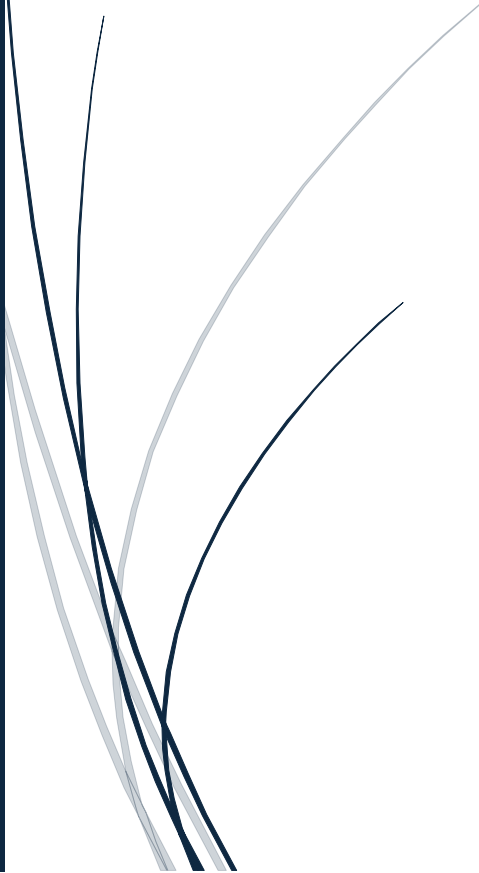


Winter 2025

# The Gospel Gleaner

*For the Lord, His Word, and His Church*



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## THE GOSPEL GLEANER

The first issue of the *Gospel Gleaner* was published in the spring of 1985. Much has changed in the world since then, but the mission and values of the *Gleaner* remain the same. Through the medium of electronic subscriptions, the *Gospel Gleaner* is more accessible than ever. Past issues can also be found on our website: [www.gospelgleaner.com](http://www.gospelgleaner.com).

Manuscripts to be considered can be emailed to the editor at:  
[andyerwin@gospelgleaner.com](mailto:andyerwin@gospelgleaner.com)

Editor: Andy Erwin (Fayetteville, TN)



# Lessons from Elijah before Mount Carmel

Andy Erwin

Elijah was called to prophesy during the wicked reign of King Ahab in Israel. Ahab was the son of the evil King Omri (1 Kings 16:21-28). He introduced the worship of false deities to Israel, namely, Baal, a god of power, and Asherah, a goddess of fertility. These were the gods of the Sidonians (Phoenicia).

Ahab married the infamous Jezebel. This marriage seems to have been a political move. By marrying Jezebel and accepting the Sidonian gods, Ahab was securing an allegiance that would grant him use of the coastlands. He was a successful king in the eyes of the world. He was a great military leader. He brought prosperity to his people, built cities, and even lived in an ivory palace.

Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal (meaning “toward Baal”) and a princess in Sidon. He may have also gone by the name Eithobalus. He would have ruled in Tyre as well as Sidon, after assassinating the king of Tyre. She brought into Israel at least 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (1 Kings 18:19). She aimed to make Baal and Asherah worship the religion of Israel. She also massacred the prophets of God (1 Kings 18:4).

Into this unholy alliance and evil dominion entered Elijah the Tishbite. Tishbite could mean “from Tishbe,” or it could mean “the stranger.” Apart from the life of Elijah, we cannot find this word used for comparison. He was a prophet of God from Gilead. His message was plain – “As the Lord God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew or rain these years, except at my word.” He was truly “a voice crying in the wilderness” for his generation. Elijah would later be honored among all the prophets of Israel as he was seen on the Mount of Transfiguration.

From this period of Israel’s history, one can observe the growing nature of sin. Sin is leprosy (even cancer)

of the soul – whether for individuals or nations. Sin does not remain isolated or benign. As sin grows, the conscience is dulled. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump.” In Omri, sin grew worse than ever before. In Ahab, sin grew worse than with Omri.

From Elijah, we learn that when God has a work to do, He will find the right man for the job. Elijah had been prepared for the time he was to appear. He was not a polished orator appearing in soft clothing, but he was God’s man for the job. He was not as polished and refined as others. Do not judge a book by its cover. Let us never reject the man God sent to do the job simply because he doesn’t pass our “eye test.”

Moreover, we are encouraged not to be fearful if we are found standing alone in the face of evil. Every generation needs a voice crying in the wilderness. When you stand against evil, know you are also standing for the right. God’s truth and righteousness are worth standing for, even if it means standing alone. How true it is that the worst times require the best men!

Three and one-half years passed between Elijah’s first appearance to Ahab and the second. During this time, he was in the care of Providence beside the brook Cherith until it dried. When it was time for him to return, Elijah could not go to his own people (cf. Luke 4:24-26). By serving the Lord faithfully, Elijah had become the troubler of Israel. The people believed the ongoing drought was Elijah’s fault, rather than a punishment for their sins.

He lodged with a widow from Zarephath. The widow had but a morsel of bread and a little oil. Yet, nothing is too small for God if we are faithful with what He gives. No matter how small our resources may be, we can still do something for God. Paul said, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. And our duty to God should always

outweigh our devotion to self. Elijah once more is found in the happy care of Providence! God gave them no reserve, and thus no reason for presumption. God gave them just enough, and therefore, no cause for despair.

While Elijah was lodging with the widow, her child died unexpectedly. Children bring a particular and peculiar type of joy to one's life. For Elijah, I imagine this child was a constant source of pleasure. For the widow, I imagine this child was her only source of joy. Yet, no circumstances ensure exemption from pain or loss. Her care for Elijah did not exempt her. Her love for her son did not exempt her. However, this tragedy could also

be seen as an act of Providence. The woman was brought face to face with God. She was immediately reminded of some past sin, and her eyes were opened to her guilt and danger.

In this hour of perplexity, Elijah went straight to God. Each new instance of deliverance was building his faith and preparing him for a greater service at Mount Carmel. Perhaps we each have a Mt. Carmel in our future. Do we see the hand of God providing for us, delivering us, or leading us to action? When the time comes, will our duty to God outweigh our devotion to self?

## An "Unworthy" Manner

Raymond Elliott

In 1 Corinthians 11:20, we read, "Therefore, when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper." Some members brought their food with selfish pride and arrogance, and, without regard for the less fortunate, ate their meals, thus causing shame on those members who had nothing.

Before we proceed, we need to consider the words "unworthy" and "unworthily" as used in 1 Corinthians 10:27: "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and of the Lord." (NKJV)

"Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink *this* cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord."(KJV). The Greek word ἀναξίως (anaxios, "unworthy"/"unworthily") calls the church to approach the Lord's Supper with repentant faith, love for the body of Christ, and reverence for the crucified Lord. The term's solitary yet weighty appearance anchors a perennial summons to holy participation in the New Covenant meal until Christ returns" (Topical Lexicon).

None of us is worthy to partake of the supper, but that is not what is considered here; rather, it is about how we partake of the Lord's Supper. Each person should 'examine' himself/herself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. Our Lord Jesus said when we partake of the supper that we are to "do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). It is a time in our worship when the thoughts of our hearts are to be centered on the death of Jesus Christ when He shed His precious blood for our sins.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:17 that he could not praise the brethren "since you come together not for the better but for the worse." He explains the real reason was in verse 18: "For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it." In 1 Corinthians 1:10, the apostle Paul wrote, "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For

it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you." When you read the epistle, you will observe disunity in the church. It became evident in their assemblies.

It became customary for the members to assemble before partaking in the Lord's Supper to eat a typical meal, whereas the wealthier members did not consider the poor members. This became known as a 'love feast', or 'agape'. However, it was not anything like a 'love feast'! Paul wrote these condemning words in 1 Corinthians 11:21, "For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk." Some members did not wait for others and selfishly ate before the poor members arrived, and

one became drunk! And so, Paul wrote the following about the thoughtless, uncaring members: "What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you" (verse 22).

Paul was not making the place 'sacred' where they were meeting; instead, he was condemning the actions of the thoughtless and uncaring wealthy members. The words in 1 Corinthians 11:33, 34 were written especially for the unloving wealthy members. "Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come."

## The Necessity of Baptism

Johnny O. Trail

When I examine Bible commentaries, study Bibles, and other writings that seek to exegete scripture, I always turn to passages that mention baptism to see how the commentator treats the Bible regarding the topic. Unless these materials are written by good, faithful members of the Lord's church, they typically deny the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins and our salvation.

Just recently, I read a book that says, "While we recognize that Jesus commanded baptism (Matt. 28:19), as did the apostles (Acts 2:38), we should not say that baptism is necessary for salvation."<sup>1</sup> Sadly, this commentator is not alone in reaching this false conclusion. The statement is self-contradictory upon critical examination. Since Jesus (Mark 16:16) and the Apostles (Acts 2:38) commanded baptism, it is apparent that baptism is essential for one's salvation.

Jesus proclaimed that He was the "way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). If the Master commanded baptism (Mark 16:16; Matthew 28:19) prior to His ascension, then we should obey His words. To do otherwise would be to disregard the "way" that leads to eternal life.

If something was "commanded" by the Son of God, we need to obey Him. It is contradictory to proclaim that Jesus is our Savior and not be obedient to His commands. The Hebrew writer makes it plain that Jesus is the originator and architect of salvation to those who are obedient to Him. Hebrews 5:7 says, "Who, in the days of His [Jesus—JOT] flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the

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<sup>1</sup> Grudem, Wayne (2020). *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Zondervan Academic, Grand Rapids, pg. 1211.

author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.” There is not a single passage in scripture that teaches a disobedient person can be saved.

At least one commentator has attempted to argue that Paul was opposed to baptism just as he was opposed to the re-implementation of circumcision. “The apostle Paul would have opposed the idea that baptism is necessary for salvation just as he opposed the similar idea that circumcision was necessary for salvation (see Gal. 5:1-12).”<sup>2</sup> While Paul did in fact stand in opposition to binding circumcision upon those under the New Covenant, it is not a true parallel to his position on baptism. This argument is totally without merit.

Paul makes a connection between faith and baptism in the aforementioned Galatian letter. Galatians 3:26-27 says, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” We become “sons of God” through faith at the time of our baptism. Therefore, we are not saved by faith alone.

Paul’s opening comments deal with those who would pervert the pure message that he proclaimed to those who converted in Galatia regarding the gospel. Galatians 1:6-9 says, “I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” The gospel is the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). We obey the gospel when we are baptized (Romans 6:3-4); thus, one who argues that Paul was against baptism

finds himself among those that Paul proclaimed were “accursed” for perverting the truth.

Paul was baptized to have his sins washed away (Acts 22:16). If Paul was saved at the point of simple belief, he would have been saved on the Damascus road. There is little doubt that he became a believer when Jesus approached him in a blinding light (Acts 9:3-5). Paul understood that he was not saved at that juncture, and he understood that he needed to “do” something given his murderous, blasphemous past. Acts 9:6 says, “So he, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'" Then the Lord *told* him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

Ananias told Paul what he had to do to be saved. Acts 22:16 says, “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” If Paul were saved at the point of belief and prayer, his sins would not have remained. Instead, the Bible teaches that his sins were “washed away” at the point of baptism—not at the point of faith or prayer.

Similarly, Paul was not saved by belief alone (Acts 9:3-5) nor by prayer. When Ananias finds him, Paul is praying. Acts 9:11 says, “So the Lord *said* to him [Ananias—JOT], 'Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for *one* called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying.’” Here are the two required elements of the so-called “sinners’ prayer”: belief and prayer.

Still, we know that Paul’s sins were not forgiven. How do we know this? Given the order of events (chronology), we know that Paul had his sins washed away at the point of baptism (Acts 22:16).

The same writer engages in ridiculous double-talk when he says, “Baptism, then, is not necessary for salvation. But it is necessary to obey Christ, for he commanded baptism for all who believe in him.”<sup>3</sup> If

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pg. 1212.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 1212.

baptism is necessary for obedience, and we have established per Hebrews 5:7-9 that the obedient are the only ones who are saved, then it stands to reason that obedience to the commandment to be baptized by the Master (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16) is “necessary” for salvation.

How long will our religious neighbors continue to deny what the Bible clearly teaches regarding the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38)? We need to examine the Bible and apply what it teaches rather than listening to the doctrines of men.

## A Critique of the Salvation Army

David W. T. Brattston

The twenty-first-century Salvation Army seeks the praise of men. It promotes itself for its own sake as an organization, at the expense of helping the destitute and victims of calamity. In doing so, it overlooks the teachings of Jesus Christ and the first generations of His followers. Although Salvationists make a display of praising God in public, it looks to me like it is praising the Salvation Army organization as such, as an end in itself. Whatever benevolence it distributed during the two World Wars, it is being edged out by religious and secular charities, which are not as inward-focused and as contrary to the gospel as it was originally practiced. Several organizations now provide social services formerly distinctive of the Army. Many preach about Jesus Christ and love of neighbor by more modern means and do so much more often.

Contrary to the original gospel, the Army's open prayer is in the streets and other public places. In contrast, Jesus Himself taught:

“...when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the comers of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:5-6).

This instruction of Christ was not merely symbolic or applicable only for His time. We find that in the AD 190s the principal or dean of Christianity's foremost educational institution wrote that a proper Christian "does not use wordy prayer by his mouth; having learned to ask of the Lord what is requisite. In every place, therefore, but not ostensibly and visibly to the multitude, he will pray." (Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 7.7)

Besides brass bands, parades, and marking on gifts that the Army is their source, its soldiers draw attention to it through wearing distinctive uniforms to distinguish themselves as members of the organization. Luke 20:46 discourages distinctive dress for religious purposes. Around AD 200, a description of the new and unfamiliar Christian religion, for pagan readers, expressly pointed out that, wherever they lived in the world, Christians do not wear distinctive garments but "follow the native customs in dress" (*Letter to Diognetus* 5.4), with due regard for modesty. Wearing a uniform today to identify as a soldier of the Lord when helping the unfortunate can have little purpose besides seeking praise for the Army as an organization.

In Matthew 23:8-10, Jesus forbade honorific religious titles, such as “teacher”, “master,” and “rabbi.” In glaring disobedience, every Salvationist above the rank of private bears some title copied from worldly armies, like “Lieutenant”, “Captain”, “Colonel,” and even “General,” savoring of class distinctions embedded into daily ecclesiastical practice, which is absent when members

of a Christian community address each other as simply “Brother” or “Sister.”

Then there is the fanfare whenever Salvationists give to the needy, when they find time away from music concerts. They are swift to display their charitable works in public: delivering aid in distinctive uniforms calling attention to the organization, marking packages and trucks to indicate the Army origin of the gift, and advertising their good works in the media. In contrast, Jesus commanded:

“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore, when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:1-4).

To call attention to the organization's benevolence, some Salvationists sound not only a trumpet but an entire brass band, informing everyone within earshot. Christ's prohibition on deliberately attracting attention whenever dispensing help and aid was repeated around AD 240 by Clement's former student Origen, who was the most outstanding Bible scholar, preacher, and teacher of the early third century (*Origen Homilies on Exodus 2.3*). Ten years later, at 11.15 of his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* he wrote:

if we do alms before men, having in our thoughts the design of appearing so men philanthropic, and of being honoured because of philanthropy, we receive the reward from men; and, universally, everything that is done with the consciousness in the doer that he will be glorified by men, has no reward from Him who beholds in secret, and renders the reward to those who are pure, in secret.

Despite some of its Christian accouterments and other pretensions to be a Christian denomination, it is doubtful whether the Salvation Army qualifies as a worshipping Christian community. It does not observe the basic ordinances of baptism or the Lord's Supper, which are otherwise part and parcel of churches and denominations, and even sects. Even Jehovah's Witnesses observe a form of baptism and make Communion available, even though nobody partakes of it. Many religious organizations broadcast weekly radio and television programs, preaching their understanding of the good news and offering instruction on leading an upright life. Almost none ask for donations, but even provide free Bible-study booklets "without cost or obligation." The Army does the opposite. It concentrates on making music and promoting itself and provides nothing for the mind or brain. Band concerts substitute for educational pursuits like Bible studies. Nor does it fund or operate universities.

Whatever its shortcomings as a “Christian” association, the Salvation Army is an outstanding advertiser. It publishes self-laudatory magazines worldwide to call attention to its charitable works and its alleged value to the community. Where I live, the Army is absent from television, except just before the giving season called “Christmas”, again to broadcast its good works rather than directly help the viewer, and ask for donations, of course.

Through its extensive advertising network, the Army flaunts its benefits to the community in the hope of obtaining donations. Fundraising is usually its only contact with the public at large. From what one sees of Salvation Army publicity, a person would expect the Army to be providing services in every town, village, and hamlet, but what most Americans encounter in practice are (1) requests for donations and (2) thrift stores, which demand money. All efforts seem to be directed to the promotion and enrichment of the Army as such, rather than to preach the gospel.

The Army's advertising strikes me as within the species of boasting prohibited in Romans 1:30 and 11:18,

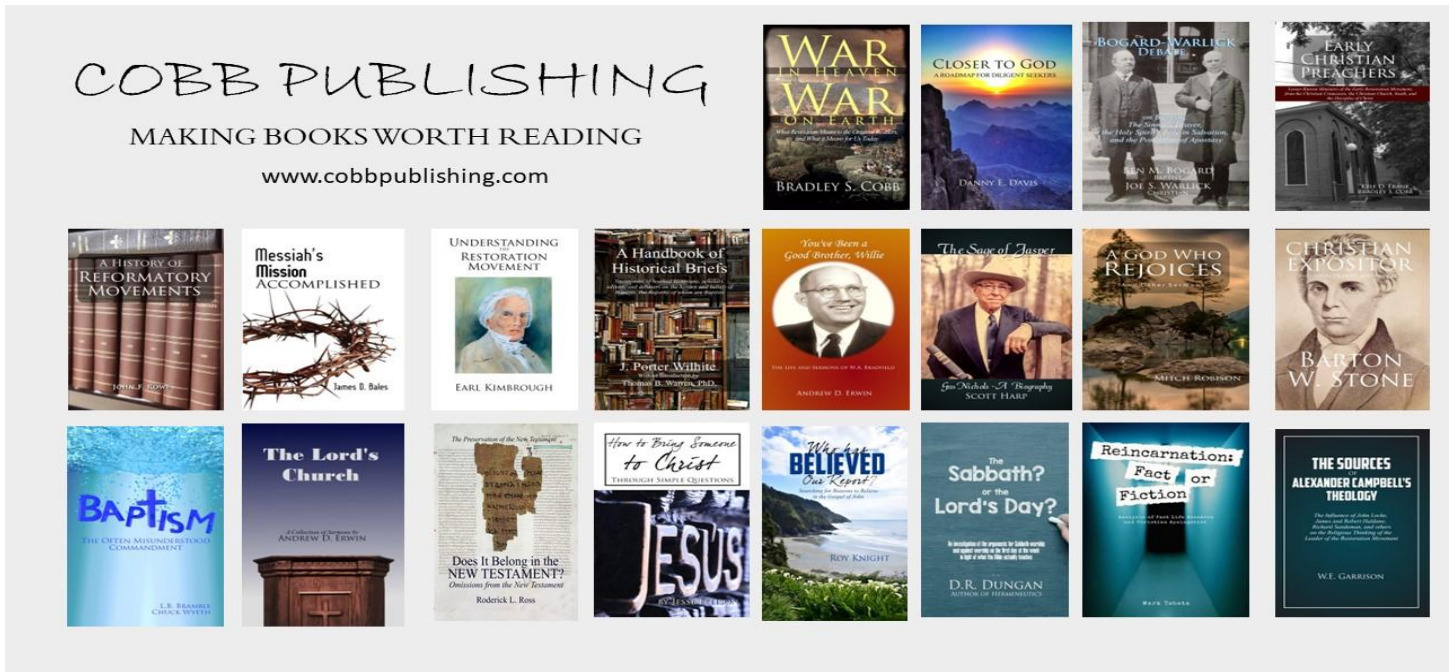
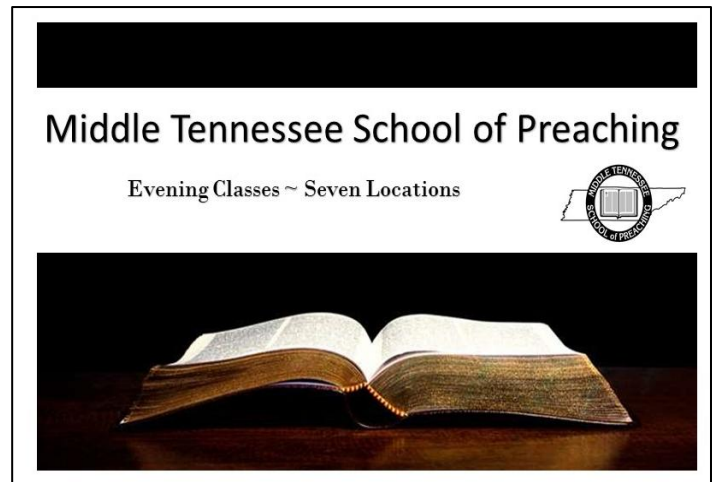
1 Corinthians 5:6, 2 Corinthians 10:15-16, Ephesians 2:9, 2 Timothy 3:2, and Jude 16. Early post-apostolic believers saw it this way; in particular, a description of Christians for pagan readers around AD 125 noted that “he, who has, gives to him who has not, without boasting.” (Aristides *Apology* 15). Romans 1:32 forbids us from even sympathizing with boasters.

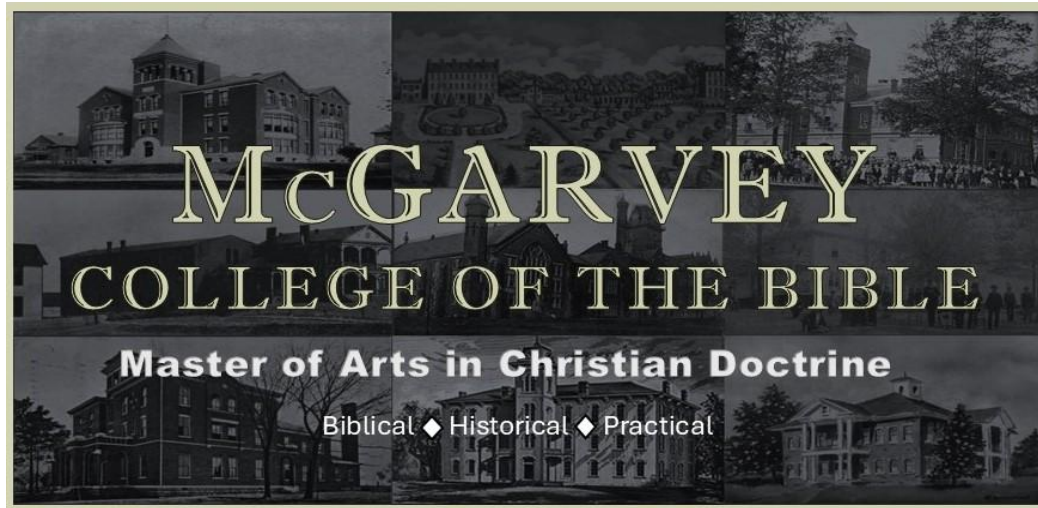
To take a view free from religious considerations, you should notice that when there is a fire, flood, or other human disaster, the neutral, secular media always state that help is coming from the Red Cross, rarely from the Salvation Army. Time and again, the Red Cross is reported to be the first to respond to human needs and to remain in the afflicted community, while the Army is seldom mentioned. Nobody promotes the Army like the Army. The key consideration in the Salvation Army's self-promotion and self-praise is probably to seek praise, especially from people outside its ranks, which leads to donations.

On the other hand, the Lord condemned people who publicly exhibited their good works for this purpose: "all their works they do for to be seen of men" (Matthew 23:5) and “Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your

name as evil, for the Son of man's sake” (Luke 6:22). Luke's description of this public reaction seems to fit the despised Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons or other religions commonly called “cults”, and is the opposite of what the Salvation Army strives to accomplish for itself. Moreover, the Army solicits donations from the public, including non-members, something the Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons never do.

I wonder how much money is spent on advertising and musical instruments as promotional tools that would otherwise be used to alleviate human suffering. When will the Salvation Army repent and turn to Christ's teachings?





As we close out our first year of classes at McGarvey College of the Bible, know that the work could not be done without the love and support of brethren like you. Let me give you a quick summary of where we stand in the school's daily operations.

We have had a good year in the classroom, and for the most part, we have had very few details to see to administratively. God has truly blessed us more than we deserve!

Many of our students and faculty have not only been busy in the classroom but also active in evangelistic campaigns in addition to their labor in local ministry. Campaigns and gospel meetings have been conducted in every country where our students and teachers live and in some where they do not. By supporting these men in their continued education, you are helping them to become more effective evangelists. Our students and faculty honor the school and serve the church by their ceaseless efforts to increase the borders of the kingdom.

Budget-wise, we had hoped to raise \$50,000 in rainy-day funds and operate on a yearly budget of \$150,000. These figures have proven to be accurate. After one year, we can see that the operating expenses for the four school extensions in the US, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa/Zimbabwe will nearly total this amount. We project to raise about two-thirds of this budget. We have been operating on a month-to-month

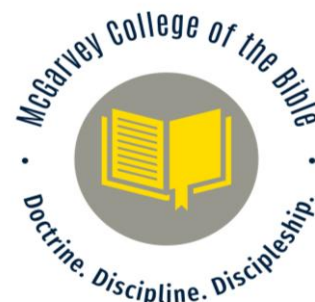
basis, sometimes week to week. But God has never failed us, and through our brethren, He has sustained us. Our supporters are truly an answer to our prayers.

The grace that abounds in you (2 Corinthians 8:7) has provided the continued education and support for over 40 preachers and faculty members in just the first year of operation. With God's help, our fidelity, and the support of our brethren, McGarvey College of the Bible can be a force for good for many years to come. We have already had brethren from several additional countries reach out to us about bringing the school to them, and we have a waiting list of students in the countries where we now operate. Thank you again for all you have sacrificed to make this dream a reality.

Please feel free to contact me for more information about this work.

Andy Erwin

[drandyerwin@mcgarveycollege.online](mailto:drandyerwin@mcgarveycollege.online)





Reach your neighbors with



# House to House Heart to Heart

## 2026 Topics

The back page will feature an intriguing evangelistic article and is the first thing people see when they receive HTH.

**JANUARY** • What If I Am Lost? • Back Page: When Were You Saved?

**FEBRUARY** • Three Reasons I Want to Go to Heaven • Back Page: What Happens When We Die?

**MARCH** • God's Invitation to an Honest Conversation • Back Page: The Bible Is the Answer to All of Your Problems

**APRIL** • I Want to Look upon His Face • Back Page: Are You Addicted?

**MAY** • Does the Bible Authorize Women to Preach Publicly? • Back Page: Are You Looking for a Church? We Are Looking for You

**SPECIAL ISSUE** • Is Jesus the Only Way?

**JUNE** • Three More Reasons I Want to Go to Heaven • Back Page: Will God Forgive Me? How Do I Forgive Myself?

**JULY** • Do We Have to Join a Denomination? Why the First Century Church Is Better • Back Page: Don't Join a Denomination

**AUGUST** • They Saw Jesus Alive • Back Page: You Can Live Forever

**SEPTEMBER** • God's Secret to a Good Life • Back Page: How Do I Study the Bible?

**OCTOBER** • King Jesus' Kingdom • Back Page: Is the Sinners' Prayer in Romans 10:9-10?

**NOVEMBER** • How Many Churches Did Jesus Build? • Back Page: You Are Worthy

**DECEMBER** • Kingdom or Church • Back Page: This Is the Community You Need



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\* The deadline to sign up for each issue is 45 days before. As an example, the deadline for the January Issue is November 15.

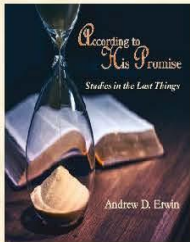
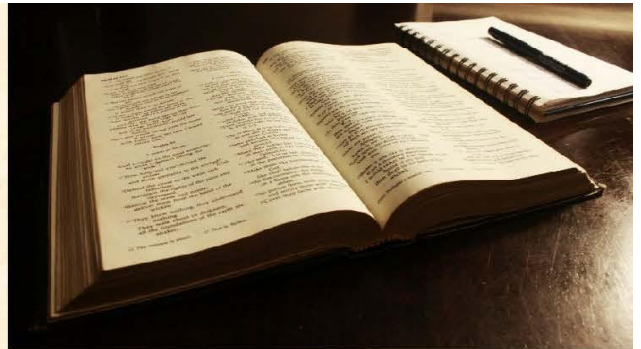


# Trusted Biblical Studies for Adult Classes and Individuals

by Andrew D. Erwin, Ph.D.

Editor, *Gospel Gleaner*

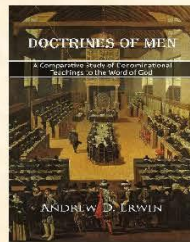
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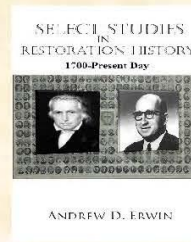
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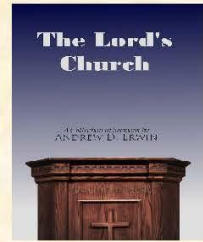
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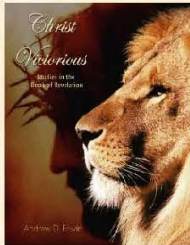
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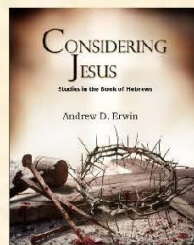
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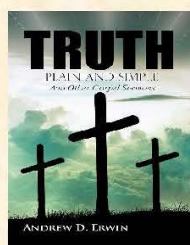
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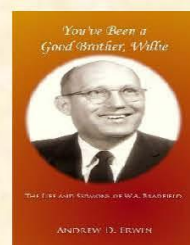
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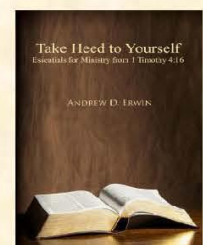
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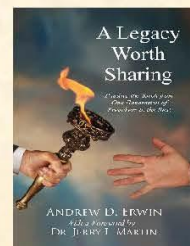
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# The Wrath and Love of God (Part Two)

Joshua Seth Houston

It is beneficial here to define “love” and “wrath” in theological terms.<sup>4</sup> Regarding “the love of God,” Kevin Vanhoozer writes,

God reveals himself to Moses as ‘compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness’ (Exod 34:6). God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) stands at the core of his covenant and is on conspicuous display throughout Israel’s history, especially when the people go astray like a faithless wife (see Hos 1–3). God ‘demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us’ (Rom 5:8; cf. John 3:16). ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8) summarizes the nature and character of the one who brings Israel out of Egypt and pours himself out on the cross to bring sinners out of the bondage of sin and death.<sup>5</sup>

First John 4:8 uses the equative “be” verb to link the nominative “God” to the predicate nominative “love” (i.e., God is love). No other attribute of God occurs in such a grammatical construct. John 4:24 comes close when Jesus says, “God is spirit.” However, in Greek, the syntax is starkly different as John 4:24 lacks the verb.

Regardless of grammatical structure, to say “God is spirit” is to present God’s metaphysical reality. In most

instances, an adjective follows the phrase “God is” rather than a predicate nominative. For example, to say “God is mighty,” is to describe a characteristic of God. These descriptions occur most often in OT poetry. A similar notion is to say, “Water is wet.” The term “wet” describes the water, but “wet” is not the water’s fullest essence. Such statements present the existence of being, but they do nothing to prove the being’s nature. To say “God is love” is to place “love” as more than a state of being. God is love (stative), but God is also loving (active).<sup>6</sup>

There is a danger of interpreting divine wrath as a malicious act where God is angry or spiteful. These adjectives may be appropriate when applied to the wrath of a human, but humans do not possess intrinsic holiness as God does. T. A. Noble’s article in the *New Dictionary of Theology* highlights the challenge of understanding divine wrath from a human perspective.

Two theological questions arise: whether it is an anthropomorphism to speak of the wrath of God, and whether it contradicts belief in the love of God. If ‘wrath’ or ‘anger’ is regarded as vindictive and spiteful petulance, then it is indeed incompatible with the Christian understanding of God. But if all our

<sup>4</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss a grammatical and linguistic word study of the words translated as “love” and “wrath” in English. Hebrew most notably uses אהב and טחן to denote “love.” Greek most notably employs ἀγάπη/ἀγαπάω and φιλέω for “love.” Hebrew is more illustrative when describing or denoting wrath. Some include תרה (to burn), קצף (to be angry), נא (nose), חרם (things placed under God’s judgment). The NT uses the word ὀργή/ὀργίζω to denote displeasure, anger, and

indignation with a focus on retribution. See BDAG, s.v. “ὀργή,” “ἀγάπη,” and “φιλέω.” See also, BDB, s.v. “אהב,” “טחן,” “קצף,” “נא,” and “חרם.”

<sup>5</sup> K. J. Vanhoozer, “Love of God,” *NDT* 535.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 223.

language of God is in fact drawn from the human context and so must be understood to apply analogically to God, then this concept too needs to be refined. God's anger should not be conceived as the same as the anger of sinful humanity. Nor is anger necessarily contradictory to love.... God's wrath can be seen as arising out of his righteousness and indeed his love.<sup>7</sup>

Noble's argument rests on two presuppositions. First, one cannot and should not evaluate God and humanity in the same context. Second, wrath is an objective decision based on justice, whereas anger and malevolence are erratic, emotionally driven behaviors. Because God's justice is an ultimate good, wrath—if justice calls for it—must also be an ultimate good.

Each instance of divine wrath demonstrates God's justice. To phrase it differently, each time God expresses wrath, he does so reactively. God does not act unprovoked. God's wrath is not capricious, irritable, or self-indulgent.<sup>8</sup> Because God's wrath must exist on the foundation of his holiness, his wrath can only be the result of his divine judgment. Mercy allows God to relent his wrath; thus, God can execute justice or mercy, but he cannot execute injustice. Mercy is love's restraint of wrath.

Scripture is transparent concerning God's joy, anger, grief, disappointment, peace, and compassion. The

golden calf narrative of Exod 32 highlights God's ability to feel emotion, think, and objectively decide. While Moses was receiving the law from God on Mt. Sinai, the people of Israel commissioned Aaron to make a golden calf, which would serve as their representative of God in Moses's place. God became angry with the people, prompting a wrathful response (Exod 32:9–10). Moses interceded by reminding God of his covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God ultimately relented his wrath because of the love he had for the patriarchs and now for Moses.

One might consider the example above and think that divine justice did not occur. However, vv. 27–35 display such justice among the actions of the Levites and a divinely ordained plague.<sup>9</sup> Peter Enns rightly concludes, "The purpose here is to accent the faithfulness, amid the chaos of rebellion, of the Levites, to whom God has charged the maintenance of the tabernacle.... The guilty parties will be put to death—and by those responsible for maintaining order in the community."<sup>10</sup>

Such divine discipline has prompted multiple scholarly responses. On the one hand, Norman Whybray suggests the golden calf narrative is a polemical narrative invented to condemn the religious policy of Jeroboam I. This leads Whybray to conclude that God acts immorally

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<sup>7</sup> T. A. Noble, "Wrath of God," *NDT* 975–76.

<sup>8</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Some commentators think the plague is a reference to the Levitical killing. See Thomas Dozeman, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 711–12.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 576.

by having the Levites kill their own people.<sup>11</sup> However, Terence Fretheim justifies God's actions when he suggests that God must take radical measures for radical sin.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the perspectives of both Whybray and Fretheim neglect to view the event in the broader context of God's holiness. Both evaluate the event by measuring the severity of the people's actions rather than their offense to God.

At first glance, an expression of love in the golden calf narrative is difficult to find. However, at the very least, God's love for his own reputation and honor is on full display (cf. Exod 32:14). Further, God's love for Moses and the patriarchs cannot be overstated. Though God's wrath takes center stage, it is mercy that occurs when God's love allows his wrath to subside. Mercy does not excuse or ignore sin. It is important to note that Moses never excuses the people for their sins.<sup>13</sup> Moses intercedes by approaching God in a way no other Israelite could. God wanted to destroy his people and make Moses into a great nation; however, God's love for his people (at the least his love for the patriarchs) shines through in his restraint. Rather than annihilating the whole people, God inflicts divine discipline.

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<sup>11</sup> R. Norman Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study*, JSOTSS 53 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 240.

<sup>12</sup> Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press 1991), 290–91. For a more detailed comparison of Whybray vs. Fretheim, see Victor Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 552.

<sup>13</sup> Moses appeals to God's character, reputation, and holy nature. Victor Hamilton's comments are helpful in Victor Hamilton,

What does it mean that God is both love (stative) and loving (active)?<sup>14</sup> What does it mean that God displays his wrath (active) and is wrathful (an internal quality)? Don Carson observes, "When informed Christians talk about the love of God, they mean something very different from what is meant in the surrounding culture. Worse, neither side may perceive that that is the case."<sup>15</sup>

For Augustine, each aspect of the Trinity is an aspect of love, whether in emotion or action. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) suggests that that God's self-awareness has an identity of its own—the Son. God conceives of himself as he truly is and loves that self-awareness as he loves himself. In this way, Augustine identified the primordial God as the Father, his self-awareness as the Son, and the love that the Father has for that self-awareness as the Holy Spirit, who binds the Father and Son together.<sup>16</sup>

However, Augustine's trinitarian approach does little to blend the love of God with the sacrificial atonement of Jesus. If Jesus is God's self-awareness and not an independent, autonomous person of the godhead, atonement theology becomes greatly challenged. Such an

*Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 538.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine understands the love of God in one context—from God. Augustine comments, "Love is God because of God," (emphasis added). Saint Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, eds. Daniel E. Doyle and Thomas Martin, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008), 290–92.

<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 287–90. See also, Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 271.

idea dilutes the doctrine of personhood among the god-head. The autonomous personhood of Jesus, though united with the Father and the Spirit in his essence, is necessary as it is the Son who receives the atoning wrath of God. Further, the obedience of Jesus demonstrates a free will in which Jesus independently chooses to act according to the will of God (cf. Matt 26:39). At best, Augustine presents a theory of how God can both be love and perform love simultaneously; however, Augustine does not present how the Trinity expresses this intra-trinitarian love to humanity.

God's love occurs in five categories: (1) providential, (2) intra-trinitarian, (3) inviting, (4) electoral, and (5) covenantal. Providential love is God's love as it relates to the whole of creation. God cares for his creation, intending to redeem it (Ps 95:4–5; Rom 8:19–22). God's provision for all of humanity displays his love to those who reject him. Matthew 5:45 says, "[God] causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (NET). Thus, providential love is that blessing of God that all creation equally receives. Some call this category "benevolent love." That is, God does not seek to harm any part of his creation but desires creation's growth and provision.

Intra-trinitarian love is the emotional bond within the Godhead. This type of love is exclusive to the members of the Godhead. Bruce Ware notes, "In this tri-personal relationship the three persons love one another,

support one another, assist one another, team with one another, honor one another, communicate with one another, and in everything respect and enjoy one another."<sup>17</sup>

This is possible because the Father, Son, and Spirit share the same essence, purpose, and goals. The Father loves the Son because there is no disappointment found in him. The Son loves the Father because the Father is perfect, wholly lovable (cf. John 17:1–23). Though humanity rejects him, God's love invites all people into his fold. However, God's invitation stands on the caveat that one will follow his terms. The prophet Hosea best demonstrates this point when he seeks to buy back his wife, Gomer, from a life of harlotry (Hos 3:1–5). Though Hosea pays the redemption price, true redemption is only possible for Gomer if she forsakes her life of harlotry and fully commits to her marriage relationship with Hosea.

Electoral and covenantal love are closely related, though some distinct differences appear. Electoral love is God's love for his chosen people. God says, "Israel have I loved but Esau I have hated" (Rom 9:13; Mal 1:2). This is a love of blessing, protection, and prosperity. Electoral love appears in the context of a collective singular (e.g., the nation of Israel, the church).

Covenantal love, however, is conditional based on obedience of the covenant-keeper. Covenantal love appears both in collective singular and individualistic

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<sup>17</sup> Bruce Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 20.

terms. God expects the recipient of his love to reciprocate that love back to him, whether a nation of people, the body of Christ, or individuals in each. Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). In addition, whether God will bless or curse the Israelites (Deut 30:15–20) is contingent on the people’s obedience or disobedience to his law, not on some universal love.

While love unites with God’s essence, it is a misconception to think of wrath in these same terms. To say, “God is love” is to fuse love with the fullest nature of God—his holiness. However, one cannot say, “God is wrath” in the same vein that one can say, “God is love.” God’s wrath is always a reaction, not a constant state of being. Because holiness is the fullest essence of God, wrath can only proceed out of a source of holiness.

There are two primary positions among theologians concerning God’s wrath: (1) wrath is necessary for God’s perfection (i.e., Jeremy Wynne’s view) and (2) wrath is not one of the intrinsic perfections of God (i.e., Don Carson’s view).<sup>18</sup> For Wynne, God’s righteousness demands the execution of wrath because God must punish sinners.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Wynne, because sin exists, wrath is unavoidable.

Carson, on the other hand, agrees with Wynne in that God will send his wrath upon sinners because God’s holiness demands it. However, for Carson, wrath is not an essential element required for God to be “God.” Carson argues, “Where there is no sin, there is no wrath.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine*, 67. See also Wynne, *Wrath*, 17.

Therefore, in a world where there is no sin (e.g., a post-eschaton existence), there is no need for wrath. That is, the eschaton ultimately separates sin and holiness (i.e., Heaven and Hell). Thus, for Carson, God will no longer exert his wrath against sin/sinners because these things will no longer be in the presence of God.

Wynne and Carson both assert the importance of Hell as the final execution of God’s wrath. Wynne argues that Hell is God’s outpouring of wrath on those who reject and rebel against him. For Wynne, hell is the eternal outpouring of God’s wrath upon sin. This requires God’s presence to be associated in some sense with Hell. In other words, Wynne suggests that the depiction of Hell as the absence of God is an incorrect interpretation.

Carson, however, suggests Hell is the separation of the love and mercy of God from unrepentant, unsaved sinners. Sin utterly separates God from Hell because a holy God cannot exist in an unholy place. In this sense, Hell is the utmost absence of God, which is the absence of love. For Carson, there is no need for God to exert his wrath as a personal action because the absence of God only allows for misery and desolation. While Wynne concerns himself with the material aspect of Hell (e.g., fire, brimstone, gnashing of teeth), Carson concerns himself with the emotional aspect of Hell (i.e., the absence of love, the absence of mercy, and the presence of evil).

Carson and Wynne are both concerned with Hell as divine punishment. Both Carson and Wynne avoid

<sup>19</sup> Wynne, *Wrath*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine*, 67.

discussions of God's judgment as a vital part of the execution of his wrath. If Hell is the ultimate execution of God's wrath against sin, evil, and unrighteousness (regardless of whether his presence to do so is necessary or not), God's judgment is the reaction to the situation. God's judgment is always righteous. Thus, God's ability to react in righteousness precedes any display of wrath.

God's wrath occurs not least in three contexts: (1) damning, (2) disciplining, and (3) redeeming. Some prefer to call God's damning wrath "eschatological wrath." However, to speak of "damning wrath" broadens wrath to encompass eschatology (Hell), personal sin that leads to death (e.g., Nadab and Abihu, Ananias and Sapphira), and cataclysmic judgments (e.g., the flood). Sin cannot escape the damning wrath of God. God's mercy does not overshadow or relent this wrath. However, damning wrath is not synonymous with God losing his temper. Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness" (Rom 1:18). God's damning wrath is a display of his holiness against those things that are against his nature.

Many theologians would like to place God's discipline in a separate category from his wrath. However, the line between the two is not as concrete as some might suppose. Carson uses the term "wrath" to refer to the fatherly discipline one directs toward unruly children.<sup>21</sup>

For Carson, God's disciplining wrath is temporarily painful. God intends this form of wrath to promote change, new character, and correction among those who should love and revere him. God counts the recipients of such discipline as his children (Heb 12:7–13). This type of wrath is not destructive but corrective.

God's redeeming wrath occurs in Jesus's death on the cross. Jesus, a man who knew no sin became sin and suffered the punishment for sin. By becoming sin on humanity's behalf, Jesus took on the wrath of God that was due to humanity (2 Cor 5:21). Christ's death is not merely an act of ultimate love or a demonstration against evil. Christ's death satisfies the demands of a holy and just God. Therefore, God can be both just and justifier. No human being other than Jesus could fully satisfy the wrath of God. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice who paid a debt he did not owe (Heb 10:14–24).<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

To study God is to first understand who God is and what God does (i.e., God's essence and God's attributes). God is love, and God is loving. God is spirit, and God does spiritual things. God is holy, and God does holy things. Love and wrath cannot coexist within the nature of God if one divorces these attributes from the foundation of God's holiness. To be holy, God must possess perfect love. Love defines holiness, and holiness defines love. Wrath, on the other hand, is not intrinsic to God's

atonement) allows God's approval of saved humanity to be a just decision. See Rom 3:9–23, Rom 5:12–21, and 1 John 2:2.

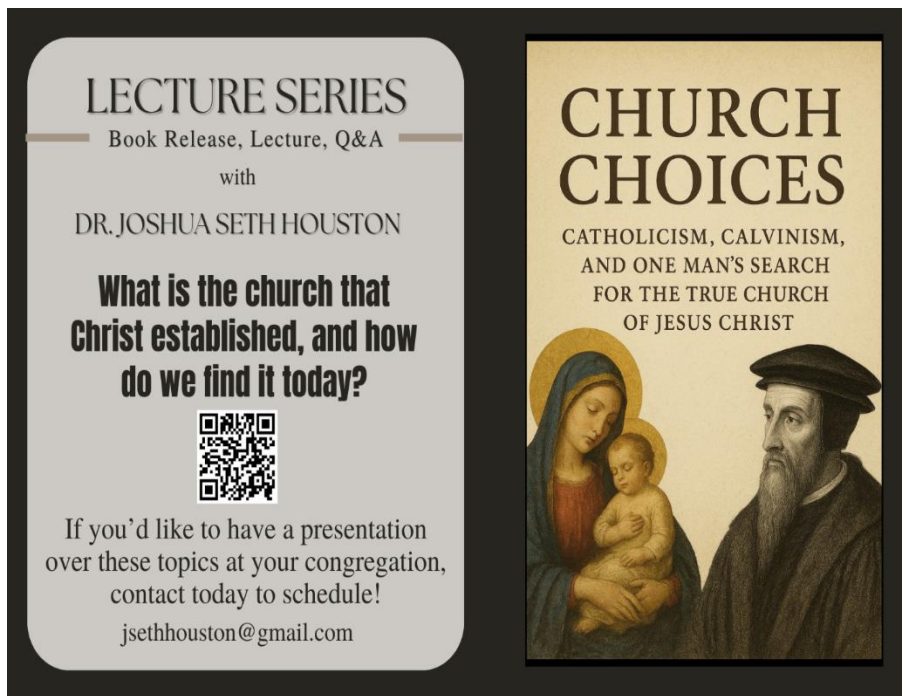
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<sup>21</sup> Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine*, 24.

<sup>22</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to evaluate the old vs. new perspectives of Paul. Suffice it to say here that the doctrine of justification demands God act justly. Jesus's death (i.e., his


essence. Wrath is a divine reaction according to the judgment of God. God cannot be “God” without love or holiness. God can, however, be “God” without having to display wrath.

Wrath and love do not oppose one another. Based in holiness, love demands wrath and wrath demands love. Theologians will debate how wrath and love pertain to the problem of evil, Hell, and salvation; however, a consensus concerning love and wrath as attributes of God is closer than many realize.



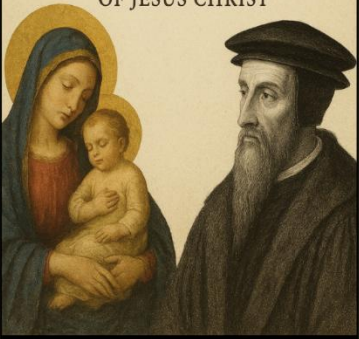
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