

Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church

Mission and Ministry for Presbyterians

JOSEPH D. SMALL, EDITOR



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Introduction

Joseph D. Small

*F*aithful proclamation of the gospel has always been at the center of Presbyterian life, and preaching remains a fundamental responsibility of the church's ministers. Preaching is not simply one item in a catalog of ministerial functions or a secondary activity in the bustle of congregational programs. Proclamation of the good news is at the heart of congregational life, a clear indicator of ecclesial fidelity. John Calvin, principal forebear of the Presbyterian Church's Reformed tradition, centers the church's faithful life in the gospel's proclamation through preaching and sacraments: "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."¹

Calvin's formulation was not an abstract definition of an ideal, invisible church. He had actual, quite visible congregations in view. More specifically, his eyes were fixed on worshiping assemblies gathering week after week. So Calvin's question—and ours—is empirical: "When we look at a worshiping congregation, do we see and hear preaching that is faithful to the gospel? Do we see and hear and taste and feel celebrations of Baptism and the Lord's Supper that proclaim the good news?"

Focus on the real life of actual congregations is sharpened by Calvin's insertion of the two little words *and heard* into his formulation. He understood that proclamation of the Word alone is not sufficient, no matter how faithfully and skillfully preachers preach and teachers teach. Proclamation must be *heard* to fulfill its purpose. By hearing, Calvin did not mean mere listening, of course, or even mere understanding. *Hearing* means *receiving*, and *receiving* means *living out* the good news that is proclaimed in the preaching and teaching of the Word and in the celebration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Proclamation of the Word of God centers the church on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit,

and then calls the church to its reason for being, shaping its mission in the world. It is too often tempting and far too easy for ministers and congregations to turn inward, focusing on institutional success by developing programs to meet every real or imagined need and managing for growth. The preaching of God's Word pulls us away from self-absorption and organizational operations, drawing preachers and congregations into the good news of God's new Way in the world. David Buttrick puts the matter nicely: "Christian preaching tells a story and names a name. If narrative consciousness confers identity, then preaching transforms identity, converts in the truest sense of the word, by rewriting our stories into a God-with-us story—beginning, Presence, and end."²

But, in our time, the preaching of sermons is not always evaluated positively. Some thoughtful observers question whether sermons continue to be effective means of proclaiming the gospel, still capable of rewriting personal and congregational stories into a God-with-us story. We live in an age of quick, interactive communication—blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. Is a twenty-minute homily spoken to a voiceless gathering able to draw us into communion with the triune God, to set before us a world that is different from the way things are, and to project a way of life that is more real than the everyday existence that we assume to be factual?

The problematic of preaching goes far deeper than worries about various forms of current communication technology, however. Twenty-five years ago, Neil Postman examined the significance of "television culture" for the way we think. Postman maintains that all forms of communication media work in unobtrusive yet powerful ways to enforce their special definitions of reality: "Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like."³ Postman claims that television (and its ancillary expansions) has produced *The Age of Show Business*, in which entertainment is the primary lens through which we see the world. "The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter," says Postman, "but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether."⁴ Do we doubt it? A moment's reflection on the state of television news or the pervasive presence of reality(!) television is enough to confirm Postman's analysis.

What are the implications for preaching? Postman worries about what happens to preaching when it is presented on television, but the larger worry is what happens to preaching in churches where both preacher and congregation are shaped by a "television culture." Will the preacher be tempted, knowingly

or unknowingly, to make the sermon “entertaining,” providing people with something they want or think they want? Postman says what we should know without being told: “I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.”⁵ Even when the sermon is faithful to the truth of the gospel, will people in the congregation be bored by sustained thought or put off by demanding and serious preaching of the gospel?

The narrator of E. L. Doctorow’s novel *The Waterworks*, looking back at the New York City of the 1870s, notes, “Quaint as it may seem, sermons in those days were considered newsworthy. The Monday papers were filled with them . . . substantial excerpts or even whole texts of representative sermons delivered from pulpits around town. The clergy were considered dignitaries of the city, and religious diction was assumed to be applicable to the public issues of the day.”⁶ Today, when even newspapers are becoming quaint, sermons are hardly newsworthy, and religious speech is consigned to the fringes of public issues.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall captures both the problematic of preaching and the daunting task of preachers:

For in an age when human expectations with respect to public address have been reduced to entertainment, when slow argumentation and the reasoned presentation of ideas has been replaced by the shallow magic of the one-liner or the three minute “clip,” and when individuals, if they are allowed to speak, speak as human beings whose natural endowments are “enhanced” by the techniques of sound, light, makeup, and all the rest, the person who dares to stand before others simply as a human being before human beings, attempting to sway them by mere language, knows the meaning of naked finitude.⁷

An entertainment/celebrity culture, coupled with a society that is both increasingly secular and religiously plural, raises difficult questions for Christian proclamation. Yet Reformed Christians have always made extravagant claims for preaching. The sixteenth-century Second Helvetic Confession boldly asserts, “THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD.”⁸ Twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth declares, “The Word of God preached now means . . . man’s language about God, in which and through which God Himself speaks about Himself.”⁹ More recently, Andrew Purves contends that “. . . the reality, truth, and power of the actuality of our preaching is the Word of God, not an illustration of it, or some kind of practical application.”¹⁰

These theological claims appear audacious, for most Presbyterians have heard enough dreadful sermons to doubt that God’s voice resounds in

preachers' mouths. Grand claims for preaching seem diminished when confronted by the reality of some careless, uninformed, opinionated, compliant, or self-serving sermons. Yet the claims for preaching do not depend on the wisdom or skill of those who speak but on their fidelity to the scriptural witness. What is implicit in all Reformed claims about preaching is made explicit in the Confession of 1967: "God instructs the church and equips it for mission through preaching and teaching. By these, when they are carried on in fidelity to the Scriptures and dependence upon the Holy Spirit, the people hear the word of God. . . ." ¹¹ Note the clause "*when they are carried on in fidelity to the Scriptures and dependence upon the Holy Spirit.*" The Directory for Worship is even more straightforward: "The preached Word or sermon is to be based upon the written Word. It is a proclamation of Scripture in the conviction that through the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ is present to the gathered people, offering grace and calling for obedience." ¹²

Fidelity to Scripture is preacherly and congregational confidence that God has made himself known through Israel and in Jesus Christ, and that God's self-revelation finds authentic and reliable witness in the Old and New Testaments. Fidelity to Scripture is preacherly and congregational assurance that God continues to make himself known through the biblical word, and that the Holy Spirit is active in both the speaking of the preacher and the hearing of the congregation. To say that the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God is not a grandiose claim for preaching but a confident declaration about the continuing presence of God.

Nearly ninety years ago Karl Barth pointed to the enduring significance of proclamation in the church. Having recently concluded his twelve-year pastorate in a small Swiss town, his address on the need of Christian preaching at a summer pastors' conference bore the marks of authentic experience.

The serious meaning of the situation in our churches is that the people want to hear the word, that is, the answer to the question which, whether they know it or not, they are actually animated, Is it true? They want to find out and thoroughly understand the answer to this one question, Is it true? —and not some other answer which beats about the bush. . . . If we do not understand this ultimate desire, if we do *not* take the people seriously . . . we need not wonder if a majority of them, without becoming enemies of the church, gradually learn to leave the church to itself. ¹³

Contemporary preaching, at its best, is animated by the same question: *Is it true?* In every sermon in every congregation, the truth of the gospel is at stake.

Proclaiming the Great Ends of the Church is a collection of sermons that represent a cross section of contemporary Presbyterian preaching. Most,

though not all, were preached by pastors in the churches they serve. Some of the congregations that heard these sermons are large; some are small. Some of the preachers have been at it for many years, while others are in the very early years of ministry. The mix of preachers and congregations is multicultural and represents a broad spectrum of theological convictions. The collection is not only an attempt to be inclusive, however, but is also a means of showing how Presbyterian preachers fulfill their calling Sunday by Sunday in fidelity to Scripture and dependence on the Holy Spirit.

Although the sermons are rooted in specific scriptural texts, they address the themes found in the “Great Ends of the Church,” a century-old statement of the foundational goals of church life. In our time, “vision statements” and “mission statements” have become a staple of church life. Congregations, presbyteries and synods, and national boards and agencies devise generalized statements of what they are to be and do. The process of developing mission statements may be valuable, but the results are almost always lackluster. Moreover, church mission statements are disturbingly similar to the mission statements of grocery stores and drug companies, featuring an idealized image, quality goods, and friendly service.

Perhaps Presbyterians would be better served by focusing attention on a “mission statement” that has been in the church’s constitution for over one hundred years, such as the “Great Ends of the Church.” Embedded in the opening chapter of the *Book of Order* are six great purposes of the church’s life—the life of every congregation and of the whole denomination. Taken together, they express direction for mission with a clarity and substance rarely found in the fleeting products of church committees. The Great Ends of the Church are

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.¹⁴

With an economy of words and a surplus of meaning, the church has six great aims to direct our life together, six basic works of the church that are foundational to who the church is and what the church is called to do.

The Great Ends of the Church should not be seen as a laundry list of disconnected items, for they are intended as a holistic vision for the church’s life. The church cannot be faithful to the intention of the Great Ends by emphasizing some while neglecting others. All six of the church’s great purposes are integrally related. Their interconnections become evident in an interesting way when they are paired from the outside in.

- “Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” *and* “exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.” Senseless debates about verbal evangelism *vs.* the witness of our lives are put aside when their mutuality is made evident by the comprehensive design of the Great Ends. Speaking the gospel is oddly abstract without the witness of the Christian life; the witness of Christian life without the gospel narrative is vague and ambiguous. The Great Ends of the Church display their unity.
- “Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God” *and* “promotion of social righteousness.” There need be no tension between the internal life and outward mission of the church. Focus on the inner life of a congregation or denomination without active engagement in the quest for social justice leads to self-seeking introversion, while focus on social action apart from attention to the inner life of the faith community leads to centrifugal exhaustion. The Great Ends of the Church display their unity.
- “Maintenance of divine worship” *and* “preservation of the truth.” There should be no disjunction between devotion and integrity, drama and doctrine, beauty and truth. Worship that neglects the truth of the gospel, no matter how engaging and creative and inspiring it may be, is not maintaining the worship of *God*. Truth without praise and prayer is not truth about *God*. The Great Ends of the Church display their unity.

The Great Ends of the Church are not theological boilerplate, and fulfilling these six fundamental purposes is not automatic. Each of the Great Ends presents problems for the church and challenges for the preacher.

Proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind: What exactly is the shape of the good news? The answer may seem self-evident to some individuals, but there is no shared articulation of “gospel” throughout the church or in most congregations. What is salvation? Is it forgiveness of sin? . . . eternal life in heaven? . . . abundant life in the here and now? . . . incorporation into the body of Christ? . . . all of the above? North American Christian consciousness of the religiously plural character of society leads to uncertainty about the universal truth of Christian faith. Is salvation only possible within the gospel of Jesus Christ? Little wonder that in a Lilly Endowment–sponsored survey of pastoral leaders, over 75 percent of respondents identified “difficulty of reaching people with the gospel today” as a problem in their ministry.¹⁵

Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God: Shelter from what? Nurture for growth into what? And in churches with fellowship halls and fellowship hours, what does *spiritual* fellowship mean? In a market-driven consumer culture, is there a danger that the inner life of the church

will be shaped in ways designed to appeal to shoppers for religious goods and services? This seemingly benign Great End challenges the church to create a community that is radically different from common notions of togetherness. The church is called to be the one body of Christ, empowered by the one Spirit, living in one hope, with one Lord, one faith, one baptism, under one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph. 4:4–6).

Maintenance of divine worship: The third Great End of the Church sounds slightly defensive. “Maintenance” implies that divine worship is in doubt, that its continuation is not a certain thing. What is it about divine worship that makes it vulnerable, placing it in need of constant upkeep? The issue is not worship that is “simply divine,” of course, but the worship of *God*. Is worship in danger of focusing more on the worshipers than on the One who is to be worshiped? Can worship of God become secondary to reverence for our position, possessions, and possibilities . . . or even our devotion to our congregation?

Preservation of the truth: Our culture is oddly ambivalent about truth, placing unquestioning confidence in scientific truth but resisting religious and moral truth claims. We are more comfortable with multiple truths than with one truth. How are we to understand the universal claims of the gospel in a postmodern world? This foundational purpose of the church not only seems restrictive; it also sounds quite conservative. Should the church look to new and creative approaches to faith and leave preservation to museums and archives? Or is it possible to appreciate that “true novelty is that which does not grow old, despite the passage of time”?¹⁶

Promotion of social righteousness: How can we understand social justice as a purpose of the church when disagreements about the shape of social justice separate congregations and divide denominations? While all may agree that a just social order is an imperative of the gospel, Alasdair MacIntyre’s question confronts us all: “Whose Justice? Which Rationality?”¹⁷ Even when Christians are able to agree on broad social aims, they may disagree sharply on the question of how they are to be “promoted.” Means as well as ends are disputed throughout the church. Can the church promote social righteousness, or is the church only able to pursue a variety of disparate strategies for the achievement of often contradictory social ends?

The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world: What does the world see when it looks at the church? Will they “know we are Christians by our love,” or will they know we are Christians by our sectarian fragmentation and churchly self-concern? Can a divided church display God’s new way in the world, or do the church’s endless separations damage the credibility of the

gospel? Given the world's increasing suspicion of the church, how can each congregation exhibit the reality of God's reign in its place and time?

The sermons in this book do not attempt to provide comprehensive answers to the big questions that are raised for the church by the great purposes set before it. Instead, they do what all faithful preaching does: proclaim God's word in a particular passage of Scripture to a particular people at a particular time. Sermons are not theological lectures or ecclesial instruction manuals, but rather moments in an ongoing conversation between preacher and congregation, a conversation in which God is participant as well as subject. The moments collected here are intended to be part of a conversation with readers and a stimulus to their conversation with others.

Frederick Buechner observes, "Sermons are like dirty jokes; even the best ones are hard to remember."¹⁸ If all that is remembered about these sermons is the possibility and necessity of proclamation that centers preachers and congregations on the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit—thus calling the church to its reason for being and shaping its mission in the world—the sermons will have fulfilled their own "Great End."

NOTES

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.9; ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1023.

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3. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking, 1984), 10.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

5. *Ibid.*, 121.

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11. *The Confession of 1967: Inclusive Language Text* (Louisville, KY: Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002), 9.49.

12. "The Directory for Worship," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2009), W-2.2007.

13. Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Glouster, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 110.

14. *Book of Order*, G-1.0200.

15. See <http://www.congregationallifesurvey>.

16. Muriel Barbery, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* (New York: Europa Editions, 2008), 100.
17. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
18. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 86.

1

The Proclamation of the
Gospel for the Salvation
of Humankind

Nathanael: Coming Honestly

Jerry Andrews

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

John 1:43–51 TNIV

The eighteen verses that open John's Gospel are so full and rich that we are never tempted to think of them as a mere introduction. The "prologue" to John is summative. Like an executive summary the opening eighteen verses consider all the content of the twenty chapters that follow and condense them into one unparalleled statement.

"In the beginning was the Word. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, . . . full of grace and truth . . . and we beheld his glory." By the time

we leave the Gospel's first eighteen verses we know everything that John wants us to know. If we've fully grasped what is said there, we've got it all.

But this is not how John wants us to learn the good news of Jesus Christ; it is not how John himself learned it. John *beheld* Jesus—he saw him, heard him, touched and was touched by him, loved and was loved by him, walked and talked with him, lived with him. The Word *dwelt* with John!

John shows us the dwelling—what Jesus said, to whom he spoke, what he did, who met him, who touched him and was touched by him, how he lived and died and now lives again. So although the story of Nathanael's calling is only in the first chapter of John's Gospel, everything we need to know is already known because of the prologue. We know who Jesus is from the very start. Nothing will catch us by surprise. Nathanael, however, will experience all of this as something new and startling. And we—those of us who read and hear these words now—if we let God's Word have its full effect on us by God's Spirit . . . *we* will behold Jesus.

John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the Savior of the world on day one. On the next day others begin to come to Jesus one at a time. The conversations between Jesus and these others are brief; from our distance they even seem cryptic. But the short exchanges are pointed, and they make the point.

Andrew is first.

“What do you want?” Jesus asks.

“Rabbi, where are you staying?” Andrew replies.

“Come and you will see,” Jesus says.

And then the conversation is over. Andrew and the unnamed second disciple—no doubt John himself—follow Jesus. That's it. The initial conversation is over. Andrew and John will follow and converse with Jesus the remainder of their lives. But this initial conversation is complete. They have found salvation because the Savior has found them.

Simon, Andrew's brother, is next. Andrew says to Simon, “We have found the Messiah,” and then brings him to Jesus. Jesus says to Simon, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Peter.” And it's over. Another follower of Jesus; another lifelong disciple.

On the next day, Philip is first. Jesus says, “Follow me.” And Philip does. That's it—another believer, another convert.

Then comes Nathanael. Philip seeks Nathanael out. (Are they brothers like Andrew and Peter?) The conversation is a bit longer, but from our vantage point it still seems quite swift and cryptic. And so the conversation needs to be unfolded with special care now in order to be witnessed fully.

Philip says to Nathanael, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the

son of Joseph.” Philip’s words are an appeal, an appeal specially designed for the studious Nathanael. Like many in Israel, Nathanael is waiting—perhaps with anticipation, perhaps with cynicism, perhaps alternating between the two, but waiting. Nathanael’s waiting is not passive. He reads while he waits; he reads the Scriptures—the Law and the Prophets. Philip knows this about Nathanael and makes the bold proclamation “The one you’ve been reading about in the ancient script is here!”

You and I know this already. We know it from the prologue to the Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh.” Philip now knows this, but Nathanael does not. Will Nathanael come to know? How will he know? How will he come to Jesus?

At first, not easily.

He questions Philip; “Nazareth! Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Read “great” for “good” here. It is a legitimate question. Great things and great people normally come from great places like Jerusalem or Egypt. And so when a great person comes from a small place, Scripture makes careful mention of it (“Bethlehem, though you are small, from you shall come the Savior.”) Jerusalem, Egypt, and even little Bethlehem all get their due in the predictions of the Prophets . . . but Nazareth receives no mention. Nathanael knows this. It’s not simply that Nazareth is small and somewhat inconsequential (everyone mentioned in this story so far lives in or near Nazareth). It’s not geography or sociology but the Scriptures that are determinative, and Philip makes his appeal to Nathanael based on the Scriptures . . . where there is no mention of Nazareth. Philip had introduced Jesus, the one long predicted and waited for, as coming from a place that gets no mention at all in the predictions of the Law and the Prophets.

“Nazareth! Can anything great come from a place not even mentioned in the Scriptures?” What is Philip to do with Nathanael’s objection? Philip knows the truth about Jesus, but he does not know how to persuade his friend Nathanael. Philip’s next move may seem desperate. And maybe it is, but it is also masterful, for it’s the same move the Master had made. Repeating Jesus’ first words to his first disciples, Philip says simply, “Come and see.”

This, John wants us to know, is the perfect invitation: “Come and see.” It is an invitation that requires a response and invites the best one. Now it’s up to Jesus. The burden of persuasion belongs to Jesus, and he gladly takes the burden. What does Jesus do? Jesus simply presents himself. This is what Jesus has always done:

He sends his Spirit to convict and convince.

He speaks his own word of inviting and persuading.

He calls his own disciples and invites his own followers.
He who created the human heart wins it over.
He who constructed the human mind persuades it.

Philip's work is done; Jesus' work begins. As Nathanael approaches, he overhears Jesus say to Philip, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

I need to interrupt the narrative at this point to remind you of another one—a narrative that Nathanael knew perfectly well: Isaac and Rebekah had twin boys (like Philip and Nathanael?). They named them "Hairy" (Esau) and "Deceiver" (Jacob). This cannot have worked well for the boys. Comments about Hairy's lack of evolution were inevitable, and the name Deceiver was an obvious handicap when looking for business partners. Remember, ancient Hebrew did not have a separate category of proper nouns with no specific meaning to be used as persons' names. Hebrew names were meant to be descriptive of the person, or prescriptive.

"Deceiver" . . . "Cheater" . . . "False One" . . . Jacob's name was descriptive. He "jacobed" his brother Esau out of his birthright, and then he "jacobed" Esau out of their father's blessing. When this deceit was discovered, Isaac said to the dejected Esau, "Your brother came to me with 'jacob' in his heart." Esau responded, "He is rightly named Jacob, for he has 'jacobed' me two times."

Later God changed Jacob's name. No longer "Cheater," "Deceiver," he was given a new name: "Israel"—"Beloved of God." But his heart was never fully converted, and his own children, learning from their father, "jacobed" him in cruel and consequential ways.

That Jacob was renamed Israel was one of the most powerful stories in Nathanael's Scriptures. That Jacob never fully ceased "jacobing" was a cautionary tale for Nathanael. And so he cultivated the discipline of truth telling, honest action, and living with integrity.

Jesus knows this about Nathanael. When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, he says of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit," no "jacob." Nathanael catches the play on words immediately. In that moment, Nathanael receives the highest compliment that Jesus gives in the Gospel. It is the compliment that Nathanael, this careful student of the Scriptures, this honest man, probably most wanted to hear.

But he declines the compliment. Why? Because Nathanael had resolved not only that he would never deceive but also that he would never be deceived. Nathanael had determined to be neither Jacob nor Esau.

And this is where Nathanael's mind is at the moment. His brother Philip has, on the basis of a brief meeting, been persuaded that Jesus is the One and has now proclaimed it to Nathanael. But Nathanael is not so easily convinced. There are Jacobs out there; they are cunning and quick; and they will cheat you out of everything. Has his own brother been deceived? The possibility is on Nathanael's mind. Perhaps as much to save his brother from the deceit as to explore the possibility of the claim being true, he has approached Jesus.

Jesus, it seems, has read his mind and knows what he values. Jesus reads Nathanael as well as Nathanael reads the Scriptures.

"Where did you get to know me?" Nathanael asks. If Jesus truly knows this about him, Nathanael would be impressed. But is it a trick? One cannot be too careful in these matters.

Jesus answers, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."

The phrase "under the fig tree" is a euphemism for meditating on the things of God—God's ways, God's will, God's word, God. At its best, to be "under the fig tree" is to converse with God, deal with God, and be dealt with by God. This might be agonizing, like Jacob's wrestling with God when his named was changed. In our imagery, Rodin's sculpture "The Thinker," with right elbow on left knee, chin supported by hand, seated and still, is a close equivalent to the image of one seated "under the fig tree."

This is precisely what Nathanael has been doing. (Has he recently been meditating on the Jacob story?) Nathanael's meditating on the things of God was not only a one-time moment—*before Philip called you*—but the basic discipline of his life. Nathanael has been conversing—wrestling—with God.

"I know this about you," says Jesus. "I know what's in your head and what's on your heart. I know what you hope for—the promised One; and what you fear—being *jacobed* by a deceiver. I know this because when you were wrestling with God, Nathanael, you were wrestling with me."

Nathanael did not know what we know: "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh . . . and we beheld his glory . . . glory as of the Father's only Son." Furthermore, you and I know that the faith of the church proclaims that God has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so that everyone—including every Old Testament character—everyone, when wrestling with God, wrestles with the Son.

While under the fig tree, Nathanael had been wrestling with Jesus. Jesus knows this. John knows this. You and I know this. Now Nathanael knows this.

And he rejoices.

Nathanael replies, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" And just like that there is a new disciple of the Master.

But the brief conversation continues with Jesus' longest speech so far in the Gospel—three full sentences:

“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?” (That is to say, “this is precious little on which to make such a conclusion, Nathanael—very little for one so concerned about being *jacobed*.”) “You will see greater things than these. Very truly I tell you that you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Which brings us back to the story of Jacob. No other narrative in Scripture speaks about angels ascending and descending than the story of Jacob's ladder. Jacob, alone and exhausted, sleeps in the wilderness with a stone for a pillow. He dreams of conversation with God, with the messengers of God climbing up and down a ladder connecting God with humanity. Jacob dreamed this; Nathanael will see it.

Jesus is the Ladder. Human communication with God will take place through him—“ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” All of Nathanael's prayers and all of his wrestlings had been with Jesus, and he will soon see

the healing of the blind man, and Jesus walking on the water;
the lame lifted up, and the Son of Man lifted up;
the wind and waves stilled, and the stone rolled away;
sinners ascending to God, because God descended to sinners.

When Jacob awoke from his dream he proclaimed, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” Nathanael now makes the same proclamation. The heavens open to Nathanael, and he sees and he knows.

How did all this happen?

No doubt much could be said about Nathanael's preparing himself by his diligent study and honest inquiry. He was found, after all, under the fig tree. The promotion of biblical literacy and sincere exploration of God's ways will always have good effect.

We could say a lot about Nathanael's wrestling with God though he did not know precisely with whom he was conversing. Our neighbors deal with God, and God, with them, even when they do not know it.

We could talk about how Nathanael discovered that he had always been fully known, and how he wanted to be fully loved as he walked and talked with the Savior. Many of us are afraid of being known, lest being known, we would not be loved. Nathanael is both fully known and fully loved. (You don't need to be Nathanael to love that very good news.)

Much could be said about John's purposes in writing his Gospel in a way that shows how initial brief conversations with Jesus lead to faith, and how faith was deepened and sustained in his presence. Sometimes it is amazingly quick and simple how faith begins in earnest.

We could talk a lot about every neighbor of ours and about the fact that no matter how far from God they think themselves to be, they are in unknown conversation with God, who hears every day's dream and every call in the night.

And we could have a full discussion about Jesus gladly bearing the burden of making his own disciples and being the only essential and necessary one in producing faith.

But I want to remind you of the brief conversation between Philip and Nathanael that led to the saving conversation between Jesus and Nathanael. Philip stated his convictions about the Savior to his beloved friend, but then, acknowledging that he could not of himself persuade his brother of what he himself had been persuaded, said simply and beautifully, "Come and see."

This story is about how Nathanael came to Jesus, so it is also a story about Philip. John, in recounting this brief conversation, encourages us to play the role of Philip. John encourages us to invite the Nathanaels in our life, first by stating our convictions about the Savior and then by inviting them to "come and see."

That is the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind: out of love for neighbors and in obedience to the Lord's command, stating our convictions about the Savior and then graciously inviting them to "come and see."

I imagine that after Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus, he stood a step back and listened in on the conversation between the Savior and Nathanael. Nathanael was not the only one that day who saw the heavens opened and angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. And Nathanael was not the only one that day that said, "Surely the Lord is in this place."

Amen.

Why Did Jesus Die?

Heidi Husted Armstrong

Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. Then Jesus had received the wine, he said, "It is finished." Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:16–19, 28–30

Preachers can be packrats. After twenty-five years of sermonizing I now have file cabinets stuffed with folders on just about every subject imaginable. This is what preachers do: we read like crazy, then clip and file (albeit increasingly electronically!)

A while back I started a file on *The Da Vinci Code*, because when the bestseller started flying off the shelves, some Christians freaked out. Many churches had classes and forums on it, but I think I can give my two-cents worth of analysis in sixty seconds or less:

First, pay attention to the book's cover. In large type it announces *The Da Vinci Code*, followed in really small print by "a novel." Please don't forget: *it's fiction*.

Second, for heaven's sake, don't buy it. *The Da Vinci Code* has sold over seventeen million copies! Borrow one.

Third, I read it, and I can say that it *is* a page-turner. But notice: I did not say "good literature." Not even close.

Fourth, it's mediocre literature but even worse theology. It is inaccurate, biased, and misleading. (Although, in my humble opinion, it is probably no worse than the *Left Behind* novels.)

So, fifth, do your homework. Start a file, because frankly, anything that can't stand up to questioning is probably not credible anyway.

And, finally: what about the terrible movie? Honestly, my answer is, *Whatever*. I mean no disrespect to you movie buffs, but movies come, and movies go. People get all worked up about movies, as if it must be true if it's on the big screen. The thing is movies can leave a lot to be desired . . . especially "religious" movies.

Andrea's Question

Do you remember several years ago, just before Easter, how we all packed movie theaters across America to see Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*? I was struck by something my sister Andrea said to me shortly after she saw *The Passion*. She was one of those who *loved* it. Well, that's not exactly the right word—she was deeply moved by it. As a fairly new believer it brought a lot of things together for her.

And yet after we had talked for quite awhile about how it had affected her, as the conversation was drawing to a close, I'll never forget how Andrea paused and then a bit sheepishly said, "Now, I know I'm supposed to know this . . . *but why did Jesus die?*"

How honest is that? If you've seen the film you know that's one question Mel doesn't really answer. *How* did Jesus die? Well, yes, there's lots of that—maybe too much, especially if you compare the film to our Gospel texts. The Bible is very short on details of Jesus' suffering. But *why* did Jesus die? Sorry, but Gibson pretty much leaves us in the dark. And, truthfully, our text from John's Gospel is not particularly illuminating either; there's very little "how" and zero "why."

So . . . "I know I'm supposed to know this, but why did Jesus die?"

As I talked with my sister that day, I almost went on autopilot. I almost took the easy way out. I almost said, "Well, Jesus died for our sins." Or, "Jesus died to save us." Well, true enough, *but what does that mean?*

So I came clean. I said, "Look, Andrea, I've been a Christian for over thirty years and I still struggle to explain it!" I don't think I'm alone.

A pastor friend of mine accompanied her high school youth group to Mexico to build houses over spring break. The trip took place during Holy Week, and on Maundy Thursday they celebrated the Lord's Supper together. After

receiving “the body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ poured out for you,” one of the students was stymied. “I just don’t get it,” he said. “Why did Jesus die?” What on earth does the death of this Jewish peasant carpenter on a cross two thousand years ago have to do with anything? The blank look that persisted on that teenager’s face was evidence of my friend’s valiant but magnificently opaque explanation.

This is one theological question that stymies lots of people, maybe especially Christians, and yes, even pastors. We know we’re supposed to know this . . . but why did Jesus die? Why wasn’t Jesus just transported directly from earth to heaven? (Hey, it happened before in the Bible, so it could happen again!) Or, why didn’t Jesus just die of old age, in his sleep? Why did Jesus have to die, and why did he have to die the way he did?

So I started another file—“Jesus, Death, Why?”—and I’ve been doing my homework, reading like crazy, clipping, filing . . . and I’ve discovered a few things.

Scriptural Imagery

The first thing I discovered is that the Gospel writers don’t try very hard to answer the question “Why did Jesus die?” Frankly, it made me nervous at first. But commentators tell us it’s not that the Gospel writers don’t care why Jesus had to die; it’s just that they are more intent on *proclaiming* the saving death of Christ than they are *explaining* it!

The other thing I discovered is that when Paul and other New Testament writers *do* address the question “Why did Jesus die?” they do not give one unequivocal answer—evidence that all of them were apparently trying to figure out what it meant, too!

What we see in the New Testament, and later in the early church, is not a single “official” answer to the question “Why did Jesus die?” What we see is the development of *multiple* answers, all of which are true. In Scripture and early church theology, we see different understandings beginning to develop from different perspectives. We see different explanations and diverse metaphors and images, making sense to people in different cultural contexts. What’s clear is that no one answer is adequate on its own; no single answer is able to say it all.

Some biblical writers use **financial imagery**. Picture a prison or a slave market, picture captives, people in bondage needing to be liberated. But, of course, freedom is not free. Redemption has a cost. A ransom must be paid. *And that’s why Christ died.* His death is the price paid to free humanity from bondage to sin. The Bible uses financial imagery.

Other New Testament writers use **military imagery**. Life is a battlefield where God and the devil are at war, duking it out for possession of God's people. And in Jesus Christ God confronts evil—with nothing, of course, but the weapons of sinlessness and love, not through violence but through his willingness to suffer. At first it appears that God suffers defeat. Jesus *dies*. But then, three days later on Easter morning, there is victory! God triumphs over the power of evil by raising Christ from the dead. Easter's resurrection is God's D-Day. The decisive battle is won. *And that's why Jesus died.*

Still other biblical writers use **legal imagery**. Picture a courtroom where the judge slams the gavel down and pronounces the verdict: Guilty! Those who are guilty of offending God's holiness deserve death. But then the judge takes the punishment upon himself! This is exactly what God does in Jesus Christ: he undergoes our death sentence for us. *This, too, is why Jesus died.*

So we have financial, military, and legal imagery. But perhaps the hardest for us to grasp is **sacrificial imagery**. We have to picture something we have never seen before: ancient worship, which is a far cry from our commanding pipe organ, stately hymns, and peppy praise music! Even the most *CSI*– or *Law and Order*–hardened viewer would likely shudder to see the temple altar filled with bleating animals, their necks outstretched, the flash of sharpened knives, and the sticky spatter and pungent smell of blood—all of which the Bible portrays on the high and holy Day of Atonement.

You can read all about it in Leviticus. When it comes to the meaning of sacrifice, one commentator describes Leviticus as “a primer with big pictures and big print.” Chapter 16 gives the basics: the temple is filled with guilty people who are estranged from God, needing forgiveness. The priest offers a sacrifice as a symbol of their corporate remorse as a substitute. This is how sacrifice works: a life for a life. Blood is shed because life is in the blood (Lev. 17:11, 14). And the result is forgiveness, reconciliation, atonement—“at-one-ment”—because relationship with God is restored.

But that's not all, because there is another sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. There is a second goat, the “scapegoat,” that is symbolically loaded up with all the sins of the people and then sent away, forgotten. This is also what God does. God not only forgives; God also forgets! Sin is now out of sight, out of mind.

But in the New Testament things get even better, because now Jesus is not only priest; he is also the sacrifice. *Jesus* is the substitute, atoning for human sin *once and for all*. The Letter to the Hebrews says, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” But it also says, “if the blood of goats . . . sanctifies those who have been defiled . . . *how much more* will the blood of Christ, who . . . offered himself without blemish to God, purify our

conscience . . . to worship the living God!” (Heb. 9:13–14, 22). Jesus is our sacrifice, our substitute. Jesus is the scapegoat who takes away the sins of the world. *And that’s why Jesus died.*

Still, Why Does It Take All This?

So there are a variety of explanations, multiple images, for why Jesus died. Yet I think if we’re honest, we still wonder, *Does it really take all this?* I mean, if God is God, and God can do whatever God wants (which is what it means to be God; it’s in the job description!) then can’t God just forgive and forget without all this blood-and-death stuff?

This is not to minimize sin. Sin is a big deal. Thumbing our noses at the Creator, telling the Almighty to get lost, is a big deal. The result—broken relationships with God, with one another, with all of creation—is a huge deal. I’ll give you that. But if God is God, can’t God just choose to *say*, “I forgive you,” and be done with it?

So you see the question is still lurking: Why did Jesus *have* to die?

Well, Scottish theologian and preacher Donald Baillie puts it this way. Suppose you hurt somebody, somebody you love. (I know this is a stretch, but stay with me here!) And so you say to that person, “I am so sorry I hurt you; I feel really bad about it.” And then that person says, “Well, it’s OK. It’s no big deal. Why don’t we just forget it.” *Is that really forgiveness?*

What is the person really saying? Isn’t that person actually saying something closer to “I don’t really care enough about you to be bothered by anything you say or do. You’re not that important to me”? So what happens is, you end up sitting there nursing the pain of your guilt when in fact what you really need is that person to help you deal with it, to help you clean the slate so that you can start fresh and move on. In other words, as Baillie so eloquently puts it,

Good-natured indulgence and casual acceptance are not forgiveness and love, but [in reality they are] an expression of indifference and sometimes [even] hostility. [In fact] real love and forgiveness mean caring enough to be hurt, caring enough to put ourselves in [an]other’s shoes and sharing their guilt as if it were our own. Real love and forgiveness are costly—not just in the sense that the guilty party must squeeze them out of the injured party but in the sense that the injured party genuinely sympathizes with the guilty and shares [their] pain.

And this is what God does!

Relational Imagery

So, Andrea, why did Jesus die? Jesus died because God cares for us too much to say, “Oh, it doesn’t really matter; let’s just forget it.” God does not flip-flop to dismiss our sin and guilt—because it *does* matter.

Jesus died because words alone don’t cut it; because actions speak louder than words. In Jesus’ death God acts to demonstrate that God’s love and forgiveness are genuine.

Jesus died because when we thumb our noses at God, when we tell God and others in our lives to “get lost”—resulting in separation, loneliness, and alienation—God deliberately stands *with* us. God *won’t* “get lost.”

Donald Baillie continues, “In the cross God says to us, ‘Yes, it is true. You *have* hurt and offended me. But I still love you.’” In fact, God says, I love you so much “I will make your guilt and its consequences my own.” I love you so much “I will suffer with you—[and] *for* you—to make things right between us again.”

In other words, for us to understand why Christ died it takes **relational imagery**. And, what’s more, when we begin to employ this relational imagery we begin to understand that it is God’s *love* that motivates Christ death, not God’s *anger*.

How often do we hear people say that the Son dies on the cross to appease the Father’s anger? Of course, they still try to maintain that God is loving, but if you ask me that feels a little like having the owner of a dog who is barking, growling, and straining at its leash say, “Don’t worry, he doesn’t bite.” Yeah, right! I mean, have you ever felt that sometimes people make it sound like what Jesus came to save us from was . . . *God!*

The name of our church is Trinity Presbyterian, but for many people the Trinity is shorthand for some unexplainable, esoteric theology. So here’s some down-to-earth, accessible Trinitarian theology for you today: two thousand years ago the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were *not* having a big fight on Calvary! The Father and Son were not battling it out on the cross with the Spirit trying to referee, or maybe just trying to stay out of the way and not get in trouble.

It is not God versus Jesus on the cross, with the Spirit playing Switzerland. No, on the cross it’s *all* of God against *sin*; it’s *all* of God *for* humanity. God is not the problem; *sin* is the problem. *Those are the arms of God stretched wide in a loving embrace from the cross.*

And that’s why Jesus died!

We Presbyterians believe that one of the reasons the church exists is for “the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind” (it’s actually

the first thing on the list of the church's purposes). I believe we proclaim the good news of the saving death of Jesus Christ most compellingly when we stay with this *relational* imagery because we are called not only to proclaim the cross but also to live it—to demonstrate love, forgiveness, and hope; to put ourselves in another's shoes; to suffer with others. We are called to express God's love as Jesus did—by ministering in weakness, vulnerability, and suffering love; by caring enough to be hurt; by letting our hearts be broken.

Could it be that the greatest influence in inviting others to become followers of Christ is the *lifestyle* of Christians—a lifestyle marked by authenticity, transparency, love, forgiveness? And isn't *that* why Jesus died . . . not merely to provide us with a ticket to heaven someday but to be the key to a new kind of existence now, an existence that proclaims the gospel of salvation with our very lives! Surely this is some of what Jesus means when he says, "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). For followers of Jesus, *life is cruciform*. That too is why Jesus died—that we might *live* for him!

By the power of God who is at work within us, thanks be to God! Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My file on "Jesus, Death, Why?" is filled with notes from the following: William Placher, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 111–56; Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 250–69; Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1991), 151–56; and Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

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