. Stanley Hauerwas develops this new epistemology in the field of Christian ethics. He critiques the modern and foundationalist project of finding universal criteria for right action and insists that Christian ethics should focus instead on development of character, which takes place precisely through reading the Scriptures. Such an ethic does not yield indubitably and universally right judgments but “happy” courses of action in specific circumstances.

The Rule Theory of Doctrine

Just like ethical knowledge, theological knowledge has to escape its representationalist ambitions. Given that we are finite, linguistic beings, our access to God and talk about God is always linguistic, making use of the best categories we might have at our disposal. Thus postliberals

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have advanced the so-called and much debated “cultural linguistic theory of doctrine” (or rule theory of doctrine). According to its main proponent, George Lindbeck, doctrine is not a representation of objective facts, but an expression of the rules of the Christian practice.

This is a notoriously difficult proposal, but in essence it is a claim that, because we never have a nonmediated access to God, theology gives the rules of the practice. What is this practice? It is the whole horizon in which a Christian moves, including his actions, the Scriptures, the practices of his community, the movement of the Spirit in that community, the experience of the resurrected Christ, in short a Christian’s whole theistic experience—which is linguistic. This whole horizon cannot be abstracted; it is presupposed in every theological judgment; it is reflected in every doctrine. Theology is an attempt to make sense of the coherence of this whole horizon.

Let me try to illustrate this by appealing to a well-known doctrine of Christology: the Son is homoousios with the Father. According to propositionalists, this statement is true if and only if there exists something like a divine ousia (substance, essence), which the Son shares with the Father. But, many theologians argue, the concept of ousia is only a tool for helping us to talk about what different things have in common (e.g., the substance of “humanity” as a designator for what all human beings have in common). Its success does not depend on there actually existing something like this (there does not have to be a thing “humanity” out there outside of our language). Moreover, throughout the history of theology, other and allegedly better christological concepts have been suggested. Thus we talk about the social Trinity; we have different models of talking about the divine presence in Christ. If the propositionalists are right, argues Lindbeck, we can never find agreement between those who want to talk in terms of “substance” and those who don’t, without one side capitulating. Yet the history of ecumenical discussion of the Trinity shows that agreement is reached without a single side admitting defeat.

In short, Lindbeck wants to argue that what is given is the whole Christian practice (one might say experience, provided the linguistic and practical aspect is underscored). Christian theology attempts to make best sense of the practice, by drawing on the best concepts it has at its disposal. Patristic theologians preferred talking about substance; modern and contemporary theologians prefer other types of categories. This does not mean that everything goes, only that the satisfaction received from a given concept depends on how it manages to preserve certain intuitions or express certain rules. However, these intuitions can be preserved in a number of different ways. So, according to Lindbeck, different christological formulations are appropriate as long as they maintain the following rules of the Christian practice: First, there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus (the monotheism principle); second, the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being, who was born, lived, and died in a particular time and place (the historical specificity principle); finally, “every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules.”

Nothing is more important than this message of the gospel of Jesus Christ—this good news of the love of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ad Hoc Apologetics

One final tendency of postliberal thought is that it rejects systematic apologetics.
It does so for the same reason it critiques the modern project of finding that which is common in all religious life. Since our knowledge depends not simply on the nature of the world, but also on the particular concepts with which our language and traditions endow us, it is futile to seek a common ground between the Christian and the atheist, for example, on the basis of which one might demonstrate the existence of God. If there is any apologetic method that might cohere with this approach, it would be the so-called presuppositionalist type. Postliberals think it is futile to try to step outside of language, so as to anchor it in reality. One learns what kinds of things there are in the world by learning to speak a particular language. The child learns to believe in God, simply by learning the language of faith from his parents and community. There is no language-independent or tradition-independent demonstration of that existence.

What Is at Stake?

We are now in a better position to expand our initial working definition along the following lines: postliberalism represents a reconfiguration of the task of theology as being a reflection on Christian practices, rather than an objective description of the theistic object (God), correlated with a renewed emphasis on the narrative quality of Scripture and how this functions to shape a community.

While postliberal theology was “all the rage” in the closing two decades of the past century (that’s more recent than it sounds), it seems to have lost momentum afterward, but not before influencing a number of influential evangelical theologians. Moreover, after some significant but not fatal modification, a revitalized postliberalism is making a kind of comeback in what is sometimes (even more loosely) called emergent theology or, perhaps better, missional theology. Clearly, this is not simply an esoteric interest of some academic theologians, but it is playing straight into a number of sensibilities that our own evangelical audience begins to share. An assessment is therefore imperative. In the space I have at my disposal I can only begin to point out some areas where evangelical pastors and theologians ought to exercise discernment in relation to this attractive proposal.

From authorially intended text to community? One of the areas of grave concern from the standpoint of an evangelical theology is a hermeneutical shift away from authorial intention to a community-centered interpretation. This slide is of a piece with the linguistic turn, which is suspicious of mental contents such as “intentions” and prefers “public” meanings (meaning as use). One can reasonably ask, though: is there not a normative use? If there is, does it not have a proper connection to the way in which the texts were intended to be used? In other words, the shift toward community begs the question as to which use is proper.

Whose community? Postliberal theologians themselves were beginning to have second thoughts about their optimism with regard to the notion of a Christian practice, of the Christian tradition. If we define the unity of the Christian framework in practical as opposed to propositional terms, we deprive ourselves of the means of identifying normative Christianity. It is true, the gospel is always already contextualized in some form. But if we are to talk at all about Christian contextualizations, then we need some normative account of what it means to be Christian. Postliberalism has so far been unable to defend convincingly against the charge of fideism—reliance on faith rather than reason.

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Postliberal Theology: A Very Brief Presentation
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Doctrines and reference. While postliberals may be reading all the right philosophers, I think they are drawing all the wrong conclusions from them. I am myself exaggerating here, but the point is that postliberals have taken the linguistic analogy too far and have pressed it in the service of a fideism which borders on solipsism. Admittedly, there has been some backpedaling and clarification on the part of postliberals with regard to the realism question. While more work needs to be done on the issue, both on the part of conservative propositionalists and postliberals, there are a number of false options that should immediately be ruled out. While doctrines are indeed self-involving (a technical term used in the conversation to denote that knowledge always involves language and social practices), it does not follow that they are about the practices. To admit, as I think we must, that our knowledge always involves concepts that have a history and are not necessarily universally shared does not mean that we do not in fact know and refer to extralinguistic reality. I cannot say more in this space, but I would like to echo the balanced opinion of a philosopher who sits on both sides of the fence: if there is no knowledge by acquaintance, it does not mean that there are no individual things to be known. There is, I believe, a realism which is integral in not only Christian theology that affirms that God is not simply a human construction, but also in the basic human practice of understanding. In not taking seriously the intentions of religious adherents to refer to extralinguistic reality (e.g., when using homoousios), postliberals fail in fact to explain ecumenical practice.

Authority as formativeness? Again, postliberals are right that it is not the sole function of language to represent reality. We do so many more things with words! But the reason why we can employ words in such a variety of tasks is ultimately dependent on truth-functional tasks. So, for example, the nonrepresentational statement “I thee wed” is not intended as a representation of reality. It is in fact the creation of a reality. But it can be a successful use of language only if certain things happen to be true. For example, the person standing behind the “I” must be a licensed marriage officiant. In other words, the performative function of language depends on its representative function. That being said, postliberals are quite right to enlarge our understanding of what it means for propositions to function as part of a language. Yet we must not dichotomize between character-shaping stories and truth-stating propositions.

The importance of history. At this point as well, postliberals have sensed a real problem with our approach to the Scriptures. They are quite right to point out that we have sometimes imposed specifically modern canons of historiography upon the Scriptures. Their mistake is to replace those modern canons with either a structuralist (early Frei) or a community-oriented poststructuralism (later Frei), which dogmatizes about the character of these texts (as character-shaping stories) apart from an inquiry into both authorial intention and the truth of these texts.

There are numerous other points where an evangelical might disagree with the postliberal school. Yet I believe it is paramount that in doing so, one does full justice to both their intentions, as well as to their many incisive diagnoses, even as one may take issue with their corrective suggestions. Fundamentally, in evaluating these claims, evangelical pastors and theologians should neither obtusely swear allegiance to a modernist epistemology nor switch to a different, postmodern master. Both modernity and postmodernity are contributing valuable insights and attitudes to our performance of the gospel today. Neither should be taken to do more than that.

Notes
1. That there is a debate over whether Barth can be vindicated as a postliberal theologian illustrates the complexity of the postliberal genealogy.
2. George Lindbeck’s *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London, UK: SPCK, 1984) is among the primary postliberal texts.
5. I would mention Nancy Murphy, Stanley Grenz, John Franke, and William J. Abraham. All of these in various degrees have been shaped by these theological conversations. They would not necessarily consider themselves postliberal (with the possible exception of Murphy), but they are all postfoundationalists.
6. I have provided a fuller critique in my *Postliberal Theological Method* (Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2005; Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2007).
8. Kevin Vanhoozer’s *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: WJKP, 2005) is an evangelical attempt to come to grips with a proper postfoundationalism, yet preserving the canonical authority of Scripture.
9. In her 1997 book, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, postliberal theologian Kathryn Tanner has been making such claims.
12. It is widely recognized that Frei’s writing betrays a shift from an earlier formalism (meaning resides in the texts themselves) to a later community-oriented hermeneutics where the emphasis is laid on how the text functions in the community.

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**RECOMMENDED READING**

**Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits***
This is a classic exposition of 1 Corinthians 13, by the man some regard as America’s finest philosopher-theologian. He lived from 1703 to 1758 and was a pastor at the center of the Great Awakening. This book was originally a series of sermons. Each one focuses on a part of the text, expounds the doctrinal truth present, and applies it to the lives of the congregation. You will find the sermon on love being patient, kind, etc., especially searching.

**Dinesh D’Souza, *What’s So Great about Christianity?***
This is perhaps the best book that critiques the “new atheism.” Books such as Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great*, Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* have brought to the surface a new movement of militant atheists determined to put an end to all religion, or at least all religious influence on society. Dinesh D’Souza’s book gives the best, most thorough arguments against their views as well as arguments for God’s existence and the truth of Christianity. D’Souza is also the most effective debater against Christopher Hitchens in numerous public debates (see www.tkc.edu).
The fatherhood of God is revealed most clearly through the words and actions of his Son, Jesus the Messiah (John 14:7–9). In Galatians 4:6, Paul tells us that it is through experiencing the fellowship of the Father and the Son that the Spirit moves us to pray. Having grounded prayer in the context of familial relationship, Jesus moves on to teach us about the God-centered motives that should shape our requests.

“Hallowed be your name.” The word hallow is actually the verb form of the word holy, which means to be set apart. God is holy because he is unique. The prayer that God’s name be made holy is not a request that God would become something that he is not, but that we might recognize him for who he is. The prayer for God’s name to be hallowed is a prayer for our eyes to be opened to the greatness and goodness of God. In a day when spirituality tends toward nothing more than another tool for realizing our self-potential, we need to be reminded that our lives are most in line with reality when we develop a God-centeredness that places his glory at the center of reality.

Our priorities also begin to align with God’s priorities as we pray, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is only through God’s liberating presence (word and spirit) that the effects of sin and corruption are overcome. Though we know that the full realization of God’s promises will not come until Jesus returns, we pray and live in faith and hope asking God to overcome sin and darkness in and around us.

If prayer is talking to God, who is this God we talk to? At the level of our human experience, we can assert the following: how we talk to people, and what we say, will to a large extent be governed by how well we know them.

—Graeme Goldsworthy,
Prayer and the Knowledge of God

“Give us today our daily bread.” Bread was a daily necessity for Jesus’ early followers, so this request for “daily bread” would have put them in touch with the reality of which we all need to be reminded: God’s gracious provision for our daily existence. God’s grace comes to us from the very beginning of the Bible’s story when he creates the physical world and provides for all of the needs of Adam and Eve.

One translation of this request reads, “Give us what we need for today.” This is very similar to the proverb “Give me neither poverty nor riches; Feed me with the food that is my portion” (Prov. 30:8 NASB). Abundance can be dangerous to us because it can blind us to reality. Jesus knows how easy it is for us to be blinded by our self-centeredness, so he graciously gives us a God-centered prayer that works to refocus our vision.

Unless we pay close attention, we might miss the fact that Jesus instructs us to pray for our daily bread. None of us exists on his or her own; rather, we are born and live within a web of relationships (parents, relatives, friends, coaches, teachers, coworkers, etc.) that are necessary for our well-being. The Jesus Prayer reminds us that if we are aligned with reality (the kingdom of God), we will regularly speak to our Father about the practical well-being of others.

“Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors.” If you have a large debt that you cannot pay, receiving forgiveness of the debt by the one to whom you are indebted is good news! The Old Testament tells of a celebration called Jubilee (see Lev. 25–26), held every fifty years, during which people were forgiven all their debts, and those who had been enslaved were liberated. Jesus may have been thinking of just such a time when he taught his disciples about prayer.

Most religions believe that prayer brings us into contact with God, but in the case of Jesus and his instructions about prayer, not just any God will do. The God that Jesus proclaims is the one who enters into our world to wipe away our debt and liberate us from the power and penalty of sin.
Thoughts to Ponder

If we take the time to consider it, we will admit that we often fail to love God with our whole being and we often fail to love other people who are made in his image. The truth is that no matter how often we have tried to be true to our calling as God’s representatives on earth, we have fallen short. Our great debt means that on the final day of reckoning, we will find ourselves so far overdrawn that we will have to declare complete bankruptcy. When we ask God to forgive us our debts, we count on his being as he has revealed himself to be in Jesus. He is the “Father in heaven” who has sent his Son to wipe out our debt through his death and fill us with the Spirit who causes us to cry, “Abba, Father.”

Some people are deeply troubled by Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness in these verses, because he seems to base forgiveness on our having forgiven others. It is easy to see why someone would have this concern in light of Jesus’ comments just a few verses later, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14–15). This is a troubling passage that is hard to fit into the biblical notion of God’s unconditional offer of forgiveness.

There is no clear resolution to this tension, but it is always helpful to look at things in light of the entire biblical story. As receivers of God’s free gift of salvation, we have been radically forgiven. Likewise, we are called to be like Christ in our forgiveness of others. It seems Jesus is saying that to be his disciple is to have entered into a whole new reality that is experienced through our identification with Jesus the Messiah. It is a liberating experience, so if we have truly embraced this new reality, we will be the kind of people who forgive others.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.” This last request zeros in on the fact that we experience opposition to our walking in the way of the Father. Moreover, contrary to what we might assume, our Father in heaven is not first of all committed to making our journey through this present life as easy as possible.

“Lead us not into temptation” at first glance appears puzzling, because it seems to imply that we need to request that our Father not lead us into a situation where we will be tripped up. What kind of father would be motivated by a desire to see his kids tripped up? This is where we need a little understanding of the original language to get a subtle but important distinction. The word that is translated temptation (peirasmos) can refer either to testing or to temptation—as a trap.

We know that God does not tempt us because he wants us to stumble (James 1:13), but he does sometimes lead us into and through trials on our life journey, as he did with Jesus when God led him “into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt. 4:1–12). Jesus, our example, prayed to be delivered from the agony of the cross but entrusted himself to... (continued on page 30)
The Jesus Prayer

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to be delivered from the testing brought about by living in an evil world even as we recognize that whatever God plans or allows comes from the hand of our Father in heaven.

We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.”

—C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain

In conclusion, the Jesus Prayer is centered on knowing God as Father. It also teaches us that the experiential knowledge of God as Father is a privilege that is open to all who come to him through Jesus our mediator. Next Jesus teaches us that knowing God’s fatherly love should motivate us to desire that the Father’s goodness and greatness be known throughout the whole earth. Having experienced the blessed rule of our loving Father, we want others to experience the kindness, mercy, and love of God.

Jesus, being the truth-teller that he is, also discloses to us that the coming of the kingdom of God in this age does not do away with disappointments, pain, temptations, and injustices, and so forth. Because of unfulfilled hunger (physical and spiritual), we are told to pray for ourselves and others that the Father would give us this day our daily bread. Because this age is also filled with sinful actions (our own and those of others), we must pray that the Father would forgive us our debts, and we must forgive others. Finally, we are taught to recognize the providence of God in the trials we experience. Prayer is the cry of God’s children who live in the tension that is created by our experience of God’s fatherly care and the frustration of our human experience in this broken world. Thus it is in the context of prayer that we are made more like our Savior who taught us to pray.

Notes


“Master, they say that when I seem
To be in speech with you,
Since you make no replies, it’s all a dream
–One talker aping two.

They are half right, but not as they
Imagine; rather, I
Seek in myself the things I meant to say,
And lo! The wells are dry.

Then seeing me empty, you forsake
The Listener’s role, and through
My dead lips breathe and into utterance wake
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply
Nor can; thus, while we seem
Two talking, thou art One forever, and I
No dreamer, but thy dream.”

C.S. Lewis, Poems, “Prayer”
According to a number of surveys, most Americans continue to believe in and practice prayer (over 90 percent). Although these statistics tell us something about the openness of Americans to interacting with something or someone beyond, they do not tell us about the relationship between core beliefs and prayer.

In my discussions with people, I frequently get a blank stare when I ask, “To whom do you pray?” It seems that many people have never thought deeply about the connection between our prayers and the character of the one to whom we pray. I believe our practice of prayer is shaped by our understanding of who God is, who we are as human beings, and what kind of world we live in.

For Christians there is no better place to go for instruction on prayer than to Jesus himself. Jesus’ most well known teaching on prayer is found in what has been referred to as the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4). I like to call it the Jesus Prayer. For the purpose of this article, we will use the text in Matthew 6, as found in the New International Version.

“Our Father in heaven.” The idea of addressing God as Father was very significant. In the Old Testament, God is referred to as a Father in relationship to his people (Deut. 32:6), and Israel is called God’s son in several places (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1), but it is most significant that the fatherhood of God is directly connected to the relationship between God and the promised Messiah (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:27–28). The privilege of knowing and communicating with God as Father is based on our union with Jesus the Son. Through being united to the Son, we experience new birth (John 1:12) and are encouraged by the Holy Spirit to call out to God as Father (Gal. 4:4–7).

The knowledge of God’s Father-love is the first and simplest but also the last and highest lesson in the school of prayer. Prayer begins in the personal relationship with the living God as well as the personal, conscious fellowship of love with Him. In the knowledge of God’s Fatherhood revealed by the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer will root and grow. The life of prayer has its joy in the infinite tenderness, care, and patience of an infinite Father who is ready to hear and to help.

—Andrew Murray,
With Christ in the School of Prayer

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- **Dec. 13**: The Case for the Real Jesus by Lee Strobel (part 2)

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**Time:**
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