Theology Matters

Vol. 32, No. 1 Winter 2026

Holiness

by Sara Jane Nixon

Have you ever heard the story of St. Christina the Astonishing? She was a twelfth century Belgian woman, and astonishing is a good descriptor. I'm not sure she'd have gotten through the canonization process at a more exacting time, though. St. Christina the Astonishing is primarily known for levitating. And, specifically, she would levitate to get away from other people. I can sympathize with that. But she wasn't acting out of introversion or a desire to be alone, per se. She purportedly had an experience of dying and seeing Purgatory and Hell, sort of a tour of the afterlife, woke up during her own funeral mass, and then, in the aftermath, said she could smell the sin on people. Literally. They stank with sin. So, she would do crazy things—run into forests, jump into cauldrons, and, yes, miraculously levitate into trees to get away from them.

Did she love those people? She would say she did. She would point to the intense life of penance she was living for all the souls in Purgatory and in Hell. But that love took the form of a particularly, well, *astonishing* mode of withdrawal. Purportedly. You may have some serious doubts about the historical veracity of this account. I certainly do. But whether it's factual or not is not really the point. St. Christina the Astonishing may be unique when it comes to levitation, but when human beings commit to holiness, this often looks like withdrawal. From sin, from temptation, from other people who are less committed to the lifestyle, so to speak.

And there's some biblical precedent for this, especially when read as isolated parts of the story of God with His people. After all, the most common definition for "holy" that you hear means "set apart." The vessels used in temple worship, for instance, were holy to the Lord—they were "set apart" for worship, and could not be used to cook your family dinner, for instance. Famously, a gentleman named Uzzah reached out to stabilize the ark of the covenant, the locus of God's presence with Israel, during a particularly ill-conceived transport plan, and died on the spot. Like touching a live electrical current without rubber gloves. Done.

Just last Sunday, I sang the words "Holy, holy, holy" to the Lord with my congregation. Maybe you did, too. We do it a lot in the Christian church. And maybe we do it too casually. We are consciously joining the angels when we do, and we know it because Isaiah 6 tells us about it.

> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high
> and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his
> robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim,
> each with six wings: With two wings they covered
> their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with
> two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one
> another:
>
> "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
> the whole earth is full of his glory."
>
> 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and
> thresholds shook and the temple was filled with
> smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am
> a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of

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unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." [6] Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. [7] With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." [8] Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" [9] He said, "Go and tell this people:

"'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'
[10] Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."
[11] Then I said, "For how long, Lord?"
And he answered:
"Until the cities lie ruined
and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
[12] until the Lord has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.
[13] And though a tenth remains in the land,
it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down."
The holy seed will be the stump in the land.

The angels sing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty," in a posture not only of modesty but frankly of self-protection. The holiness of the Lord is overwhelming even for the holy angels. It's overwhelming for material reality—the temple shakes and fills with smoke. And it's more than overwhelming for Isaiah. It's downright terrifying. Because Isaiah has a problem that neither the angels nor material reality has. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people with unclean lips," he says. And so he recognizes himself to be in mortal danger. "Woe to me, I am ruined." I was asked to come talk about why holiness is hope for the Kingdom of God, and, specifically, for the PC(USA). But we've got to start here. Holiness is not, at first blush, good news to Isaiah. He's in the presence of the holy Lord, and he despairs of his life.

I hope, at this point, there's at least one difference between St. Christina's experience of holiness and Isaiah's that is becoming glaringly obvious. St. Christina's holiness was something that she possessed, and it caused her to flee from people who were less holy than she was—who, in her terms, stank of sin. Isaiah knows that he is one of the people who stink of sin. Isaiah's experience of holiness is that it is something very external to him, something that is a characteristic of God and very much not of himself or his people, and indeed something that is threatening to him because of his own sin and the sin of those around him. St. Christina possessed holiness. Isaiah is confronted by it.

When we read the sixth chapter of Isaiah in isolation, it is difficult to imagine why the holiness of God is hope to anyone at all, and especially not to those of us whose failures are all too well-known, as individuals and as a denomination. Certainly, Isaiah did not hear it as hope. First and foremost, holiness was a threat. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory." And, so, "Woe to me, and woe to my people, that we have unclean lips"—means, of course, both unclean hearts and unclean lives. Even after Isaiah experiences the purification of the coal, the news he is sent to proclaim is not what we would call positive and uplifting. It isn't the kind of preaching that most pastors want to preach, nor that most congregations want to hear.

Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes, until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken.

Even the promise of a remnant cannot entirely make this "good news" except in retrospect. The creaturely experience of holiness is bound to the experience of judgement. And that's because to be holy is to be set apart from sin. It's Israel's sin that causes the holiness of God to be a threat to them. It's Isaiah's sin that makes him recognize himself to be in mortal danger, there in the presence of God.

There's a danger here, specific to those of us who pray to see the PC(USA) reformed; and that is, when we come to speak of holiness, that we will take too much pleasure in the sins of other camps and factions, or even of the denomination as a whole. The danger is that holiness becomes something that we own, something that is intrinsic to us and our behavior, something we can hold in our hands as a club to hit other people with. Famously, after Paul's long list of sin and judgment in Romans 1, all of which are seductively easy to apply to the mainline church in the United States, he turns around and bites those of us who have perhaps been enjoying hearing it a little bit too much: "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else." That, I think, is the first thing to hear when we come to speak of holiness as hope for the PC(USA). Whatever hope that holiness brings us, it will not be one of partisan vindication.

A discussion of holiness that primarily has to do with what some traditions call "personal holiness"—the practices, habits, and prohibitions that make up the external structure of a life spent following Jesus—is brutally insufficient. Holiness is not primarily something that we possess. We must begin by disclaiming any right to the title. Holiness is always, first and last, an attribute of God's own character. And it's an attribute of God that negates our own moral high ground. Holiness is always primarily God's holiness.

St. Christina had one thing right: holiness is to be set apart, and specifically to be set apart from sin. But St. Christina's first mistake is not recognizing that to flee sin, she'd need to flee from herself. Holiness was never something we could comfortably possess. Neither the angels nor the temple is what you'd call *comfortable* in the presence of the Holy Lord. Holiness is always and forever primarily an attribute of the Creator, not creation. An unfallen human being could enter into the overwhelming but basically safe experience of holiness that the angels and temple have. But after the Fall, holiness is not something that we can endure on our own strength. Our natures are too vitiated by sin. It's dangerous to us. It's foreign to us.

But that is not the whole story of holiness. Something happens between Isaiah 6 and the letters of Paul that enables him to pepper his writings with references to "the saints," literally, to the holy ones. How did we go from Isaiah, prostrate on the floor of the temple in mortal terror at the experience of holiness, to the ability to call human beings, who clearly still have many faults, the "holy ones?"

The thing that happened, of course, is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The second person of the all-holy trinity, eternally begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, is born in a manger and dies on a cross, rises from the dead on the third day, and ascends with his human flesh and nature —that's a vital point—into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, until, as the psalmist says, all things are subjected at his feet.

The God whom no one and nothing can surprise knew the problem from before the creation of the world. He knew that we would become dominated and all but consumed by sin. He knew that we would become unable to endure the beauty of his holiness, the beauty of his presence. And the God whom no one and nothing can resist willed that it would not remain that way. John the Elder teaches us that God is love. We often hear this profound truth produced in order to defend a lack of standards, or used in a way that sounds trite or even sentimental. It is, of course, neither trite, nor easy, nor sentimental. Trite, easy, sentimental love would not have made Isaiah fear for his life in its presence. It is a holy love—a love that has no mixture of sin in it. God is love within himself, as the community of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he loves the creation he has made outside of himself in the overflow of his love.

God's being is love, the content of God's glory is love, the content of God's holiness is love. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth is particularly illuminating on this point: In the *Church Dogmatics*, he identifies God's holiness, like all his actions and characteristics, as an outworking of his love: "God's being is His loving. He is all that He is as the One who loves. All His perfections are the perfections of His love."[1] This explicitly includes his holiness, the thing that Uzzah and Isaiah, to different degrees, experienced as a direct threat to their existence.

And the thing about love is that it seeks the company of the beloved. God's love is a love that, while maintaining its holiness, invincibly draws near rather than apart. It draws near to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Fully God, fully man. Two natures in one person. It is not only a matter of holiness coming to live among us—although that's amazing enough. The ark of the covenant is incredible enough. Don't ever let anyone convince you that the so-called "God of the Old Testament" is not a God of unspeakable grace. But what the ark of the covenant pointed towards, Jesus Christ fulfills. Not just God living among us, but God in his holiness binding himself forever to human nature. Irrevocably. The second person of the Trinity has assumed humanity and he will never take it off. The holiness of God is united forever with a fully human nature in one person.

As God in all his holiness, and as a human being in all his frailty, both at once, in his body Jesus carries human beings through death as he dies on the cross to free us from sin. And he carries us into the fullness of true life with him on the third day as he rises from the dead. And he carries us with him in his human nature to dwell in the presence of God, to sit at the right hand of the Father.

What kind of holiness must the God that we encounter in the crucified Jesus Christ possess? It cannot be the holiness of St Christina the Astonishing. This is her second mistake: a holiness that seeks to remove itself from the presence of the sinful is not God's holiness. In Jesus Christ, we see the opposite. We see a God who is eager to come among the sinful, to be, as John Knox says in his beautiful communion prayer, like us in all things except for sin. This is a holiness that comes among the sinful, without itself becoming sinful. It is a holiness that intentionally seeks those who are not holy. Isaiah fears for his life, but he finds not death but forgiveness. He is sent back to a people of unclean lips to pronounce

judgment, but that judgment ultimately is for the sake of life, not death. In retrospect, from the vantage point of the cross, we can see, with a healthy dose of astonishment, that God's holiness is reconciliation rather than alienation, and creation rather than destruction.

Jesus Christ came to seek and save sinners. Not the perfect, not the theologically correct, not the sheep who have unfortunately and inexplicably found themselves in the midst of a herd of goats. That's Gnosticism, not Christianity. Because God's holiness is an expression of his love, it is our hope rather than our despair.

There is no need to soften, deny, or defend the ways that we have sinned and the ways that the mainline has sinned in order to affirm that, nevertheless, there is hope for us that is specifically grounded in God's holiness. For the PC(USA), as well as for us individual sinners, God's holiness is ultimately good news. Because we know the holiness of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. God's holiness is our hope because it is a holiness that reaches towards us. And because it is God's holiness, the holiness of the God against whom no one can stand, we know that he will succeed in reconciling us to himself. God is love, and love seeks the presence of the beloved. God is God, and so nothing will stand in his way.

And that includes our sinfulness. By the grace and mercy of our God, we will not only survive but also find our fullest rest and joy in the presence of the holy God. But our sin will not. Sin cannot survive exposure to God's holiness.

When we speak of these things, we often use the terms justification and sanctification. I know we have people of all levels here when it comes to theological education, so just in case, justification is what God does when he declares us righteous through Jesus's blood, and sanctification is the life-long process of making us in fact holy as he is holy, of freeing us from our sins and making us resemble him. To sanctify is of course to make holy just in Latin rather than good old-fashioned Anglo-Saxon.

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus gives us his own holiness. Or, to say it more carefully, the whole Trinity is explicitly at work here. Through the cross of Jesus, we receive the Father's holiness through the Holy Spirit. John Calvin puts it particularly beautifully at the start of Book III of the *Institutes*:

> We must now see in what way we become possessed of the blessings which God has bestowed on his only-begotten Son, not for private use, but to enrich the poor and needy [that's us]. … To communicate to us the blessings which he received from the Father, he must become ours and dwell in us … if the shedding of his sacred blood is not to be in vain, our souls must be washed in it by the secret cleansing of the Holy Spirit. For which reason, also, Paul, speaking of cleansing and purification, says, "but you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). The whole comes to this that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself.[2]

The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself. It's a good thing to pause here and notice that none of this is our idea, our effort, or our results. To use an old but very helpful phrase, the dead cannot raise themselves. The unholy cannot make themselves holy—they can only mourn with Isaiah, woe is me. It is the Holy Trinity who commands, obeys, and makes effectual. We are, at best, along for the ride. We can only receive, in open-handed astonishment, the holiness of God, given to us in the most unexpected possible way.

Holiness is hope for God's church because God shares his holiness with us. He declares us to be holy through the work of Jesus Christ and the bond of the Holy Spirit. And then, through that same Spirit, he makes us actually possess his holiness. I've recently noticed the unforgettable image in Ezekiel 16—it is the corner of his own garment that God says he covered Jerusalem with. He clothed us when we were naked, with his own clothing. He gives his own holiness to the unholy.

So now that we're towards the end of this talk, we can come to the personal or human holiness that I laid aside at the beginning. We couldn't start with it because we don't have any to start with. We must receive it as a free gift from the crucified and risen Christ. But it's undeniably true that immediately afterwards, as soon as the Church becomes the church, the Bible begins to talk about the people of Christ's kingdom as the *hagioi*, the holy ones, the saints. The ones who are sharing in a real and robust way the characteristic of holiness that belongs primarily to God. The ones who are beginning to bear a family resemblance to the Father who has adopted them.

The proof that we have truly seen the Lord and are following him is that we bear greater and greater family resemblance to him. None of what I have said before about holiness being God's own possession, not ours, is intended to get us out of any standards that the Lord has set for us. When we are sanctified, we are becoming more and more holy in fact, growing to become in reality what the Lord declared us to be when he justified us. This is the necessary result of being bound to Christ. We do not earn our salvation through our holiness, but if we see no evidence of holiness in our lives at all, if we cannot see, looking back, that holiness is growing in us

through the work of the Spirit, that is cause for grave concern and self-examination.

But if it is growing in family resemblance to the Lord, the holiness that we grow into will also be his holiness. It will be the holiness revealed to us in the cross of Jesus Christ. It will be a holiness that moves towards God's beloved sinners, not away from them into some perceived place of doctrinal and moral purity. I hate to keep picking on St. Christina the Astonishing. But she's so emblematic of all the ways that it is so, so tempting to get holiness wrong. It's a great deal of fun to claim holiness for ourselves on the basis of our own goodness, experience, theological commitments, or personality type. It's a great deal of fun to notice the stink of sin on other people. And, even with the absolute best intentions in the world, it's easier and more pleasant to flee that sin. It feels like purity. It feels like being set apart. It feels like a rigorous commitment to God's truth. It feels like common sense.

Richard Burnett, who will speak directly after me, had what was probably the unpleasant task of teaching me confirmation class as a teenager. And one thing he said I will never forget: God hates common sense.[3] It is common sense that to impress a holy God, we must make a case that we are at the very least the lesser of the evils. But Isaiah shows us otherwise. It's in the recognition of his own sin that he's given holiness as a gift. It's common sense that for the holy to remain holy, for the set apart to remain set apart, it must keep a healthy distance from everything that is not holy. But we see in Jesus Christ that true holiness draws near. It doesn't stay in heaven, and it doesn't levitate up into trees. It gives itself away. And it's common sense that since I am responsible for me and for no one else, it is easier to become a hermit, to be holy without the distractions and complications and mess of other people. But in the Bible, God shows us that isn't the case either. The holy are holy in the communion of the saints, the community of the holy ones who are holy with God's holiness.

When the Bible speaks of the holy ones, the saints, I believe it is every single time in the plural. I'm open to being proven wrong here. I'll be around all week, but I could not think of or find an instance in the New Testament where "holy one" or "saint" was applied to a singular individual. Every time that I could think of or find, it was in the plural. The holy ones in Jesus are holy in community with others.

Holiness belongs first and perfectly to God, then to the community that bears His name, and then to the individual person—but not to the individual person alone. The Trinity is holy in community with himself, the Church is holy in community with the Trinity, and the individual Christian is holy in community with the Church.
The hope for the PC(USA) is not in its own holiness, but specifically in the holiness of God which has as its content his flaming love. The holiness of St. Christina will do nothing for us. Whatever holiness she may have possessed, it is not the holiness of the Lord who descended to us sinners, was willing even to endure a cross, to draw us towards himself rather than permit us to remain far away in our stench of sin. That is the holiness that we grow into as we grow in family resemblance to our Lord. It is a holiness that draws near, both to God and to other people, rather than one that keeps us at a distance for fear of sullying our so-called purity.

Holiness is set apart from sin but not from sinners. It is a characteristic of the God whose whole being is love, and who, in love, chooses to share it with us as well. But it's never truly ours. It can never be a source of pride. It can never be a reason to stand far off, or it ceases to be holiness and transforms into a demonic imitation of the real thing. Even God himself does not choose to be holy in isolation but in community, first the community of the Holy Trinity and then, through the grace of the Cross, in community with us as well.

That's why God's holiness is hope for the kingdom. That's why God's holiness can even be hope for the PC(USA.) It's a holiness that draws near to us, that does not give up on us, and that with divine authority is intent upon bringing us into communion with God and each other forever. Again, from Isaiah:

> The LORD of Hosts has purposed,
> and who can thwart Him?
> His hand is outstretched,
> so who can turn it back?

And our part in holiness is not withdrawal. It's not an overriding focus on the creation of a pure and utopian society. It is to run to other sinners, tell them not to be afraid, and point them towards the Holy One who loves us and will not rest until we not only can adore his holiness like the angels do, but even share it with him, as his beloved sons and daughters.

This address was delivered on March 2, 2026, at the Presbyterians for the Kingdom conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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[1] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), II/I:351.
[2] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845) III.1.1.

[3] Editor's note: "God hates common sense *when it comes to understanding the ways of his grace*," I should have made clearer. And it was not "unpleasant" but a delight to have the author, her brothers, and my daughter in confirmation class.

Orthodoxy

By Richard E. Burnett

You have asked me to speak about orthodoxy. So, let's begin by defining the term. The term orthodoxy derives from two Greek words: *orthos* (ὀρθός) which means right, correct, or straight. If you go to an *ortho*pedic doctor, you are going to get your bones, joints, or ligaments corrected or straightened out. The other word is *doxa* (δόξα), which has a range of meaning. It means —and is more often taken to mean—belief, teaching, or doctrine. But *doxa* also means praise, worship, or glory. We sing something called the *dox*ology, which begins: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." So, what is orthodoxy. Is it: Right belief or right praise? Right doctrine or right worship? Right teaching or right glory? It's an important question.

Before trying to answer it, I should mention that I first became interested in the concept of orthodoxy in the summer between my freshman and sophomore year in college when I read G.K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*. It made a deep impression on me. I'd heard the term orthodoxy growing up, I suppose, but I'd not thought much about it. Yet when I went to college, I heard the phrase, "dead orthodoxy." I'd not heard of it before. It never occurred to me that there was such a thing as "dead orthodoxy." But I began to meet those for whom there was no other kind. They spoke of orthodoxy only in derision. To be called orthodox was, to them, a slur. By God's grace, I had been spared their wounds. My mind had not been poisoned by the idea that doctrine is inherently dry and dull or that orthodoxy is inherently cruel and oppressive. And Chesterton did more than merely immunize my heart and mind. He introduced me to the adventure of orthodoxy.

"The real trouble with this world," he said, "is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not quite." "Life … is a trap for logicians. It looks just a little more mathematical and regular than it is; its exactitude is obvious, but its inexactitude is hidden; its wildness lies in wait." Evidence that the world "is nearly reasonable, but not quite" abounds, betraying "a sort of secret treason in the universe," which "escapes the rationalist, but never escapes till the last moment." And so it is, Chesterton claims, with Christianity.[1]

Before he became a Christian, Chesterton was bothered by so many contradictions in Christianity. He said, "For not only (as I understood) had Christianity the most flaming vices, but it had apparently a mystical talent for combining vices which seemed inconsistent." For example: Is Christianity for or against war? On the one hand, you've got Jesus saying, "Turn the other cheek." You've got Tolstoy and a long tradition of pacifism associated with Christianity. On the other hand, you've got Augustine, just war theory, the Crusades, and the Old Testament, which remains the largest part of the Christianity's Bible.[2]

Is Christianity for or against pleasure? On the one hand, you've got the asceticism of John the Baptist and countless monks and nuns. On the other hand, you've got Jesus turning water into wine and thanking his Father for food and the good gifts of creation. You've got Paul knowing "how to be abased and abound." And then there is the Song of Solomon. And speaking of which: Is Christianity for or against marriage? On the one hand, Jesus and Paul aren't married to women and say things that should give one pause before entering hastily into marriage. On the other hand, did any two figures in history ever say more to establish marriage between a man and a woman as a good thing?[3] Later, Chesterton said, "the most extraordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man and an ordinary woman, and their ordinary children."[4] But before becoming a Christian he couldn't reconcile so many seeming contradictions.

Is Christianity basically optimistic or pessimistic? Does it teach a naïve sunny outlook or dark "inhuman gloom"? Is life "a nightmare or a fool's paradise"? Whatever the issue or moral dilemma, Chesterton saw Christianity as always falling off one side or another. But he began to see that Christianity had a knack for combining opposites. It did so by maintaining a balance or equilibrium, but it was, he said, an "irregular equilibrium."[5]

It was *not* the balance or equilibrium of Paganism. The pagan mind in the classical era was ruled by a perfectly rational notion of equilibrium or balance, Aristotle's "golden mean," wherein truth is always, predictably, in the middle, never a matter of wild excess or extravagance, but always a matter of boring moderation, always a matter of weak compromise, which is why the pagan mind simply did not know what to make of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. "Orthodox theology," Chesterton acknowledges, "has specially insisted that Christ was not a being apart from God and man, like an elf, nor yet a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God."[6]

Many of you know what was and is at stake in the Nicene Creed and how it came about. A bishop named Arius claimed Jesus was divine in the sense that he was "like" God, that is, he shared a "similar being" or "substance" with God. In other words, he was *homoiousios*. But another bishop named Athanasius, said No! This is not what the Bible says. The Bible says, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Bible says, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:17). Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9) Therefore, Athanasius asked Arius, "What do you mean that Jesus is "like" God? He is "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." In other words, he is *homoousios*, not *homoiousios*. He is of the *same* not *similar* being or substance with the Father.

It cost Athanasius a lot to uphold this teaching. He was exiled five times. His opponents tried repeatedly to kill him. People said he was crazy. They said, "Athanasius, the whole world is against you." He said: "Then I will be Athanasius against the world, Athanasius *Contra Mundum*." Even some of his friends said, "Why are you getting so uptight about this? Why make such a fuss? There is only one Greek letter, one iota's difference, between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*. But Athanasius knew there was a world of difference between saying that Jesus was of the "same being" and of "similar being" with the Father. He knew the truth of the entire Christian faith was riding on it.

When it came to defining the deity of Christ, Athanasius knew that Arius paid more attention to Greek, classical theistic conceptions of deity than to the Bible. So, he asked Arius, essentially, "What do you know of God's being, Arius?" "How do you know Jesus is of 'similar being' with God? How do you know Jesus is 'like' God? Who told you what God is like? How can you say Jesus is 'like' God unless you already have some idea of who God is? Where did you get it? Where did you get your idea of God, your conception of deity? Did you get it from Greek philosophers or from the Bible? Why don't you let the Bible tell you who God is, what deity is, what divinity can or cannot do or be?

It can hardly be overstated that Arius's view—his understanding of divinity—was more popular. It made more sense to more people. It not only made more sense to the wider public. It made more sense to philosophers in the Academy (the one Plato founded in Athens, which would last another couple of centuries).

Thus, it would have been so much easier if the church had said that Jesus was half-god and half-man or a mixture of both. It would have been so much more pleasing to the pagan mind, so much easier for everyone to understand, if the church had sided with Arius and said Jesus was more or less divine but really mostly human or if it had sided with the Gnostics, the Docetists, and Eastern mystery religions and said he was more or less human but really mostly divine. Either one would have been more palatable to pagan sensibilities. But, no, the church said he is both truly divine and truly human at the same time. In other words, Chesterton says, "Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them *both*, and keeping them both *furious*."[7]

This is where Chesterton introduced me to the adventure of orthodoxy. He writes: "People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe. There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy."[8] It is like riding a charging horse, speeding across a battlefield at breakneck speed, buffeted on all sides, careening to the left and then to the right without falling off one side or the other. Or, rather, Chesterton says, it is like riding a chariot behind a team of charging horses:

> It was the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses, seeming to stoop this way and to sway that, yet in every attitude having the grace of statuary and the accuracy of arithmetic. The Church in its early days went fierce and fast with any warhorse; yet it is utterly unhistoric to say that she merely went mad along one idea, like a vulgar fanaticism. She swerved to left and right, so exactly as to avoid enormous obstacles. She left on one hand the huge bulk of Arianism, buttressed by all the worldly powers to make Christianity too worldly. The next instant she was swerving to avoid an orientalism, which would have made it too unworldly. The orthodox Church never took the tame course or accepted the conventions; the orthodox Church was never respectable. … It is easy to be a madman: it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one's own. … It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles

> at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any one of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect.[9]

It was this vision of orthodoxy that captivated me: the equilibrium of a man behind madly rushing horses as "the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages" and "the wild truth reeling but erect.' And in describing it all, Chesterton wrote a line I never forgot: "It was only a matter of an inch; but an inch is everything when you are balancing. The Church could not afford to swerve a hair's breadth on some things if she was to continue her great and daring experiment of the irregular equilibrium."[10]

This "irregular equilibrium," I later learned, was balanced on a specific point, "a mathematical point," you might call it, yet one established not from below but from above precisely where heaven and earth, time and eternity meet in Jesus Christ. I learned this not from Chesterton, but from a Reformed theologian.[11] But I kept thinking about this line, "It was only a matter of an inch; but an inch is everything when you are balancing," and it dawned on me that this applied not only to Nicea and the homoousios, but to Christian doctrine as a whole, to the study of theology, and to orthodoxy.

Do you remember that I began by asking what orthodoxy means? Does it mean right belief or right praise? Right doctrine or right worship? Right teaching or right glory? We tend to distinguish sharply between the two, don't we? In fact, modern scholars claim the meaning of orthodoxy is "ambiguous" for this reason.[12] But what is ambiguous to modern scholars was not ambiguous to the ancient church. For the ancient church, right belief and right worship went together and could not be separated. Right teaching and right praise were united and could not be divided.

I don't know anyone in the history of the church who understood this better than John Calvin. Calvin writes a lot about knowledge of God, and he takes great care to distinguish between "proper" and improper knowledge of God, "pure" and "corrupt knowledge," "confused" and "clear knowledge," and "right knowledge of God." And he says this about right knowledge of God: "all right knowledge of God is born of obedience."[13] In other words, we cannot truly know God without wanting to obey him. We cannot truly know God without wanting to worship him.

It's common in American evangelical piety to speak about "head knowledge" and "heart knowledge." But when it comes to knowledge of God, Calvin refuses to draw this distinction. Calvin defines faith as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to *our minds* and sealed upon *our hearts* through the Holy Spirit."[14]

Calvin says true knowledge of God is "not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which … takes root in the heart."[15] For Calvin, there is no head knowledge that is not also heart knowledge and there is no heart-knowledge that is not also head-knowledge when it comes to knowledge of God—and so it is for those of us in the mainstream of the Reformed tradition.

Yet many throughout the history of the church have tried to drive a wedge between the head knowledge and heart knowledge. Many have emphasized one at the expense of the other. Many have drawn a wedge between right doctrine and right worship, right teaching and right praise. It happened in the Middle Ages when—despite Anselm's insistence upon "faith seeking understanding"—an all-too speculative and rationalistic form of scholasticism developed. Eventually, in reaction, Christian mysticism emerged as well as other spiritual and devotional movements which had their influence on the Protestant Reformers, for example, Bonaventure on Calvin and Johannes Tauler on Luther.

The Protestant Reformers had their problems with Medieval Scholasticism. Yet by the end of the sixteenth century, a *Protestant* Scholasticism had emerged. It was a good and necessary development. There was a lot to think through. More precise definitions were needed. But by the end of the seventeenth century, many sensed something was wrong, something was missing. The Lutheran theologian Philipp Spener complained about the Scholastic theologians. He said what Luther and the Reformers threw out the front door, these guys are dragging in the back door. Spener is "the Father of Pietism." Whereas scholastics emphasized the mind, reason, and right doctrine, Pietists emphasized the heart, prayer, and right praise. And, of course, many Puritans shared their concerns.

Orthodoxy has always blazed a trail between the movements and counter-movements that have separated Word and Spirit, doctrine and life, faith and reason, right teaching and right praise, or have emphasized one at the expense of the other. Sometimes those who define orthodoxy as right teaching rather than right praise have done so with an attitude, a tone, a swagger that suggests they *know* better and if you don't agree with them, you're

just not as smart—as if knowledge of God was an intellectual achievement rather than a gift of grace, as if God and their ideas about God were necessarily the same, as if they had God somehow in their pockets, which suggests the greatest threat to orthodoxy. The greatest threat to orthodoxy has always been the orthodox.

Certainly, we should strive to *be* orthodox—to follow right teaching and to offer right worship. And if others call us orthodox, we should be glad. We should be grateful. But there's no need to go around calling yourself orthodox. It's like calling yourself handsome. You may be handsome. But if you have to go around saying so, you may be overlooking something or you may be paying more attention to yourself than you should—just as those who call themselves orthodox often pay more attention to themselves than to God.

Of course, orthodoxy has also been threatened by those who believe there is no such thing as right doctrine or right worship, just as there is no such thing as truth. And if you ask them if it's true that there's no such thing as truth or is it right to teach that there's no such thing as right teaching, they speak with marbles in their mouth. But a far greater threat to orthodoxy than skeptics has been the pious pragmatists who say Christianity is about 'Deeds, not creeds, 'Life, not doctrine,' or 'doctrine divides, mission unites,' as if one was possible without the other, or as if life, mission, or service does not divide, dissolve, and eventually disintegrate without doctrine.

In another book, Chesterton puts it well: "Theological distinctions are fine but not thin. In all the mess of modern thoughtlessness, that still calls itself modern thought, there is perhaps nothing so stupendously stupid as the common saying, 'Religion can never depend on minute disputes about doctrine.' It is like saying that life can never depend on minute disputes about medicine."[16] Tell that to your doctor.

I am so grateful that so many of you are interested in doctrine. The church needs you. The church in America today needs to care far more about doctrine than she has in several generations. And I am thankful that you want to think critically about the faith. I want to encourage you to do so—to think and to reason as rigorously as you can. Reason and logic have their place. Reason is a gift of God, and we should strive to be as rational as possible. But we need more than reason. And, again, it was Chesterton who was among the first to help me to begin to understand this. He says:

> If you argue with a madman, it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways, his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by the things that go with good judgment. He is not hampered by a sense of humor or by charity, or by the dumb certain of experience. He is the more logical for loosing certainties sane affections. Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.[17]

The madman, he suggests, has a chain of logic that keeps running the same loop, that keeps repeating the same steps in his mind, A–B–C–D; A–B–C–D. His chain of logic is unbreakable. Chesterton continues:

> The madman's explanation of a thing is always complete and, often in a purely rational sense, satisfactory. Or, to speak more strictly, the insane explanation, if not conclusive, is at least unanswerable; this may be observed especially in the two or three commonest kinds of madness. If a man says (for instance) that men have a conspiracy against him, you cannot dispute it except by saying that all the men deny that they are conspirators, which is exactly what conspirators would do. His explanation covers the facts as much as yours. …
>
> The lunatic's theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way. I mean that, if you or I were dealing with a mind that was growing morbid, we should be chiefly concerned not so much to give it arguments as to give it air, to convince it that there was something clearer and cooler outside the suffocation of a single argument."[18]

The point is: Reason has its limits. It takes us only so far, if anywhere. We need what gives reason direction and purpose. We need faith, faith seeking understanding, which is why Presbyterians have always cared about the life of the mind.

We have sought to love God not only with our souls and bodies, and with our hearts but also with our minds, which is why we built so many schools and institutions of higher learning. Yet it is never merely about the mind. Calvin says: "the heart's distrust is greater than the mind's blindness. It is harder for the heart to be furnished with assurance than for the mind to be endowed with thought."[19]

Friends, orthodoxy has sailed on many treacherous seas. It has weathered many dangerous storms. It has endured the winds and waves of temptations from within and without. Between Charbdis and Scylla, it has navigated through many narrow straights, and avoided shipwreck on the shoals of disaster both on the left and the right.

There's so much to learn from those who've gone before us. There is so much they can teach us. We should not

think of ourselves as wiser or smarter than they or immune from the temptations they faced. Rather, we should learn from the battles they fought. This is what it means to "honor your father and your mother."

Yet we should not confuse our battles with theirs. Learning lessons from the past does not absolve us from facing the challenges of the present. Orthodoxy requires that we confess in our own time, our own tongue, and in face of our own temptations. It requires us to take responsibility for faithful words spoken by the church then and there, but to also take responsibility for speaking faithful words here and now.

Orthodoxy has always stood firm, but standing firm does not mean standing still. It has always been on the move, never in retreat, always moving in advance, which means: There is no going "Back to Orthodoxy." That train has left the station. That horse has left the barn. And you and I are going to have to run fast to keep up.

Being orthodox has never been easy. It has always been costly. And given the challenges in the church today, not least in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I cannot promise that you or your congregation will flourish, that you will succeed in any way that the world counts success, or that you will even survive. I can only promise you blood, sweat, and toil. But for those who have sought to follow the path of orthodoxy, for those who have sought to walk the pilgrim road of faith and not fall off on one side or the other, for those who have dared to tread "the straight and narrow way," to walk the razor's edge between truth and falsehood, orthodoxy has never ceased to be an adventure.

This address was delivered on March 2, 2026, at the Presbyterians for the Kingdom conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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[1] Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 146.
[2] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 153, 177–179.
[3] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 160–162.
[4] This statement is widely attributed to Chesterton, but I have not yet found the source of it.
[5] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 154–155.
[6] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 167.
[7] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 174.
[8] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 183
[9] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 183–185.
[10] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 182. "… whenever we feel there is something odd in Christian theology, we shall generally find that there is something odd in the truth" (150).
[11] See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 29f.; *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Wieser (Richmond: John Knox, 1960). 43f.
[12] "The word 'orthodoxy' is ambiguous. It can mean 'right worship' or 'right belief.'" Duncan Forrster, Orthodoxy, *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). 422.
[13] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1.6.2.
[14] Calvin, *Institutes* III, 2.7. Italics mine.
[15] Calvin, *Institutes* I..5.9.
[16] G.K. Chesterton, *The Resurrection of Rome* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1930), 61-62.
[17] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 30.
[18] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 30–32.
[19] Calvin, *Institutes* III.2.36.

Perseverance

By Douglas F. Fletcher

Lately, I have been reading spiritual autobiographies. Each story is unique. Together they invite us to remember the power of the Spirit to touch and shape life. The stories remind us that God's story reaches beyond any single time or place and we can find encouragement in the stories of God's touch in the lives of others, and even companions along the way.

Albert Schweitzer's autobiography was recently published in a fiftieth anniversary edition. Son of a Lutheran pastor, he earned advanced degrees in philosophy, theology, and medicine, was a concert organist and wrote a classic on J.S. Bach—clearly an underachiever. I especially enjoyed reading in his autobiography shorter versions of his book on the gospels, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and on Paul, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle,* classics which I read in seminary. In his autobiography the books were described with deeper connections to his own faith and life. He had written about Jesus as an apocalyptic figure, and also about Paul living in expectation of the Kingdom with a mystical faith. I sensed this was part of Schweitzer's own faith,

too. He argues that the heart of Paul is not located in the argument of "justification by faith" but living or "being in Christ." In his own life, he sought to live in service and to make his life a witness to Christ with a universal reverence for life. His autobiography overflows with gratitude for friends who helped him persevere with academic projects, organ concerts, and support for the medical mission in Africa. His book made eminently clear how important friends had been in supporting his efforts and life.

I also enjoyed, *Surprised by Joy,* C.S. Lewis' spiritual autobiography. Lewis described the roots of his faith in his childhood imagination. He was convinced that there was far more than what we can see. This conviction later drew him to great stories in literature. As an adult, when his spiritual quest was in earnest, he read philosophical works. On a most rational quest for faith, he was impressed by arguments and moved by a number of things. He was touched by G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man,* so I read that, too. It moved me, a beautiful and touching picture of Jesus, his unique teaching and larger purpose. Chesterton connected the discovery of an early cave man to the cave in which Jesus was born. He makes interesting and often hilarious connections and contrasts. And then, perhaps because I enjoyed his humor, I also read Chesterton's *Orthodoxy,* a celebration not of doctrines but of the paradoxes of life and faith. It was there that I realized where Lewis had received the inspiration for a well-known line in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. When Lucy saw Aslan for the first time, she asked about the lion "Is he safe?" You may know the answer to that question: "No, but he's good."

In *Orthodoxy,* Chesterton described the lion and the lamb lying down together (Isaiah 11:6, where it is actually a wolf, a lion is mentioned later in the verse); and he insists that it is critical that the lion isn't "lambized." If the lion loses all its fierceness, then it is no longer really a lion. The miracle is that these two animals, in full possession of their natures, lie down together. The image is an irreducible paradox for Chesterton. And it suggests for Chesterton other paradoxes, like that of Jesus' own nature, fully human and fully divine. Orthodoxy, Chesterton argued, is all about holding together the paradoxes.

Chesterton described his own faith as the discovery in his teens that most of the answers people gave about life, religion and a host of things were inadequate or simply wrong. He took pleasure in pointing this out and did it in humorous ways. In a time when religion was ridiculed in England, criticized for its irrationality and contradictions, he took the challenge and celebrated paradox with insight and humor, and loved being both a defender of the faith and a gadfly. His conversion was gradual, intellectual, moral, and joyful. He was influenced by Charles Dickens and was an influence on C.S. Lewis.

C.S. Lewis' faith was influenced by Chesterton, among others, but also by his friend J.R.R. Tolkien, also at Oxford. When Lewis was struggling with questions of faith, Tolkien suggested to him on a walk what he was confident Lewis already knew that myths are not simply stories, but the greatest myths reflect the deepest longings of the human spirit (actually, that longing is a part of the definition of joy for Lewis). And Tolkien then suggested that the story of Jesus was the greatest myth of all. What if this story was, in fact, true? Tolkien believed it so. Tolkien further suggested that Lewis' problem was really not about rationality but about his will. It was the special touch of a friend.

Lewis also had a unique influence on Tolkien. While they did not agree on everything, and that is undoubtedly important to remember about the best of friendships. (Tolkien didn't like allegories and thought Lewis was sometimes careless, like having a faun, Father Christmas, and a witch, belonging to different genres altogether in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and perhaps being too eager to get a book to the publisher, whereas Lewis thought was Tolkien too perfectionistic and a bit slow with his writing). More importantly, Tolkien acknowledged that when he was ready to abandon his project of *The Lord of the Rings,* it was Lewis, convinced of its value, who persuaded him to continue. Tolkien didn't write a Christian allegory (as Lewis had), but according to his letter, *The Lord of the Rings* was built on and included themes that were part of his own Christian faith, though placed in a time before Jesus. Both Lewis and Tolkien believed neither in a one-story material universe nor a two-story universe (adding a place for heaven), but a universe more like a skyscraper with room for elves and angels and more than can be imagined. Tolkien's books have had an enormous impact, spawned the modern epic fantasy genre and defined the blueprint for modern fantasy. I think it also offers something special for our time. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* can help us in thinking about perseverance.

As a Roman Catholic, Tolkien prayed the Lord's prayer ending with the words "deliver us from evil." I want to share with you ten weapons against evil from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The weapons are neither swords nor spells. They are moral, spiritual, and communal strengths that may look weak in comparison to brute strength but end up being decisive. *The Lord of the Rings* is not only one of the greatest stories written. It is also the witness and word of a believer. According to Tolkien, it is a story of sanctification. The irony is that in a way it seems like a non-allegorical version of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Ten Weapon's Against Evil From Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

1. *Pity and mercy*. Bilbo is merciful toward Gollum, which is depicted as a hidden strength that may look like weakness. Later, so is Frodo. Bilbo says, "For now that I see him, I do pity him." In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, chapter two, "The Shadow of the Past," we find these words "Many that live deserve death … do not be too eager to deal out death." Tolkien frames mercy as something evil cannot understand and so cannot defend against. In a 1963 letter, Tolkien reinforced that pity and mercy have a providential role, even if not a determinative role. In fact, they are derived from Scripture. "Blessed are the merciful," Jesus said (Mt 5:7). And "Be merciful even as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36).

2. *Humble courage*. The world is saved by Hobbits, the least powerful, but also the least power hungry. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, book two, chapter two, Frodo volunteers, "I will take the Ring … though I do not know the way." Elrond declares the improbable: "it is the hour of the Shire-folk." Sauron's blindness is his pride: he cannot imagine anyone choosing to destroy power rather than seize it. So, humility becomes a weapon against evil because evil cannot understand it.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian congregation along these very lines: "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27). The prophet Micah exhorts us to "walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

3. *Endurance against despair*. In this long journey with all its hardships and fears, despair itself becomes a battlefield. The weapon is endurance, staying constant through all of it. Frodo's perseverance and Sam's steady loyalty defeat evil's strategy of exhaustion and loss of hope. In *The Return of the King*, book six, chapter three, we find these telling words: "He knew all the arguments of despair and would not listen to them."

These themes are readily found in Scripture. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul wrote: "we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame" (5:3–5).

In the opening to the Letter of James, we find these words: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2–4). In the Letter to the Hebrews we find: "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (12:1–2).

4. *Friendship and fellowship*. Evil isolates us and turns us inward with fear, suspicion, and possessiveness. The weapon against it is a shared burden. In *The Return of the King,* book six, chapter three, Sam says "I can't carry it for you … but I can carry you."

The words recall Paul's counsel to the Galatians (6:2) "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." They also recall Jesus' words to his disciples, "I no longer call you servants … Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15:15).

5. *Hope beyond "optimism."* Tolkien distinguishes between hope and sunny optimism. Hope is choosing to act rightly even without guarantees of a particular outcome. Tolkien uses the word "*estel*," a word in Sindarin, one of the Elvish languages, meaning trust or faithful hope. Tolkien distinguishes between "amdir," ordinary hope based on likelihood and "estel," a deep enduring hope rooted in trust beyond evidence. "Estel" represents the deep conviction that good is worth fighting for, regardless of outcome. The motive is not winning, but faithfulness. Aragorn embodies this high hope. In fact, Estel was his childhood name. And in *The Return of the King*, chapter two, "The Land of Shadow," Sam has a star moment. What he discovers is that: "In the end the shadow was only a small and passing thing."

The Psalmist wrote, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why are you disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God (Ps 42:11). To the Corinthians, Paul wrote: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor 4:16–17). Paul's Letter to the Romans includes this benediction "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (15:13)

6. Renunciation of power/refusing domination. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, book two, chapter seven, "The Mirror of Galadriel," Galadriel refuses the Ring. "I pass the test … and remain Galadriel." So does Gandalf, Faramir, and Aragorn, each of whom wins a key battle precisely by not grasping. In the story of temptation, "the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away

from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only" (Mt 4:8–10).

Paul wrote to the Philippians "In your relationship with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5–8).

7. *Moral integrity*. Refusing "victory by the enemy's weapon." In *The Two Towers*, book five, chapter five, "The Window on the West," Faramir refuses to take the Ring even to save Gondor "I would not take this thing … Not were Minas Tirith falling …"

To the congregation in Rome, Paul writes "do not repay anyone evil for evil … Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good" (12:17ff). And to the congregation at Thessalonica, Paul wrote "hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (1 Thess 5:21).

8. *Seeing through manipulation and propaganda*. In *The Two Towers*, book three, chapter ten, "The Voice of Saruman," there is this cold and dangerous description of what was spoken: "All that it said seemed wise and reasonable."

To the Corinthians, Paul wrote "And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (II Cor 11:14). In Ephesians, we find these words: "Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:11–12).

9. *Healing and restoration as the true counter to evil*. In *The Return of the King*, book five, chapter eight, "The Houses of Healing," the words are striking: "The hands of the King are the hands of a healer and so shall the rightful King be known."

Jesus read the following words from Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry, a ministry that included much healing: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners" (Isaiah 61:1). And so it is: "The hands of the King are the hands of a healer and so shall the rightful King be known."

10. *Providence/grace, the sudden joyous turn*. In Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories*, he wrote: "I will call it 'eucatastrophe.'" In ancient Greek drama, "catastrophe" the final resolution and denouement, did not always mean disaster, but a decisive turning point at the end. Tolkien, the philologist, invented his word, "eucatastrophe," to accentuate the joyful ending. In fact, the ending is constructed in such way that no individual can take credit for it.

The core catastrophe of the trilogy is when Frodo fails at the last moment and claims the Ring for himself. The quest appears morally and practically lost. But Gollum unexpectedly intervenes, seizes the Ring and then falls into the fire, losing his life and destroying the Ring. The victory is not from Frodo's strength, or military triumph or human willpower or a calculated strategy. And Gollum was simply true to himself. The salvation of middle earth depends not on power but on mercy—the sudden joyous turn which Tolkien saw as grace. It does not deny sorrow but breaks despair with joy.

There was no human hero, but Tolkien's divine providence works through human freedom. While no person was responsible for the eucatastrophe, in a letter to Eileen Elger in September 1963, he described Frodo as an instrument of Providence because of the mercy he had shown to Gollum. Tolkien saw the moment on Mt Doom mirroring Christian grace. As he described it, the Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation, the ultimate real world eucatastrophe. Indeed, good can triumph beyond human power and imagination.

In Genesis 50:20, we find inspiration for the concept. After a betrayal by his brothers and many plot twists, Joseph finally was in a position of power and spared his brothers saying, "You meant it for evil, but the Lord meant it for good, for the saving of many lives." Is this 50/20 hindsight?

There is an echo of this story from Genesis in the New Testament which looks forward. In Romans 8:28, Paul confidently declared to the congregation what they could also remember from the Genesis story: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." And from Revelation 21, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne, said 'Behold, I am making everything new!'" (Rev 21:4–5).

Tolkien built the whole story of *The Lord of the Rings* on a foundation of Scripture. It is a story much about perseverance. It calls us to remember who we are called

to be and remaining true even when things are hard. Tolkien suggests that we are not called to win. We are called to be faithful and to trust God.

Calvin came at the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints from its foundation in God. When he laid out the doctrine in the *Institutes*, he saw perseverance as the necessary consequence of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit. He wrote "Perseverance itself is a gift of God" (*Institutes* III.24.6). Perseverance is not merely a future hope but the ongoing action of God sustaining faith within the believer. Assurance may fluctuate, and true believers may groan under weakness, yet the foundation remains unshakeable—God finishes what God begins. Perseverance is ultimately a description of God's character and faithfulness, that God will not abandon us. We shouldn't be afraid or get discouraged but trust God.

What have I learned about perseverance?

1. We really don't know how the story of our life will unfold. Things change. But trust in God offers us a better foundation for dealing with all the unknowns than we could ever imagine. Perseverance is not merely a theological concept or a future prospect. It is the Holy Spirit's presence with us.

2. Perseverance is a gift to us. John Calvin was insistent that perseverance is a necessary consequence of the gift of God's grace. That should reassure us. But Calvin also understood that there would be trials and that the Spirit would be with us "through many dangers, toils, and snares." Calvin would have undoubtedly liked Tolkien's "eucatastrophe," that God's mercy not only changes the expected outcome in a surprising way, but it also impacts the story along the way. Tolkien worked to get the ending of *The Lord of the Rings* just right, without a human hero, but with a deep and joyful surprise that also used a gift of mercy that had been offered.

3. As Tolkien suggested, perseverance calls us to live as faithfully as we can to the call that Jesus has given us. The weapons are to be as faithful to Christ as we can be. It is no time to change aspirations or values. We are a peculiar people, like Hobbits perhaps. The grace of God is intended to make us more gracious, the faithfulness of God to make us more faithful, the love of God to make us more loving.

4. Perseverance is aided by the support and friendship of other believers. John Knox wrote about perseverance from his more pastoral perspective. Albert Schweitzer experienced the support of many friends in many different endeavors. The friendship of Lewis and Tolkien was a gift to them. It helped bring out the best in each of them. As Hebrews reminds us: "We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." We have companions on the way. Tolkien used unlikely heroes and lifted up the importance of friendship, even with Hobbits.

Part of what makes this occasion of *Theology Matters* especially meaningful is the opportunity to renew old friendships and to make new ones. Remember, Tolkien's first book in the trilogy is entitled *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Use this time. Believing that we are alone diminishes and weakens us. Real friendship strengthens and deepen our life. You have friends on this journey.

My mother was a model of perseverance for me. Late in her life when she had developed Alzheimer's and was failing, we were in the backyard and she just started talking. She said that she had Alzheimer's, something she never talked about I learned later from my sister who cared for her, and my mother added that she was forgetting things. And then she said, "The Lord has seen me through a lot of things in my life." Her childhood and life could be recounted like the complaint of the psalmist. I knew the story.

She then looked at me and said: "It's no time to change ponies now." We both laughed. And then she said: "And when I forget my faith, you need to remember it for me." Her words touch me still. It was the last real conversation we had. And I believe she knew that, remembering or not, Jesus would never leave her. For there is a healing love for us that is greater than we can imagine and that never lets us go.

This address was delivered on March 2, 2026, at the Presbyterians for the Kingdom conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

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The Institute for Theological Education

Theology Matters has established The Institute for Theological Education. Our goal is to equip the next generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological instruction that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and we begin by offering three programs:

1. A Master of Arts in Reformed Theology in partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (for more details, see below);
2. A continuing education program that offers seminars and retreats for pastors, elders, teachers, and other congregational leaders; and
3. An adult education program that offers courses, lectures, and seminars to all interested in the subject matter, whether for academic credit, a certificate in theological studies, or as auditors.

Master of Arts in Reformed Theology

In August 2023, Theology Matters and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary launched a Master of Arts in Reformed Theology. We have had two strong cohorts, and we are beginning to recruit a third. Focusing on classic texts and practices valued by the Reformed tradition, this program offers instruction from pastor-scholars whose knowledge has been tested in the academy and significant pastoral ministry. The M.A. in Reformed Theology is a fully accredited, 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. In-person instruction will be held at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Required Courses

Introduction to the Reformed Tradition
Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Interpretation of the New Testament in the Reformed Tradition
Reformed Theology I
Reformed Theology II
Capstone Project in Reformed Theology

Elective Courses

Early & Medieval Church History
Reformation & Modern Church History
Presbyterian History and Confessions
American Puritanism through Edwards
The Theology of Augustine
The Theology of John Calvin
The Theology of Karl Barth
The Theology of T.F. Torrance
and many more on *Worship & Preaching*

"I believe that faithful Christian leaders today must be formed within an alternative educational culture that is seldom available through most mainline theological seminaries today but is possible with innovative strategic partnerships that authentically recognize that the way to human flourishing remains an ever-present need and our calling as participants in a Great Commissioning."

Dr. Jeffrey Bullock, President
University of Dubuque & Theological Seminary

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to equip, encourage, and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416, at this email address, admin@theologymatters.com or at our website: www.theologymatters.com

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Theology Matters

is happy to announce our new

Associate Director
The Reverend Clark L. Remsburg

Thanks to your support, the ministry of Theology Matters has grown during the last ten years. Several years ago, our board recognized that the growth of our programs would require additional leadership support. Thus, we are grateful to bring onboard an Associate Director who will help expand our efforts to provide theological leadership, focusing especially on development and administration.

Clark Remsburg brings a rich blend of pastoral experience, relational leadership, and spiritual and practical wisdom to his new role. After working as a financial adviser, helping people plan how best to understand and to meet their goals, he then served as pastor of congregations of the Presbyterian Church for more than twenty years, preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and caring for the people.

For the last ten years, he has served faithfully on the board of directors of Theology Matters, helping to guide us from an all-volunteer organization to where we are today. In short, all his life, education, work experience, and ministry have prepared him for, and led him to, this new position. Please join us in welcoming Clark and supporting him as he steps into this important work.