

Every
Woman
a
Theologian

KNOW WHAT YOU BELIEVE.
LIVE IT CONFIDENTLY.
COMMUNICATE IT GRACIOUSLY.

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Introduction

On a Tuesday, in a brick cafe in Virginia, theology became essential.

I should not say *became*; rather, theology revealed itself as essential as it has always been. It became essential *for me*.

I was a young mom in my mid-twenties reconnecting with an old friend from high school. My friend and I were sipping coffee, talking about the gray weather outside, warmer places, and the intersection of politics and religion (just as Emily Post advises *not* to do). These discussions were not new for us; I am a Christian and she was, at the time, exploring many different religions after having left Christianity behind. Our coffee dates covered incredible philosophical ground, and we sometimes discussed our differing views. We knew we didn't agree, but we weren't particularly direct about it.

Until that Tuesday.

I don't know how the conversation turned from the outdoor temperature to Jesus, but it did—as abruptly as a winter squall.

“I definitely admire Jesus,” my friend confessed. “I just think God lets us come to Him in a variety of ways. We're all on the path to Him, it just looks different—Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians. We're all just finding our way.”

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I took another drink of my coffee. “What makes you arrive at that conclusion?”

“I just don’t think Jesus would have a problem with all these other people finding their way. Like, they’re seeking too. Just because it looks different doesn’t make it invalid.”

“Can I share something?” I asked, setting down my mug.

“Sure.”

“I definitely agree that people are seeking; they’re looking for answers. They believe there is something greater out there, and they want to attach themselves to that purpose. But, something to consider: Jesus didn’t allow for many paths to God.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Let’s start with how we know who Jesus is. Most of our information is from the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All the things we like about Jesus are in there: His love, healings, resistance to power structures, sacrifice. But that’s also where we see Jesus say things that make it clear He didn’t think there was more than one way to God.”

“Like what?”

“In John 14, He says He is the ‘way, truth, and life.’ He even goes on to say no one can access God unless it’s through Him. He says a similar thing in Matthew 11.” I adjusted my coffee mug. “I guess what I am saying is: I like your theory, I really do. But Jesus didn’t allow for it. So I respect that you admire Jesus, but if you admire Him, you have to take into account everything He said about Himself. He *made* Christianity exclusive.”

“I’ve never heard it explained that way.” My friend tapped her coffee cup and narrowed her eyes. “I’ll have to think about it.”

On a Tuesday, in a brick cafe in Virginia, theology was essential. And today, wherever you are in the world, it is essential as well.



We think of theology—the study of the nature of God and His truth—as the stuff of C. S. Lewis; we picture it swirling with pipe smoke and stacked with leather-bound books. We think it’s for people with seminary degrees, and it seems irrelevant to the rest of us. Perhaps we think it especially irrelevant to those of us in “normal” jobs and lives: those commuting to work wearing the company polo shirt; those wiping toddler noses and bottoms; those taking care of aging parents. What does theology have to do with *us*?

It has everything to do with you, my friend. And just as theology became essential to me, one day it will become essential to you. It probably already has.

For example, have you ever:

- been asked a tough question about the Bible’s trustworthiness and found yourself searching for words?
- attempted to comfort a grieving friend and found yourself struggling to explain how God can be both all-powerful and all-good?
- tried to explain the gospel to an unbelieving friend but couldn’t get much further than “ask Jesus into your heart”?
- avoided tough questions about your faith because it’s too much work, or you’re scared, or you just don’t want to know?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, theology has already proved itself essential to your life—you just didn’t have the words for it. All the situations I’ve framed demand that Christian theology provide an answer, and it does.

THEOLOGY: *the study of the nature of God and His truth*

However, theology doesn’t just provide intellectual satisfaction. It also provides *direction*. Like my friend

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noted, people of all religions are seeking answers. They are seeking God. The world's religions, and even the religion of self, whose followers we call religious "nones," are an attempt to secure purpose and identity, to root oneself in service of something.

C. S. Lewis called this attempt to find happiness and purpose the root of "all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy."¹

Most people want to be happy. The pursuit of happiness is not just a right written into the United States' Declaration of Independence—it's a desire of the human heart. We want to know who we are and where we're going, and we want to be at peace with our world. Therefore happiness is bound up in both purpose and identity.

These pursuits beget deeper theological questions: Who made humans? If God, what was His purpose in making them? What does that say about human identity? How does this change how we live? Like Lewis indicated, people are pursuing happiness apart from their Creator. Theology lays a foundation for answering the tough questions of these same people tired of the "long terrible story" hunting for a God-less happiness.

If you're a Christian, you hold the key to a *God-based* happiness. You hold knowledge that leads to peace and purpose because it leads to Christ. When your average Tuesday comes, will you be ready? Can you "give an answer . . . for the hope that you have . . . with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15)? Do you know what you believe and why you believe it?

If the answer is no, you're in the right place! I have spent the last six years teaching women how to own their faith, understand basic Christian doctrine, and grow closer to Jesus in the process. This book is the product of that work, and it is my joy to walk alongside you as you are equipped to not just know *about* God, but

know Him intimately, sweetly, and honestly through the study of His character.

The emphasis on intimacy is important here. Too often, studying theology turns the Person of God into the “theory of God.” We speculate about Him as if He were a specimen in a petri dish. We hypothesize and analyze and cease to *recognize* that the power of Christianity, the transforming element, is not just in philosophy and reason, though both are honored by our faith. No—Christianity is a personal *transformation*, one that cannot be forced into existence by knowledge alone.

Theology without intimacy is a hollow thing, neither relevant nor compelling. No unbelieving person wants it, and they shouldn’t, because it isn’t Christianity. Pursue theology to pursue God’s heart, and you will be surprised to find that doctrine leads to devotion. (If you find this improbable, consider the encouragement of C. S. Lewis again: “I believe that many who find that nothing happens when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden when they are working their way through a tough bit of theology.”²)

Let’s go back to that Virginia coffee shop. My friend didn’t become a Christian that day. In fact, as far as I know, she never did. The point of our conversation wasn’t to push her to a decision; it wasn’t for me to change her view. What happened that day was an example of how theology, when rightly understood and pursued, *directly applies to real life*. And if we define theology as the study of God and His truth, then every single Christian should be a theologian! Understanding what we believe and explaining it graciously does not guarantee that our family, friends, and coworkers will follow Jesus. But it equips us to have those conversations and introduce them to His heart.

To become “theologians,” we have to shed the academic overtones we’ve attached to the idea (certainly, there are truly academic theologians, but for the sake of my purpose here we will call them

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“scholars”). Before theology became an academic pursuit, it was the foundation for a living, active faith in Jesus—and it still is today. Faith is not just a feeling; it requires an engaged mind.

A few years ago I received an email from a young stay-at-home mother with children under the age of four. “At first, your encouragement to study theology felt really irrelevant to me,” she wrote. “But eventually I decided to begin. I feel like my faith is alive again. I feel challenged in ways I haven’t in years. Thank you for showing me that even a mom who will never go to seminary can know the Bible for herself.” Her message brought tears to my eyes. This young mom was realizing the fruit of an engaged Christian mind.

The idea that faith and reason, or intimacy and logic, are on two ends of the Christian spectrum (or are not found within the Christian spectrum at all) is not found in Scripture and is *definitely* not found in the history of the Christian church. The Bible is theology and reason unified, and it demands study and intellectual pursuit—not so we can prove ourselves or because God likes to play games, but because God made us *thinking people*. He imparted to us the gift of a reasonable mind, and He expects us to use it.

Christ does not require us to blindly believe. Faith is, after all, only as good as the thing we put our faith in. To believe in God we must first understand *who it is* we are trusting. Christianity is a reasoned faith, and this employment of the mind is how Christianity became a springboard for scientific, philosophical, and logical exploration.³

It used to be that religion and reason were not seen as opposites but as complements. Until the 1890s, philosophers were often trained as ministers and theologians, and theological seminaries were the center of philosophical thought.⁴ After the Protestant church broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s, the subsequent reformation-turned-church split led to many changes in the church landscape, many of which were necessary and good. Some of them encouraged the scientific and philosophical advancements we’ve

seen so far. But one of the long-term impacts of the Reformation was a rejection of church history, liturgy, and tradition. Over time, Christians became forgetful of their shared legacy. They became more and more individualistic and, in some denominations, humanistic. This was helpful to science but forgetful of Scripture.

Today many Christians follow a humanistic trend by separating what is spiritual from what is logical. They fail to combine the two, instead separating them into completely isolated pursuits. This is the influence of humanism, not a reflection of Scripture's teaching on the mind.

HUMANISM: *a worldview focused on the rational and material rather than the divine or supernatural.*

Every weekday when I was a kid, my mom gathered my siblings and me in the living room for our homeschool routine. As bread baked in the oven, filling the air with the scent of yeast and flour, we rehearsed poems, scientific facts, literary pursuits, and Bible verses. The verses my mom had us memorize are still with me today.

Maybe you memorized verses in Sunday school and got an award for most verses committed to memory (if so, I'm impressed!). One of the verses many of us know is Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (NKJV). The Gospels (all except John) record a story where Jesus talked about this command. A Jewish teacher of the law asked Jesus which command was the greatest.

The accounts differ a little on the details. In Matthew, Jesus' answer is recorded as, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). In Luke, Jesus asked the *teacher* to state the command and the teacher responded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and *with all your mind*" (Luke 10:27, emphasis added). In Mark, Jesus responded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and *with*

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all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30, emphasis added).

We may find it curious that Jesus added “with all your mind” to the original command. The Greek word used here is *dianoia*, which means understanding, comprehending, or desiring. To love God with our minds is to be loyal to the Lord with our attention, seeking to understand, comprehend, and desire Him.

I love that Jesus wants us to engage our minds with Him. He knows we desire to be challenged! But this doesn’t mean we have to spend our days wrestling with thousand-page commentaries from two hundred years ago (unless that’s your jam, like it is mine!). It means that clear teaching on the nature of God, the nature of sin, humanity, gender, biblical trustworthiness, and church is vital to the average Christian person. And as our culture becomes more post-Christian (the percentage of American adults who identify as “Christian” is down twelve points in the last decade⁵), apathy is not the answer. A biblical, historical, Christian theology is the key to discerning truth and sharing it with others in an understandable way.

If this feels intimidating, that’s okay. It’s one reason I wrote this book. If you’re new to Christ, or if you’ve been a Christian but were never encouraged to engage your mind *and* heart in your faith, this can feel like an uphill journey. I’m here to bridge the gap between your usual devotional books and academic theological tomes. As we journey together in this book, I want you to come away with

- an understanding of what the gospel really is and how it applies to life;
- confidence in your faith and worldview;
- tools to steward difficult questions and doubts; and
- a renewed desire to know God personally and intimately!

We won’t cover all the nuanced angles of each topic we discuss in the following pages, but you’ll get a general overview to begin

your study. And I hope, as you read, you'll have questions and ideas sparking in that beautiful brain of yours—the kinds of questions you can discuss with God in prayer, with friends over coffee, and with people at your church.

I hope I've convinced you that theology is not relegated to damp libraries and ancient books. It's as alive as the God who's at the center of it. It's all around you, every day, in the questions of your coworkers and the conversations with your cousin and the skepticism of your friend. It filters our inner dialogues and doubts. Its current runs through every political debate, every moral judgment, every new idea. Theology is essential because it touches every single area of life.

Are you ready? I hope so! Every woman is a theologian, including you.

A REASONED FAITH: THOMAS AQUINAS

Can the existence of God be established by reason, even in an unbelieving mind? Thomas Aquinas thought so. This medieval scholar believed reason and faith were two ways of knowing God's reality. Reason reveals God in the world, and faith reveals the unique answer to the world's problems: Christ. Aquinas fought for a faith made compatible with reason rather than competing with reason. He believed "reason had a divine right to feed upon facts," and that it is "the business of faith to digest the strong meat of the toughest and most practical of pagan philosophies."⁶ His work laid a foundation for the sciences and for future theological exploration.



Chapter 1

Bibliology: The Very Breath of God

THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

“Will you hang this for me?” I asked my husband, Josh. “Sure,” he replied. We’d been gifted a five-foot “ruler” to mark family height on the wall. It was one of those Hobby Lobby decor pieces thirty-year-old women like me tend to collect. Josh took the dark piece of wood, tucking his pencil behind his ear. The girls watched with saucer eyes, excited by the prospect of seeing their growth.

Minutes later the ruler was on the wall—but something about it was odd. Too high? Too low? Too far to the left? I couldn’t quite put a finger on it. *Probably just seeing things*, I shrugged.

We left the ruler on the wall for a few weeks; weeks became months. One day, as the snow fell and blustered around the farmhouse walls, our house was filled with people—people stuffed into the kitchen, stuffed with winter food.

“There is *no* way I’m this tall!” laughed one of our guests. She

backed up to the ruler, her husband measuring with his hand. At five-foot-two, she should have just crested the top; instead, the ruler said she was nearly six feet! The problem dawned on us, and the farmhouse guests laughed: we'd hung the ruler a foot too low. The girls, the guests—we all had grown twelve inches!

When we use a ruler incorrectly, the measurement will inevitably be off. My dad is a home builder. Can you imagine if his ruler was “off”? Entire houses would be unstable! This is dangerous in life, but what about in morality? What is the standard for determining good and evil? This age-old question leaps the confines of theology. Philosophers throughout the world have asked it. And for Christians, philosopher and layperson alike, the Bible is the standard of measure. It offers objective truth by which we judge right, wrong, good, and evil.

If the Bible has this much power, we should be asking the question, Where did it come from? We should also be asking, Why should I trust it? Even if you have never thought to ask those questions, many of your friends and loved ones are asking them!

BIBLIOLOGY: *the
theology of the Bible*

Bibliology is the theology of the Bible. We're starting here because all theology begins with the revealed Word of God as recorded in these sixty-six books.

In the front of your Bible, any Bible, the table of contents organizes the books of the Bible into two major sections: Old Testament and New Testament. The word *testament* is another word for *covenant*. The first thirty-nine books are part of the *old covenant* between God and Israel. These texts are sacred in both Judaism and Christianity and are divided into three major sections:

- *Torah*: the first five books, also called Pentateuch (meaning “The Five”)

- *Prophets*: the historical books (such as Judges and Kings) and prophetic literature (such as Isaiah and Ezekiel)
- *Writings*: poetic and proverbial books (such as Psalms and Ecclesiastes)

The New Testament, or *new covenant*, is made up of twenty-seven books of varied type:

- *Gospels*: the story of Jesus' life and ministry written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
- *History of the Early Church*: the Acts of the Apostles, which we often consider “part two” of Luke
- *Epistles*: letters such as Corinthians, Ephesians, First and Second Peter, and James
- *Apocalyptic literature*: Revelation

I must confess I often take the Bible for granted. It sits on my shelf or open in my lap, and I don't stop to wonder how it got there. Many of us never consider how these books got put together. After all, there are sixty-six books, written by over a dozen different authors, over the course of three thousand years. How did they find each other? Did the Bible drop out of the sky, like an asteroid of thin pages and red-lettered words? It didn't—and that's great news because we couldn't trust it if it did!

The *historicity* of the Bible (its grounding in historical events, places, and people) gives credence to the story it tells.

That large wall ruler still hangs in our kitchen, now adjusted to the correct height. Last Sunday my daughter Adeline sat next to it, wearing tights and pigtails as she unwound string from her Sunday school craft. It was a telephone with two cups and a piece of string, surprisingly intact after being stretched across a church lobby between seven-year-old ears. She held it up eagerly, “Try it, Mom!” and goaded Josh and me into making a call. Stretched tight

across the kitchen, whispering messages down the line, she strained to hear our words.

“I love you,” I said.

“WHAT WAS THAT?” she yelled in reply. “I LUMP YOU?”

While our cup-and-string telephone conversations might be silly, some think the Bible was compiled by a similar method. God whispered vaguely into a prophet’s ear, and the prophet made faulty attempts to record it: “What was that, God? ‘Thou shalt not murmur’? Oh, *MURDER!* Got it.”

But the Bible is not a cryptic gathering of vague spiritual ideas from random ancient men; nor is it a mystical book appearing, already compiled, into the hands of a single prophet. Terry Noble called it a two-part epic telling the redemptive plan of God.¹ W. A. Criswell said the story of salvation is a scarlet thread running from Genesis to Revelation.² Both scholars are saying the same thing: the Bible is one cohesive story told by many different people over many different centuries.

Can the Bible Be Trusted?

I was eighteen, almost out of high school, when one of my friends began exploring atheism. I had a small crush on him and wanted fodder for conversation, so I started reading some famous atheists—Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, Nietzsche.

I came away from those books with a sober realization: I needed to know why the Bible was worthy to be trusted. If I didn’t, my Christianity had no leg to stand on. What I didn’t have words for at the time was *the importance of bibliology*. My exposure to atheism revealed a scary truth, one that sunk in my heart like a stone: I didn’t really *have* a bibliology. I just believed the Bible because it was the Word of God. I had failed to ask the question, *How* did it become the Word of God, and why do I believe that it is?

This Word we trust and turn to for spiritual guidance was compiled slowly over time. This surprises some of us—and even bothers us! Getting the Bible all at once would have been simpler. That’s how we modern Christians received it. Many of us are given our first Bible at baptism or in Sunday school. Some people get theirs in prison or at church or at a secondhand store. One ministry leader I know was a Christian-curious ER doctor who stole a Bible from his own hospital waiting room! In all these situations, the reader is getting a complete, canonized, compiled Bible. This is a privilege, but it’s not how the Bible has always existed.

Imagine the Bible as the epic story it is. It started thousands of years ago, in cultures different from ours, revealing the character of God in millennia. The story God revealed in these ancient cultures is still being told by the church today! While getting the Bible as one piece, magically from heaven, seems more straightforward, the Bible’s progressive development makes it much more trustworthy. It reveals that God

- shows Himself in history to real people, in real places, under real circumstances similar to ours today (albeit different historical context);
- has a plan for humanity and wishes to continue working with us and through us;
- uses restraint in how much of Himself He reveals at one time, out of mercy for our human understanding;
- respects cultural context; and
- is doing something far greater than we can imagine.

In contrast, there are some cults and religions whose sacred books are given all at once to a single prophet. Such revelation lacks more than one witness (a fundamental biblical value), accountability to community, and a standard of measure. In contrast, the Bible’s books were given to multiple prophets, apostles, and disciples. They

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were written in different eras but contain content that consistently upholds who God is and what He is doing in the world. God's character is the ultimate measure of "canon."

CANON: *a collection of books able to tell us who God is and how we should live in relationship to Him*

Picture my ruler again, hanging on the kitchen wall. Before the ruler was the *kanon*. *Kanon* is the Greek word for "reed" (yes, the kind in which baby Moses was found). Coincidentally, the reed referenced by this Greek word grows in Egypt. In the ancient world, these reeds were cut, dried, and used as a standard of measure.

Over time the term *kanon* came to represent a general standard of measure and morphed into the word *canon*, which we use today to mean "a rule . . . by which something is judged" and "an authoritative list of books accepted as Holy Scripture."³

How Did the Bible Come to Be?

The books in our Bible today are there because the early church and its leadership judged them as 1) historically trustworthy, 2) doctrinally consistent, and 3) connected to eyewitnesses. The process of choosing what books can be treated as Scripture is called *canonization*.

The first five books of the Bible are called Torah, or Pentateuch. Tradition says Moses wrote these books with some editing by Joshua after Moses died. It is more likely that Moses wrote portions, and the rest was edited and compiled closer to the fifth or sixth century BC. It is likely that someone may have done edits because Moses' death is recorded in the text, and also because of brief insertions such as "Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3).⁴ (Kudos to Moses if he penned with such self-confidence, but scholars believe Joshua

or a scribe added this later.) The Torah is the centerpiece of Jewish theology, and it is Torah Jesus based his teaching on. Almost all the debates Jesus had with the religious leaders had to do with Torah law.

The Torah was quickly canonized by the Israelites, deemed authoritative for spiritual guidance and civil law. These books are ancient, and we often need help to understand them, but understanding them is vital to the rest of the story!

The next group of books to be added to the Bible—still before Christ—were the prophetic books and the “writings,” such as Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. These books are the outworking of Moses’ law. We see songs about God’s character, wisdom for following God’s law, and prophecies about what will happen if God’s people depart from His ways.⁵

The complete Old Testament, made up of thirty-nine historical, legal, prophetic, and poetic texts, was quickly received by the Jewish people and the non-Jewish people residing with them. The Old Testament was a guide for the spiritual life of believers before Jesus came to earth. The *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* says this directly: “As each book of the Old Testament was written, its authority as the revealed Word of God evoked the immediate embracing of it as sacred and binding.”⁶

Between the Old and New Testaments was a four-hundred-year span of time that scholars often call “the silent period.” During these years the Jews were persecuted and the Maccabean rebellion took place (this is celebrated today through the festival of Hanukkah). This silent period ended with the birth of Jesus, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Two of the four Gospels, Matthew and Luke, record this momentous event. While all four Gospels record Jesus’ life and ministry, each shares a different perspective on what He did and said.

Before the first century concluded, congregations were referring to these eyewitness texts as authoritative. Even earlier, Peter referred

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to Paul's letters as Scripture (2 Peter 3:15–16) and Paul cited Luke's gospel as Scripture (1 Timothy 5:18). The gospels and the letters of our New Testament were circulated to groups of Christians around the Middle East and Asia for encouragement and instruction. By the third and fourth centuries AD, lists of canonical books could be found confirming a Bible almost identical to ours today.

Knowing how quickly the Bible was received, revered, and rooted in historical truth helps us understand why Christians seek it for guidance on life and behavior. We aren't the first people to do this; we have an "ancestry of faith" in the Word of God! The Bible was written for all people in all times. However, knowing how it was compiled is only the first step in appreciating its authority. The next step involves the nature of the writing itself: the Bible as literature.

What Are the Literary Genres in the Bible?

Before studying religion at a liberal arts university, I attended community college in my hometown. Community college night classes come in all shapes and sizes—I took many, each one its own grab bag of opinions and characters. An English class I took fell during a presidential election and our group was eager to discuss it, perhaps more than the stories we were supposed to read. The class tables were set around the room in a giant square as if we were about to do a script reading for an upcoming television series. There was no hiding from our professor, who stood in the middle, as we read aloud strange, slightly off-color stories from a *Norton's Anthology* that weighed twenty pounds.

GENRE: *a type of
literary composition*

I learned two things in that class: when to keep my opinion to myself, and that when it comes to literature, *genre matters*.

As foreign as it may seem to classify it this way, the Bible is literature. Secular scholars study it as such, but the Christian reverence for Scripture can make us forgetful of what it is we're reading. Identifying genre is helpful when drawing out interpretation. If we want to interpret the Bible rightly and understand its authority, we have to take note of the genre we're reading.

If I handed you a book and told you it was a mystery, you'd be pretty annoyed on page seventy-five when you discovered, after much wasted time, that I'd *actually* handed you a sappy romance. Your expectation was set! You were looking for the plot, the case, the conflict. The *genre* of the book had already told your brain what to look for in the text. We can use this to our advantage when studying the Bible.

Genre guides our understanding of not only the author's intent but also how the text's message impacts our life today. A healthy bibliology begins with healthy literacy. Being able to see the full range of meaning intended by the biblical writers helps us accurately apply the Bible to life.

Here are some ways to identify genre and read it well:

- **HISTORY:** Historical narrative—like Joshua, Judges, Kings, Chronicles, Samuel, and Acts—is written to tell a story. It is full of places and people important to the story. These records weren't meant to be immediately moralized like Aesop's fables; they were intended to record the history of God's interactions with people on earth. We best discern the theological principles in these passages when we don't look for immediate application but instead note the setting, context, people, and actions of God.
- **LAW:** Books like Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy contain

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a mixture of legal code and historical narrative. These are the books we tend to struggle with the most. They seem dry, boring, and irrelevant to us—but they aren't! The books of law show us how much God wanted humans to be able to live with Him. He wanted it so much, He created a law to make communion with Himself possible. God chose to use a specific nation and moral code to set apart a people in the world as a “city on a hill,” a template for what the church would be thousands of years later.

- In these books, take note of the moral themes and expectations that appear most often: love God, honor others, and so on. Scholars divide biblical law into three types: civil, ceremonial, and moral. Civil laws have to do with the governance of Israel as a nation ruled by God. Ceremonial laws relate to temple or tabernacle worship. Moral laws are summed up in the Ten Commandments and expressed in more detail through Leviticus and Deuteronomy. While we no longer observe the civil laws because we do not live in ancient Israel, and the ceremonial laws apply to Jewish Christians but not to Gentiles, the moral laws are reaffirmed in the New Testament and apply to all of us today.
- **PROPHECY:** The prophetic books are usually divided into two sections: the major prophets (Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah) and the minor prophets (Amos, Obadiah, Hosea, etc.). Major and minor don't indicate more or less importance, rather the size of the books themselves. Major prophetic books are significantly longer than minor prophetic books. These prophetic books should be read alongside the historical narrative of Kings and Chronicles, since much of what happens in them coincides with the events recorded there. Prophetic books are often repetitive because the prophets were trying to make a point and warn their society about the consequences of sin. Some prophetic

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books sound quite harsh until you understand what Israel was doing: idol worship, child sacrifice, sexual promiscuity, and other pagan cultural practices.

- **GOSPEL:** The Gospels are divided into the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and John. The Synoptics were written as testimonies of Jesus' life and ministry, and they're called Synoptics because they're similar to one another in narrative. John, however, was written specifically for evangelism and to give further proof of Jesus' divinity. All four of the Gospels quote extensively from the Old Testament, both in Jesus' direct quotes and as proof of how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.
- **EPISTLE:** Epistles are letters, often written to specific churches and circulated throughout a city or province for the edification of the Christian population there. The epistles in the Bible are named either after the author (i.e., James, 1 Peter) or after the recipient (for example, Colossians, Philippians, Corinthians). Because the letters were written to specific people, it is helpful in our understanding to look up information about those groups before reading the letter sent to them. The principles shared in the letters are universal, but their specific context helps us understand the author's intent.
- **APOCALYPTIC:** Apocalyptic literature is a little wild. We see it in Revelation and also in parts of Daniel. These books utilize a wide range of imagery to depict a spiritual point. Poetry, prophecy, and allegory all play a part. Much of what we see in this type of literature is not meant to be taken at face value; for instance, we should not assume that the "locusts with tails like horses" in Revelation will actually be locusts with hairy tails! Rather, it's likely an image to represent the evil of the creature. Read apocalyptic literature looking for the big picture and noting any part that is connected to another book of the Bible.

Who Told the Authors to Write the Bible?

This brings us to the question of the biblical writers themselves. How did they know to write all of this down? Certainly, some books recount that God told them to write the book (like Isaiah and Revelation). But many others don't indicate such instructions. Who told the authors what to write, and why do we think it was God?

To answer these questions we use three *i* words associated with bibliology. These words also give us theological glasses through which to view the Bible. The nature of these three words has been debated by scholars over the course of church history. Most conservative scholars (those who stay close to the original text and traditional interpretation) adhere to these words in some way. They are *inspiration*, *inerrancy*, and *infallibility*.

Inspiration

Sometimes I coach writers, and when I do, I teach them not to rely on "inspiration" for when and how to write. Many writers use the word *inspiration* to mean "a feeling or urge to write" or "a bright idea." Writers who depend on feeling have a hard time being consistent in the long run. Inspiration of that kind is fleeting.

However, when we talk about the Bible being "inspired," we're not referring to a passing emotion or a prophet's bright idea. The biblical writers didn't wake up one day after some bad pizza and think, "You know, I think I heard God last night. I'm gonna write a book about it." (Interesting as such a book might have been!) Neither is inspiration New Age "automatic writing," where a prophet taps into God's Spirit and writes whatever comes to him in a trance. Yes, prophets had visions and recorded them, but they were not required to empty their minds or hold a seance with a spirit to do so.

Scriptural *inspiration* means the Bible was initiated by God, breathed out by His Spirit through human agents in a specific

historical context. That's powerful! It means that the things recorded about God's interactions with humanity have authority and weight. The inspiration and initiation of God is visible in almost every book of the Bible. In the English Standard Version, the phrase "thus says the Lord" occurs 417 times. "The Lord said" occurs 275 times.⁷ God's initiation and interaction with His Word is evidenced in the text.

And yet inspiration is a little more complicated than this.

Scholars define two types of inspiration: *verbal* and *plenary*.

- Verbal inspiration means that every single word of the Bible (not just its concepts) was directly inspired by God Himself and was communicated from God to people.
- Plenary inspiration means that the whole Bible (from lengthy genealogies to John 3:16) carries God's authority. Jesus affirmed this truth in Luke 16:17 when He said, "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter in the law to drop out" (HCSB).

Together this creates a micro-macro inspiration. The Bible came from God, period. But why? Or how?

In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Paul said, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (ESV). This tells us the essential nature of Scripture for spiritual maturity and growth. We cannot be competent and equipped for every good work apart from the Word of God. If we want to be mature Christians, then we need to be in the Word.

But why would the Word of God change us? Paul said it is because it's breathed out by God. The phrase "breathed out" has to do with the Holy Spirit because the word for Holy Spirit means "breath." The very Spirit of God inspired these words and made

them profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness—in other words, for growing people up in what is good.

As if this weren't enough, Peter said something similar in 2 Peter 1:21: "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (ESV). Here's another founding father of our faith, Peter, writing the exact same thing as Paul, declaring that all of Scripture is inspired by God, led by the Holy Spirit, and only *written* by men. They didn't do this by their own will; it was because of God's inspiration. God was working through the instrument of human personality, and though God worked through historical context and even the authors' writing styles, the inspiration to write came from the Lord.

The biblical authors stated outright that the words they shared were from God (for example, Exodus 17:14, Jeremiah 1:9, Ezekiel 1:3, Hosea 1:1). Jesus did too! He affirmed the authority of the Old Testament (the Bible of His day) by quoting it liberally in response to spiritual questions, including those that questioned His deity and authority (Matthew 19:4–5; Mark 12:36).

Inerrancy

Inerrancy is a word used to say that the Bible is not in error. This means Scripture makes good on its claims; it achieves what the authors were aiming for. This doesn't mean there's never a copyediting error or a discrepancy between two documents (the Bible was hand-copied until the invention of the printing press), but none of those discrepancies changed the big-picture story, the gospel message, or the doctrine. They were simply copy errors or slight differences in the documents that did not impact the theological reading.

As one scholar has noted,

The only error-free documents were the originals. While no one

has ever denied that mistakes can be found in the various copies that have been made, this fact has nothing to do with the original. Furthermore, the closer we get to the original wording of the text, we find that the errors become less and less . . . The variant readings that do exist do not threaten any doctrine of Scripture, or any command that God gives to believers . . . The sense of any passage can be gathered from the immediate context—the variants in the manuscripts do not affect the overall content.⁸

The Bible we have today was handed down with incredible accuracy, especially given the times in which it was translated and transmitted. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947, they proved that the Old Testament had been copied consistently, with almost zero changes, for thousands of years. A scroll of Isaiah from among the Dead Sea Scrolls (dated about 100 BC) agreed almost to the letter with the Masoretic texts from a thousand years later.

Infallibility

Inerrancy and *infallibility* might sound like trendy baby names for twin girls, but as we've seen, the meaning is a little deeper than that. *Inerrancy* means "without error"; *infallibility* means "unable to deceive." When we use the word *infallible* for the Bible, we are saying that nothing in the text is able to deceive us or lead us away from God Himself. Certainly, *teachers* may misinterpret these texts and lead people astray, but the Word accurately taught and understood will never do so.

This is why the New Testament writers were so vehement against false teaching (2 Timothy 4; Acts 20; 2 Peter 3; 1 John 4). It's also why we need to check others' teaching *against* Scripture, like the Bereans were commended for in Acts 17:11, when they compared Paul and Silas' teaching to the Old Testament to "see if these things were so" (ESV). When we rightly understand the Bible, it will never

deceive us or lead us away from the path of life. These words will always direct us *toward* it.

We can think of the three *i*'s of the Bible as *eyes*. They give us a view of truth. The lenses of inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility leads us to the conclusion scholars have held for thousands of years: we can trust the Bible's historical accuracy and spiritual authority. And because this is true, we can allow it to lead our lives. This doesn't mean we interpret every passage at face value, since the authors sometimes used symbolism to express concepts about God. But it does require respect for the Bible's authority and its ability to guide our life decisions.

Does the Bible Really Get to Tell Me How to Live?

Let's revisit the children's height ruler hanging on my farmhouse wall. Since the things it measured weren't essential to life, it did no harm to measure incorrectly. Adeline thought she was a foot taller than she was for a few months, but no one was set on a path of destruction because of it!

However, without an objective, authoritative source of truth—a *kanon* by which to measure what is right and wrong—much harm *is* accomplished. The “ruler” becomes whatever we feel is most important: our emotions, our sexual desires, our political ideals. The things that should be *informed by* objective truth instead become the measure of truth itself. The result is a multiplicity of “kanons” that differ wildly from person to person.

We see this happen in the mantras “find your truth” and “live your truth.” Our culture considers truth to be subjective. Truth is whatever you want it to be.

We know such an idea could not survive scientific testing. Certain things must be or not be; they can't be redefined from person to person. But what about morality? Can morality be subjective?

The Bible says no. On issues of life, sex, spirituality, and relationships, the Bible speaks boldly for an ethic of honor and love. And because Scripture is historical, spiritual, and able to guide into all life, we can trust its authority.

As theologian John Stott said, “We must allow the Word of God to confront us, to disturb our security, to undermine our complacency and to overthrow our patterns of thought and behavior.”⁹ Or to put it in the plainer language of writer Andrena Sawyer, “We can’t weaponize Scripture when it defends our behavior and reject it when it convicts us.”¹⁰

Scripture is not just meant for other people. It is not to be used just for pointing out sin in others; it is for the refining of our own character. The authority of the Bible changes *us* before it changes the world. If we follow Jesus, we must allow the words Jesus inspired to change, convict, and transform us. The Bible’s impact on *us* has priority over the Bible’s impact on others.

This does not mean everyone will affirm the Bible’s truth. Some people will reject the biblical narrative and fall into unbelief. This unbelief can take three forms: emotional, rational, and volitional. Emotional unbelief has to do with our experiences: “I was hurt by the church, so I don’t trust the Bible.” Rational unbelief has to do with evidence: “I don’t see enough historical evidence to trust the Bible.” Volitional unbelief is a willful rejection of the Bible, when someone remains unconvinced by experience or evidence.

The emotional and rational responses can sometimes be worked through with gentle discussions and quality resources. Occasionally, we can reach people who’ve been hurt by the church or are questioning the Bible with a kind and truthful explanation. But those who give in to volitional unbelief are like the people described in Ephesians 4:18: “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (ESV). Hardness of heart cannot be broken with more facts or testimonies. Only the Lord Himself, who

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longs for all people to know Him through His Word, can reach the ones set on rejecting Him.

Isn't that the whole point of Scripture? It's a story of the initiating, loving, redeeming God who chases down the imperfect and rebellious, even when He knows they'll reject His truth. He does not wish for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). The Word of God is the gospel of Christ, which is "the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16). The authoritative beauty of the Bible will not return void.

As the Lord says in Isaiah 55:11, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." The Bible has authority and power because God has authority and power.

Though written in a distant time, the Bible's truths are relevant for us today. God was willing to enter into the raw, human experience in an ancient culture to reveal His love. He was willing to record Himself within the arc of human darkness and shame, to reveal that He is not afraid of sin or Satan but has come to redeem and restore regardless of culture or age. The Bible is the timeless story of God's reaching, holding, never-giving-up love, and it's a story we get to participate in. The more we celebrate and embrace the Word of God, the better we know the God who breathed it. The Bible is the foundation of our theology, our worship, and our experience of Christ. It's hard to let something that valuable gather dust on the shelf!

If we want to become theologians, we have to start where theologians begin: the Word of God. Through this breathed-out Word our own lungs are filled with air, empowering us to live the Christian life God desires. The Word is life, lamp, and light (Psalm 119:105). The Bible is the foundation of our Christianity, and the reason C. S. Lewis could say in his essay *The Weight of Glory*, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else."¹¹



By what light do we see the world? By what ruler, what *kanon*, do we measure truth? For us, there is one answer: the Word of God.

CHAPTERS AND VERSE DIVISIONS

The Bible did not come to us initially as a single compiled document or with the structure of chapters and verses. The original texts were written on scrolls—the Old Testament in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. In the 1200s, Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton added chapter numbers to the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible. Three centuries later in the 1550s, a monk named Robertus Stephanus added verses to his Greek New Testament. We still use this model of chapters and verses today.

MARCION

DID YOU KNOW? The early church spent a lot of time hammering out the essential doctrines of Christianity. One of those doctrines had to do with bibliology: What books do we trust to shape our view of God? This topic became urgent to the church when a wealthy ship owner's son, Marcion, became a pastor and created his own "canon."

Marcion was raised on Scripture, both Old and New Testament. But he didn't like the Old Testament God; he believed the Old Testament presented a "lesser deity" than Jesus. After editing, Marcion's canon consisted of the gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's letters. This biblical hack job put the church into overdrive. Marcion was excommunicated (removed from church fellowship), but rather than repent, he took his edited Bible and evangelized for a "Christ" disconnected from history and Scripture.

Sadly, Marcion is not an isolated example. The same pattern emerges today: the Bible is edited to fit what teachers find suited to



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their own worldviews and fleshly desires. Like the church in the second century, we need to know why both the Old and New Testaments are essential to Christianity and how to answer the questions of skeptics.

Chapter 2

Theology: A Loving and Holy Father

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

I came to Christ because of pornography. At twelve I was exposed to an erotica novel at a garage sale. Erotica novels are romance novels with sexually explicit scenes; they're essentially pornography in book form. The book had no cover and, thinking it might be a *Boxcar Children* or *Nancy Drew*, I picked it up. I was intrigued, then ashamed, and I threw the book away from me. But I was also curious.

The shame drove my curiosity into secrecy, and as I continued consuming the novels, I harbored my struggle for years. Over the next three years, I found myself confused, angry, and helpless in my sin and shame. I didn't know where to turn, I was too embarrassed to tell my parents, and I didn't want anyone in my friend group to know my situation. While I wouldn't choose to relive that lonely season, it drove me to the one Person I knew I could trust: Christ.

Desperate for an answer, I began to pray. I began to ask

questions: *Does God really love me? What does it mean that Jesus died for my sins? How could God tolerate me when I keep exposing myself to this trash?* Up to that point I had been hardened to the things of God. I had no interest in worship at church, I was bored by sermons, and I didn't have any desire to honor my parents or love my siblings. I was a challenging child and a little bit proud of it. But this new realization of my helplessness drove me to seek an answer.

I came to Christ in the back ten acres of our family farm, alone at sunset, writing in a journal bedecked with sunflowers. Jesus met me there, and my heart changed. But my life didn't—at least not right away.

My struggle with erotica would be an ongoing battle for the next decade. But underneath that struggle was something deeper, the real reason for my sexual stronghold. It actually had less to do with sex and a lot to do with my view of God. I viewed God as a judge: righteous, just, too holy for sin, offering Christ to save me but doing so with some reluctance. I believed God *loved* me (John 3:16!) but I did not believe God *liked* me. He tolerated me. He was a distant and difficult Father, unlike even my earthly father—a good man—and I preferred to keep my distance from Him. I battled my sin, never feeling as though I was forgiven, never truly gaining victory, and never feeling at rest in the affection of God.

If you're like most Christians, you probably resonate with some part of my story. Perhaps not the pornography portion, but maybe the shame portion. Or the reluctance to accept God's love. Or the disbelief in His kindness. But it's important to know that our theology of God the Father affects how we interact with all the other "ologies" of Christianity. After all, if God isn't kind, if He is an intolerant and reluctant Father, then we are never truly safe in our attachment to Him.

The Bible upends these assumptions. The God of the Old Testament is the same as Jesus in the New, and the closer we study it, the more apparent this becomes. As we explore the character

of God, we find Him far kinder, greater, and gentler than we ever imagined.

Let God Define Himself

To truly embrace God's character, we have to destroy the assumptions we make about who He is—and we all have assumptions. It's amazing how we project our own experiences or unanswered prayers back onto God. While some of this is to be expected (we're human!), we must be honest enough to check these assumptions against what Scripture, in its context, says about God.

We read Old Testament passages through the Western bias of a culture enamored with love and unacquainted with true justice. Ancient Middle Eastern culture was built not on feelings of love but on structures of honor and shame; family honor, respect for elders, and integrity held the utmost importance. Our cultural differences cause us to struggle to form an accurate picture of the God of Israel. We have no framework for Him.

Fortunately for us, the Bible gives us a framework if we take the time to understand it!

The God of the Old Testament is often accused of being vindictive, wrathful, violent, and unloving. In contrast, many people point to Jesus as loving, kind, nonviolent, and accepting. The two are presented as oppositional forces, when in fact they are two sides of the same coin. Jesus is and was God. God sent and is one with Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the very essence of Christ given for our growth. We'll talk more about the Trinity specifically in a moment, but it's important not to splice apart these Persons of God based on our own feelings about love and wrath.

Instead, we should be considering the following questions:

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- Why did God command firm judgments for sin in the Old Testament law?
- Why did God send Jesus?
- What did Jesus say about God?

We must deal in the revealed Word of God, not just our feelings about that Word. When we take the time to wrestle with these texts and let them teach us about who the Father is, we come away far more secure in His love for us.

There is so much that could be said—and has been said—about God. The theology of God the Father fills entire books and systematic theologies. Here we're going to focus on some of the most evident truths found in Scripture and the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. We'll see these principles emerge in other "ologies" later as well! Let's start with one of the more complicated but most fought-for doctrines of the church: the Trinity.

God Is Trinity

Every Saint Patrick's Day parents attempt to teach the Trinity with strained analogies to three-leafed clovers. When it's not St. Paddy's, we use analogies to water, describing it as one substance, able to present itself in three ways: liquid, solid, or gas. But any analogy we use to describe the Trinity will fall short. The Trinity is a truly *mystical*, spiritual doctrine; it's hard to explain and sometimes hard to understand. And yet our early church fathers considered it so important that they fought for it in books, letters, and councils over hundreds of years.

Many people struggle with the idea of Trinity. Some struggle to understand how three *Persons* of God isn't the same as *three gods*. The unique personhood of Father, Son, and Spirit simply means they are distinct. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit,

the Spirit is not the Father, and so on. In the Bible, the Father sent Jesus into the world and Jesus left the Spirit with the church. For this to occur, they cannot be the same Person. Some scholars summarize this difference by saying each member of the Trinity has a distinct center of consciousness. This is how Christianity can be a monotheistic religion (a religion with one god), and yet we talk about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit as individual entities or persons. If your mind spins a little, that's understandable; this is one of the most essential yet complicated doctrines of our faith.

In his book *Delighting in the Trinity*, theologian Michael Reeves outlines the importance of God's triune nature, saying, "I could believe in the death of a man called Jesus, I could believe in his bodily resurrection, I could even believe in a salvation by grace alone; but if I do not believe in this God, then, quite simply, I am not a Christian. And so, because the Christian God is triune, the Trinity is the governing center of all Christian belief."¹

This is a bold statement. But it gets to be bold because it's true. If God is triune (three in One), then everything we know about Him and every truth we hold points back to this three-in-one nature. We can't rightly understand Jesus' life, death, or ministry apart from the Father who sent Him or the Spirit He left behind. We can't understand Christian life today, led by the Spirit, without Jesus' atoning sacrifice, and we can't understand the point of any of it without the God revealed in the Old Testament books. In a sense, the Trinity traps us into the truth. Without the Trinity, there is no Christianity, and there is no Christianity if God is not triune.

Inevitably this leaves us with questions. If God is not three separate gods, nor a cosmic "shape shifter" moving between godlike personalities, how do we understand Him? The simplest way to describe the doctrine of Trinity is that God is one, existing in three Persons; He is equal, eternal, and distinct, yet unified in Himself. At the risk of falling short with yet another analogy, one might describe the Godhead like a human being who is at the same time daughter,

sister, and mother. None of these roles make her any less human in essence. She is three, yet she is one. However, this analogy falls flat as well since those three “roles” aren’t distinct Persons like the Father, Spirit, and Son, but it might give us a slightly clearer picture of what Scripture describes. Father John Behr says the Father, Son, and Spirit “are the same or one in essence” yet distinct and personal.²

The Trinity can be a divisive doctrine. It is the doctrine that sets us apart from Islam, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Each of these affirm God and Jesus in some capacity, but all of them deny the Trinity. The trinitarian doctrine drove the church to develop the Apostles’ Creed and later on the Nicene Creed, which set in stone a set of beliefs the apostles taught and the early church affirmed.

Before we move on to some other truths about God the Father, we must ask, What’s the real-life impact of the Trinity? It actually has a lot to do with God’s love. In other monotheistic religions, the main “man upstairs” is a solitary being. He is, as Michael Reeves says, “an inevitably self-centered being.”³

Completely solitary gods create people out of a desire for servants or slaves or sexual partners, not out of a desire to truly love. But the Christian God is different. This God is One, but He is expressed in Three, and these Three all have fellowship in the One. They are a *community* of holy love. And from this community of holy love pours out *love in community*. God created humanity. He didn’t create a single human but two, and from those two He fully expected a fruitful and multiplied world. Why? So He could dwell with them and be their God (Exodus 29:45).

The community of the Trinity created the community of humanity, which was intended to commune in unity: God and human, forever. Sin ruined this intention, but in the final restoration God’s original goal will be achieved. The triune God is a communal God, a loving God, and He can be no other kind.

God Is Love

God is love because God is Trinity. This leads us to explore God's love, which is perhaps His most monopolized and misinterpreted attribute. What does it mean that God *is* love (1 John 4:8)? Here's how John described it:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7–11 ESV)

John's passage teaches us three things about God's love: love is God's essence (v. 8), God's love is sacrificial and self-giving (vv. 9–10), and God's love is transforming—those who experience it want to give love to others (v. 11).

This definition of love diverges from our culture's ideals. To love someone today can mean a range of things, including but not limited to endorsement, affirmation, unquestioning support, and attention. If you don't affirm the choices someone makes—no matter how damaging or unwise—you're deemed "unloving." But how does this align with love as God defines it?

The love of Christ is self-giving and sacrificial. It's also wise. God's love is not in opposition to attributes like holiness and righteousness; it is *complementary* to them. In other words, these are not two poles on a globe, but two sides of the same coin. You can't have love without justice and truth, and you can't have true justice without love.

When we as a modern culture moved ourselves away from God, we separated ourselves from both justice and love. Our justice is polluted by selfish opinions and lack of consideration for others; our love is diluted by the mistaken idea that affection equals endorsement. The Christian God upends these assumptions. His love will not be manipulated or separated from truth, and yet it is this truthful, faithful, *hesed* love (a “completely undeserved kindness and generosity”⁴) that chases us down and seeks us in our sin: “In Jesus, God has taken the initiative to seek out the sinner, to bring the lost into the blessing of his reign. He was, in short, the seeking God.”⁵

Jesus proved that God’s heart, holy as it is, is not to separate from the sinner but to invite the sinner to experience the Father’s love. Of course, humans may choose to reject that love, and by doing so they embrace separation. That choice has always been an option. But Jesus revealed God’s seeking, loving heart to humanity by entering into a relationship with people who needed the transformative love of God. This exposure to the Father’s heart changed them—and it changes us.

It changed me.

In the midst of my addiction to erotic fiction, I rode a pendulum between repentance and fear. I repented of my sin because I knew it was wrong. I was objectifying the people in these stories, objectifying myself, and objectifying my sexuality. I was filling my mind with the opposite of what is pure, noble, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). But my motivation for repentance wasn’t the love of God, at least not in those early years. My motivation was fear. I repented because I was afraid of God, afraid of sin, and afraid of what might happen if I lived there. In a way I think that was a healthy fear. Yes, we should recognize the consequences of sin and take them seriously. However, in Scripture such fear is always tempered by the open arms of God. But I didn’t see His arms as open; I saw them as crossed.

I believed this judging God saw my sin, and I felt shamefully

exposed. At seventeen, a few years after I came to Christ and five years into the addiction, I read a book about God's love. The sun rose, a switch flipped, and I understood why I continued to repeat the same patterns over and over. *I did not trust God's love.* My repentance was genuine, but because I never felt truly attached to God, secure in His love for me and His grace over my sin, I returned to what felt safe: my sin. Of course, it wasn't safe—it was damaging—but the familiarity deceived me. I was so unfamiliar with the affection of God that I ran to the very thing destroying my heart.

The love of God is the glue of Scripture. It's the binding of the theological truths we study. The Christian God is distinct because He is, in every part of His being, love. Love is *Him*. There is no love in this world that can exist apart from Him. Every human love is an echo of the original *hesed*, the faithful, seeking love, brave enough to redeem the darkest sinner you know—even if that sinner is you.

“We have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16 ESV).

We know God's love. But do we believe it? Until we do, we can't live in it. Abiding comes from believing. God's love is real, and it is *for you*. “For God so loved the world [you] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever [you] believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Eternal life is not just beyond death. It's real life *now*. It's real life free from addiction and dependency and anger and bitterness. It's real life knowing and believing God's love is *for you*, not just for everyone else.

God Is Holy

The Hebrew word for *holy* means “separate” or “set apart.”⁶ God is utterly unlike us; He is perfect, sinless, and completely good. His

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holiness is the guarantor of His love! Because God is so perfectly holy, we can trust that His love is unstained by self-interest. This is one reason God's love and holiness can't be pitted against each other but must instead be viewed as one complementary unit, a symbiotic relationship of love and purity.

God's holiness is a major theme in the Bible. God affirmed His holiness to Israel. Jesus affirmed God's holiness in His ministry. The apostles affirmed God's holiness to the church.

- “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” (Exodus 15:11 ESV)
- “Thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.’” (Isaiah 57:15 ESV)
- “God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.” (1 Thessalonians 4:7 ESV)
- “It is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:16 ESV)

Because God is holy, we, His children, are expected to be holy. All moral behavior is rooted in the character of a holy and righteous God. When we think about God's moral law—expressed in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) and again in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5)—we don't treat these things as inconveniences. We see them as just and loving. No one wants to endorse murder, envy, and robbery, at least no one with an awakened conscience. And yet when we judge God as “angry” or “wrathful” for His holiness, we're undermining the foundation for all moral behavior. God should be wrathful against murder. He should be angry when people envy and

steal and wound other image bearers. God is wrathful against sin because God is *love*, and that love is perfectly holy in all its ways.

This is how theologian R. C. Sproul described sin against the love of God:

Sin is cosmic treason. Sin is treason against a perfectly pure Sovereign. It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the One to whom we owe everything, to the One who has given us life itself. Have you ever considered the deeper implications of the slightest sin, of the most minute peccadillo? What are we saying to our Creator when we disobey Him at the slightest point? We are saying no to the righteousness of God. We are saying, “God, Your law is not good. My judgment is better than Yours. Your authority does not apply to me. I am above and beyond Your jurisdiction. I have the right to do what I want to do, not what You command me to do.”⁷

The human understanding of holiness is tainted by our own tendency toward self-interest. Unless we are daily exposed to the true nature of God, we are prone to make allowances for our own pet sins. We may try to downplay God’s holiness, failing to recognize how doing so undermines every objective statement we make. We can make no moral judgments if there is no moral Judge. God’s holiness is fundamental—not just for Christianity, but for all worldviews—for without an objective moral standard, we can make no truth statements about right or wrong. Every time we create a law or seek justice or call something “good,” we’re trapped into the necessity of a moral judge. God’s holiness is that judge. It is vital that Christians understand both God’s holiness and His love. Many believers tend to emphasize one over the other, leading to an imbalanced and extreme theology. If God is only holy and not loving, there is no hope for us, no safety in His affection. If God is all love and no holiness, my behavior doesn’t matter and I am left in my

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sins, hurting other image bearers with my selfish deeds. God's love calls us to holiness *so that* we love others effectively and, in doing so, bless the world.

God Is Just

“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he” (Deuteronomy 32:4 ESV).

My understanding of God's love and holiness together led me to believe God's *justice*. This justice freed me from my addiction to pornography and erotica because I knew God was right in His sexual ethic. He was right to want honor for my body and the bodies of others. He was right to call my desires into alignment with His. He was right to create boundaries for my sexual desires within either celibacy or covenant marriage and to call me up to a satisfaction outside of romantic idolatry.

Understanding God's justice requires a foundation in both love and holiness. Without love, God's justice is ruthless. Without holiness, God's justice is untrue.

The spirit of the modern age is social justice. But this phrase alone can mean a dozen things! Some Christians cringe and side-eye those two words; others wear them proudly. And yet we can agree that Christians should care immensely about justice because *God is just*. That justice, however, must be biblically defined. It must also be socially active or it's a justice of lip service alone.

In a series on biblical justice, pastor and theologian Tim Keller says this of God's just nature:

God's justice is both retributive and reparative. It not only punishes evildoing, but it restores those who are victims of injustice . . . As the Judge of all the earth, the Lord will finally give everyone what

justice dictates is due to them (Acts 17:30–31). But he will also restore and “renew all things” so there is no more evil, suffering, or death (Matthew 19:28). Both his retributive and remunerative justice will come to final fulfillment at the end of history, and we will live in a new heavens and new earth filled with *dikaiosune*—justice (2 Peter 3:13). These basic themes work themselves out in four facets of biblical justice. Biblical justice is characterized by: radical generosity, universal equality, life-changing advocacy, and asymmetrical responsibility.”⁸

God’s just nature and desire to protect those who are being unjustly treated should motivate Christians to desire the same. Though Christians may disagree on *how* such justice should be accomplished, there should be no debate that justice is not just an eternal reality but also a present one.

The Mosaic law (the law God gave through Moses, which we see in Deuteronomy and Leviticus) provided God’s people with the outline for a gracious and just society. These laws were not arbitrary; they set Israel apart in an age of oppression and violence. Not only were the people of Israel called to treat one another with fairness and consideration, they were even called to go above and beyond simple fairness, such as during the seventh-year cancellation of debts (Deuteronomy 15) or the fifty-year Jubilee (Leviticus 25). In the previously noted article, Tim Keller quoted scholar Craig Blomberg on this subject: “Out of love of God and love of neighbor, ‘The righteous (*saddiq*) are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.’”⁹

God “disadvantaged” Himself to the utmost when He sent Christ on our behalf. The gospel is the ultimate working of justice for an unjust and undeserving people. Some Christians are tempted to stop here and move no further, but God’s incredible justice at the cross is not where He stops—and it’s not a place to lie down. The

justice of the gospel motivates us to defend the widow and orphan (James 1:27), to do right by the foreigner (Exodus 22:21–24), and to do justice for the weak, afflicted, and destitute (Psalm 82:3).

Some believers think the best way to accomplish this is through changing existing government systems. Others believe justice should be accomplished through personal efforts, fundraising, and church outreach. Whatever form it takes, we can all claim this truth: God is just, and His justice is active, not passive. As part of His body, we must be active too.

God is Omnipotent

A few years ago the Marvel Universe produced a new show centered on the character of Loki, a mischievous god who consistently makes trouble and walks the line between good and evil. In the show, Loki finds out that his entire life—as well as the lives of every other creature in the movie—has been planned by the Time Keepers. The Time Keepers are in turn commanded by a God-type character who dictates exactly how each life should play out. From birth to death, all decisions must be planned, and anyone who strays from the plan is “pruned.”

When the show emerged on the cultural scene, some Christians were bothered by how it presented “God.” Was this sovereign God-character a representative of the Christian God? Was this show somehow mocking the Creator? To answer these questions you have to know what the Bible says about God’s sovereignty, or omnipotence.

The word *omnipotent* isn’t found in the Bible, but this term describes the biblical value of God’s all-powerful nature. The word comes from two Latin roots—*omnis* (all) and *potens* (power). In other words, God is all-powerful. When this attribute is expressed over creation, we say that God is *sovereign*.

Scholar Wayne Grudem described omnipotence as God’s ability to do “all His holy will.”¹⁰ This definition is important because it’s not the same as saying “God can do anything.” There *are* certain things God cannot do—things that deny His nature! For example:

- God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18)
- God cannot stop being God (2 Timothy 2:13)
- God cannot tempt us to do evil (James 1:13)

All of these things would require God to deny His perfection, power, or purity. Therefore, God is able to do anything consistent with His character and unable to do things that deny who He is. This “inability” is a form of self-restraint; His holiness restrains Him from doing evil.

Where does the Bible teach about God’s power and sovereignty? Many places, but here are a few:

- “Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.” (Psalm 147:5 ESV)
- “Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.” (Jeremiah 32:17 ESV)
- “For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth—the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!” (Amos 4:13 ESV)
- “For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.” (Romans 1:20 ESV)
- “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint

of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” (Hebrews 1:3 ESV)

- “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” (Matthew 19:26 ESV)

Sometimes Christians misunderstand God’s sovereignty. They assume it doesn’t matter what we do or how we live; God’s will is going to happen anyway. This results in a fatalistic “faith”: *Who cares what I do or how I live? God’s just going to do what He’s going to do.*

But this misconstrues God’s omnipotent nature. While God can work His will any way He likes, He permits consequences for our sinful choices. God created humanity with a will, which means we can choose “life or death” (Deuteronomy 30:19). When we choose to live sinfully, we are rejecting God’s *perfect will*. As a result, God may delay or alter His perfect, original plan in order to teach us and draw us back to Him. This does not downplay God’s sovereignty because He is the one who created humans, gave them a will, and watches over their coming and going (Psalm 121).

There are a variety of views of God’s omnipotence. One of these is *determinism*. Determinism falls on a spectrum, with some people saying God causes all things except sin (though He may cause things such as disease and disaster) and others playing the idea out to the logical conclusion—that God is the *author* of evil. Most Calvinistic denominations hold to some form of determinism, though not to the extreme of God authoring evil. The show *Loki* is an example of hyper-determinism: a world in which God is planning the actions of His creatures, whether that be birth, death, salvation, or any life experience.

There is an alternative view, one upheld by classical Arminianism, orthodox Wesleyanism, and other traditions. This view is often summed up as *free will*, but that’s really not a great definition. Both Calvinists and Arminians believe in a form of human free will

in conjunction with God's sovereignty. A better term for the non-Calvinist approach is *libertarian freedom*.

In this view, God's decision to create people who make free choices does not downplay His sovereignty but rather affirms it. This means that the evil we see in the world is *permitted* by God's sovereign nature because He created people with libertarian freedom. It is not His *perfect* will for evil to occur, but His *permitted* will, because relationship requires choice. God did not desire the world to have such evil, but in order for humanity to have the freedom of choice and relationship, they have to have the freedom to choose to move away from Him. That's exactly what happened. The Enemy is *permitted* to roam the earth tempting humanity until final judgment (2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 John 5:19; Ephesians 2:2; Revelation 19), and each person will answer for whether she follows Satan or follows Christ.

Christians may come to different conclusions on *how* God's sovereignty operates—determinism or libertarian free will, but what they agree upon is that God *is* the sovereign, reigning authority in this world, and that His creative, loving, gracious power is the anchor of our saving grace. Unlike the “god” of Loki, ours does not prune those who fail to keep to His plan. He offers salvation and redemption.

God is Omniscient

As I grew into an older teen, still carrying out my secret battle with erotica, I began to question why God had allowed me to stumble upon the book that started it all. *It isn't fair*, I thought. *I was just a kid. I didn't mean it. Sure, what I did with it was wrong, but why did God allow me to find the book at all? If he knows everything, why didn't he do something?*

I think every human asks this question at some point. Maybe

you had an alcoholic parent, and it opened the door to your own struggle with addiction. Perhaps you were abused. Maybe you face a painful autoimmune disease. At some point we have to reckon with the biblical truth of an all-knowing, omniscient God who also permits bad things to happen. How do we reconcile these realities? I had to wrestle with this question myself.

God's *omniscience* is His ability to know all things past, present, and future. He is all-knowing. Not only does He know what *has* happened and what *will* occur, He also knows what could have *possibly* occurred. In Scripture, God's knowledge of the future is described as "foreknowledge," or "perceiving beforehand." All Christians agree that God is omniscient, but there are varying interpretations of how God's all-knowing nature works out in real life.

Determinism

The determinist view, found often in Calvinistic churches, closely binds foreknowledge with *fore-ordination*. It states that God knows what will happen because He *decreed* it to happen. Determinists believe humans cannot make completely free, libertarian choices because that ability would contradict God's all-knowing, sovereign nature. All things that occur in the world are the product of God's specific decree (order), caused by Him for His purposes. Many determinist scholars argue that God's decrees, while encompassing evil, always work evil for good. In the end, He restores all things, and the things He caused were for His glory.

Open Theism

Determinism is not the only view of how God's knowledge of the future works, though. The *open theism* view says that God restrains His foreknowledge and does not actually know some things, such as who will choose to follow Him. It can be expressed this way: God knows everything that *can* be known, and some things—like future human choices—cannot be known.

While appealing, the open theism view has a very difficult time upholding the character of a truly sovereign God. It also contradicts Scripture's teaching that God knows all things that have been and will be:

- “Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.” (Psalm 147:5 ESV)
- “For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” (1 John 3:20 ESV)
- “And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever.” (1 Chronicles 28:9 ESV)
- “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things.” (Romans 11:33–36 ESV)
- “Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?” (Isaiah 40:13–14 ESV)

Molinism

A third approach to God's omniscience is Molinism. It strikes a bit of a balance between determinism and open theism. To summarize their belief: God knows all choices that will be made and works through those free choices to accomplish His purposes. Molinism teaches that God has a “middle knowledge” of what

choices humans *will* make, and He chooses to permit those choices and work through them to accomplish His purposes.

Some theologians say that Arminians (those who hold to libertarian freedom) are Molinists. Others argue that Molinism leans toward determinism, because God places people in circumstances where their choices will inevitably be what His “middle knowledge” has foreknown. The classical Arminian view, though similar to Molinism in many ways, differs slightly. It upholds the absolute omniscience of God—knowing past, present, future, and all possibilities. It also upholds the libertarian freedom of humans. God knows what people will choose, but He does not cause them to choose it. God’s Spirit is involved in convicting, leading, and counseling people in their decisions.

As I struggled to understand how God could know my future and yet permit it, I came to realize that the only way to understand God’s foreknowledge was to also understand His love. For me to experience God’s gracious love, I had to both *know my need for Him* and *recognize the nature of this world*. I encountered pornography because the world is a broken and dark place. God did not desire that I encounter it or wish for me to experience that darkness. But He permitted it and my free choices within it in order to provide me a chance at a relationship with Him. God knew I would face the darkness. And He knew that in the darkness I would find His Light.

Today, I have had the privilege of sharing God’s hope with hundreds of women who are getting free from sexual sin. I asked God “Why?” at the time; today I think I know why, or at least part of the reason. God’s glory and goodness has been displayed through the painful, lonely, dark time of my teens and twenties. He knew it would happen. He did not cause it. But He did cause many to know His love because of it.

God Is Omnipresent

Knowing and believing God's love began my journey to freedom from porn. But the greater gift I received was a deeper, sweeter relationship with the Father. I no longer looked at Him as an unkind and distant judge. I understood God's love in a new way—how His love was expressed through justice and holiness, and how that was for my *good*. God's hatred of sin was not a threat to me; it was the guarantor of my safety. He was on the side of my freedom. He was, and is, *for me*. This reframing of God's character enabled me to fight my addiction to sexual sin not from fear or guilt but from an identity as a loved child of God.



In the ocean of God's character, we've only dipped our toes into a tide pool. There are so many attributes we did not cover in this chapter—so many I wish I could include! As you continue your study of the Father, keep His unity front and center. He is not different in character from Christ and the Spirit. They are *One*: all loving, all just, all holy, all powerful—*together*. Splitting them apart into the pieces we find most comfortable or approachable is a path to confusion, or worse, false teaching about God.

It takes some wrestling to reckon with the texts about God, but when we understand the Bible as a cohesive narrative and Jesus as the very Son of God, proceeding from the Father who loves us and sent His Son to reveal such love (John 3:16), we discover a depth of relationship with Him we had missed before. God must be taken together with all His attributes; after all, He has given all of Himself to be known and loved, and everything He did through the gospel made it possible for you to experience that relationship.

GOD'S GLORY AND GOODNESS

If you read a lot of Christian books, you'll hear a good bit about God's "glory." We say our actions "glorify God" or that nature "displays God's glory." God's glory can be described as His majesty or His awesomeness. But we see God define it for us in Exodus 33. In this passage, Moses met with God and begged to see God's glory. God responded, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence" (v. 19). God's glory is God's goodness! When the Bible talks about glorifying God, it's not saying God is an attention-seeking megalomaniac. God wants His glory to be visible because His glory is His goodness. And when God's goodness is on display, His love and kindness bless the world.