

# Spiritual Formation and Christian Discourse

Stone-Campbell Conference

Speedway Church of Christ

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It is an extraordinary pleasure and blessing to be participating in this conference with brothers and sisters bound together as participants in and heirs of the Stone-Campbell Movement. It is a further joy to be invited here by my good friend and former student, Kent Ellett. The sheer delight of having him as that special sort of student who thinks clearly, believes deeply, and isn't afraid to speak up remains vivid in my memory. But to continue to have him as a conversation-partner in these years of my so-called retirement summons me to gird up my loins and engage his most probing questions and earnest proposals.<sup>1</sup> For you who are members of Kent's congregation here in Speedway, however much he may prod, probe, and challenge you to reach beyond your previous habits of thought, be reassured by me that he speaks with the authority and wisdom of angels and with the power of a divinely gracious passion.

As a seventy year-old third generation member of the Disciples branch of the Stone-Campbell movement, I have over the years encountered many from the Churches of Christ and Independent branches—encountered them as my students and as folks in the larger American ecclesial culture who are earnest about the authority of the Bible, the independence of the congregation, the unflinching inclusion of laity in church governance, and the unswerving conviction that there is a Gospel rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>2</sup>

But how might I engage my Movement friends to preserve this passion for the Gospel and the Bible, while easing them out of that oft-unspoken but troublesome conviction that the Bible and the 'facts' of the Bible have authority only if the whole of the Bible is *inerrant*. Of course, many are they in the Movement who have seen their brothers and sisters relinquish that conviction only to tumble right off the spectrum of traditional Christian beliefs. Take a roll in a Unitarian congregation and you will find many of the broken-hearted who once tabernacled among the Stone-Campbell Movement but lost an authoritative and salvific Christ to a "Jesus of history" who died inadvertently but nevertheless left behind sayings of considerable moral and symbolic value.

It is also continually troubling to me that the Stone-Campbell Movement has been so focused on the Bible, in particular the New Testament, that it easily falls into the habit of thinking that *tradition* and *theology* are temptations to be avoided. Just stick with the Bible only and all will be well. The tradition that folk have in mind when they think this way is the tradition of the early ecumenical creeds and what came to be called the Roman Catholic Church. However, it is virtually unnoticed that all the branches of the Movement are themselves continuing *traditions*—as in the traditions of local congregations with their distinctive ways of ordering their life and thought; as in the traditions by virtue of

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<sup>1</sup> Some folk may be interested in seeing an exchange between Kent and myself that is posted on my web site, [www.grammaroffaith.com](http://www.grammaroffaith.com), under "Responses" in the menu.

<sup>2</sup> In another format I recently addressed issues of ecclesiology with others in the Stone-Campbell Movement in an essay entitled "On Being the Church of Jesus Christ" in *Leaven*, vol. 15, no. 1 (First Quarter 2007), pp. 6-11.

which they could identify other congregations as included in their particular ‘brotherhood’. The Movement might have rejected some past traditions, but it was practically impossible to reject all traditioning because they could not continue on into the future without a sense of who they were, who else was like them, and who else was faithful in ways that could be trusted.

In this same connection, *doing theology* was typically considered *speculating* beyond what the Bible itself might say. ‘Speculating’ is the right word here, for it was a name for that apparent human reasoning and invention that went beyond the Bible and sought an authority and truth independent of the Bible. This negative sense about doing theology was also tied to a troubled mind about ‘doctrines’ and ‘creeds’. If theology is pursued it must be simply ‘biblical theology’; the Bible and the plain and intelligible ‘facts’ of the Bible are the ‘givens’ for all church theologizing and teaching. Yet this suspicion about *reasoning and theologizing* often obscured from Movement folk the obvious fact that they are *reasoning* all the time as they interpret and infer points from Scripture, make arguments, draw distinctions, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

Closely linked to these dimensions of our heritage was our wariness of talking about the Spirit and certainly our reluctance to talk about ‘spirituality’. To be sure, along with many in American Christianity, we talked excessively and effusively about faith being a ‘private matter between the individual and God’, though sometimes we would fall into that American idiom of saying ‘the individual and *his* God.’ Even today, when many other church traditions regard ‘spirituality’ as an urgent topic for the Christian life, Movement folk still put the emphasis on the individual and tend to ignore that the individual Christian always lives in some tradition in the midst of some formative community.

### **Some Proposals about Spiritual Formation and Christian Discourses**

These previous comments are simply intended as appetizers for the topic I have been assigned for this conference: Spiritual Formation and Christian Discourse. This actually is a wonderful topic, rich in possibilities of making some pertinent and hopefully useful remarks about the Christian life and the church. I propose the following for our consideration:

1. There is no Christian life or spirituality that is not formed by some tradition or traditions of discourse. Hence, the word ‘discourse’ here simply refers to the many ways in which a tradition lives in and through its distinctive ways of speaking and acting, of construing and judging, of thinking and believing, feeling and imagining. Take away these distinctive linguistic practices and you nullify the tradition as well. In making these

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<sup>3</sup> That some folk in the Movement nevertheless thought they were just interpreting the facts of Scripture in a manner of ‘inductive reasoning’, see Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988) and Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), especially pp. 96-98. For the reader/listener who is interested in further exploration on various theological topics, I will refer them to my systematic theology, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), hereinafter referred to as GCF. See GCF, 117-119 for a discussion of ‘reason’. See GCF, 121-130 for a discussion of the authority of Scripture, and 131-135 for a discussion of ‘tradition’.

points I am reminding us that the spirituality the church is concerned about is itself a *construction* of the language of the church.<sup>4</sup>

2. All of the primary discourses—the language—of the Christian church are *theological* in intent and scope: it is language *about* God and human life *before* God or language directed *to* God. Thus the constitutive language of the church is theological from beginning to end. The hymns we have sung this evening are theological. Our prayers are theological. Hence, let us give up the pretense that we are not doing theology or speaking theologically. The real question, however, is whether what we are doing and saying is good, true, and faithful theology, and that is a vexing but inescapable question that requires prolonged and demanding conversation and inquiry.

3. While the discourses of the Bible—what we call the Old and New Testaments—are the given discourses from which later traditions learn who God is and what God has done and is doing, it has never been the case that the discourses of the Bible were available to anyone apart from some contemporary ecclesial community of interpretation. As almost all of us Protestants have come to agree, the ecclesial tradition arising from first century Israel in the proclamation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the tradition that brought forth and determined what would constitute the authoritative canon of the New Testament. The church's discourses over the centuries have always been discourses intending to teach us what the Bible *really says*, but now really says according to the community's own study and interpretation. Hence, there is no easy answer to the question of which came first, the church or the New Testament. It was the early apostolic and post-apostolic church that wrote, preserved, and decided what would count as canonical texts for the church's life.

4. When we talk now as Christians about spiritual formation, we are relying on the distinctive ways in which the church talks about the shape of the Christian life. In ways conceptually interchangeable, talk of *spiritual life* is simply talk about how human life comes to be shaped, formed, transformed, and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Along with most church traditions, we have agreed that spiritual formation entails two overarching prongs of emphasis, both rooted in the prior forgiving grace of God in Jesus Christ: being formed by a relationship of love to God and being formed by a relationship of love for the neighbor.

Such formation could also be called *discipleship* to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. To be spiritual in the Christian sense is to be a disciple of Jesus—a follower of Jesus and a believer in Jesus' Gospel. When we tie spirituality to discipleship to Jesus, we should be able to grasp why spiritual formation is inextricably tied to some distinctive *beliefs* and distinctive *actions and feelings*. These beliefs and actions/feelings are what can also be called the *what* and the *how* of the Christian life. Saying it another way, in becoming members of the church as the body of Christ, persons are being formed by the incarnational narrative of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world. The Holy Spirit that moves within persons in the church is simply the Spirit of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of the Father.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I grant that it may seem peculiar to put this emphasis on language and discourse, but see my prolonged discussion of these concepts in GCF, 1-19.

<sup>5</sup> I think one of the reasons the Stone-Campbell Movement in all of its strands has been short on developing a doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is that we have hesitated at the development of a robust trinitarian doctrine of God. See GCF, 483-509, for an attempt at retrieving such a robust doctrine of the Spirit. Note as

In ways that I hope will become clearer in our conversation together, I will be contending that the *what* and the *how* of Christian life are intricately and complexly intertwined and interdependent. Hence, to suppose one can have the *whats*—the beliefs, the Gospel, the incarnational narrative—without the *how*—the way of life, or the *how* without the *whats* is to erroneously suppose that either can be had without the other.

5. The theological task of sorting out the *whats* of Christian faith is crucial to Christian spirituality. It is important in this regard to notice that every tradition of the church believes there is at the center of its faith a *Gospel*—a good news about what God has done for human salvation—and that Gospel centers on Jesus Christ. What is that Gospel? Over many years of teaching theology courses in seminaries I have insisted that each student must be involved in the process of identifying as clearly and succinctly as he or she can just what that Gospel is. If we cannot come to some agreement about the Gospel, then it is irrelevant whether we believe the Bible is inerrant or not. Further, I propose that how we identify the Gospel will also give us a clue to how we ought to be reading the Bible. Talk of spiritual formation will itself fall into disarray if there is substantial disagreement about what is the Gospel. I want to recommend that all of us here for this conference, pastors and laity alike, try our hand [or should I say try our tongue] at saying what the Gospel is. To put it strongly for emphasis sake: it is the Gospel that ought to be guiding our reading of the Bible rather than our assumption that the Bible is what we must first ‘believe in’ and then we can find the Gospel in the Bible.

6. Here is my try at formulating the Gospel—as the *Gospel of Jesus Christ*—as a way of clarifying for us what is involved in that spiritual formation that is summoned and formed by the Gospel:

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News  
that the God of Israel, the Creator of all creatures,  
has in freedom and love become incarnate  
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth  
to enact and reveal God’s gracious reconciliation  
of humanity to Godself, and  
through the Holy Spirit calls and empowers human beings  
to participate in God’s liberative and redemptive work by  
acknowledging God’s gracious forgiveness in Jesus,  
repenting of human sin,  
receiving the gift of freedom, and  
embracing authentic community by  
loving the neighbor and the enemy,  
caring for the whole creation, and  
hoping for the final triumph of God’s grace  
as the triune Ultimate Companion of all Creatures.

I hope it is discernible that this Gospel statement is meaningless apart from the rich biblically-formed and tradition-sustained discourses and practices of the church. But

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well how trinitarian conceptuality connects spirituality, Christian life, and the church in GCF, 511-591, 593-653.

I believe this statement might also give us some understanding of what sort of spiritual formation is important for the life of the church.

7. These points can position us to grasp an essential truth about faith and spiritual development: it is impossible—even unintelligible—that anyone can become a Christian without *learning how to be a Christian* and such learning is dependent on being formed by the distinctive *discourses* and *practices* of the church. It is this *learning how* that we can also call *being spiritually formed by and conformed to Christ*. The Christian life itself is simply the life of this *being formed and conformed*. To grow in spiritual life it is necessary to acquire the skills involved in thinking and practicing faithfulness. In learning these skills the Christian becomes *wise* in the ways of God.

If this sounds odd to us, let me put it another way: however intense an experience of some sort a person might have had, without awareness of some available Christian language, it would be strictly impossible that the person could understand her experience as an experience of the Holy Spirit of the risen Jesus Christ. Certainly one might later *learn* to construe a previously compelling experience as an experience of the Spirit of God, but this construal is itself dependent on the language the person has come to possess. Could Paul have recognized Jesus on the road to Damascus if he had never heard of Jesus nor heard any language about Jesus of Nazareth?

8. Central to this spiritual formation is that persons come to have an *identity* before God. It is an identity that is superior to any other identity the person might also have. This is the identity of knowing oneself loved and forgiven by God and called by God to life in and through the church as witness to God's grace. The practice of baptism both bestows this identity and signals the acceptance of that identity by the baptizee and her promise to grow more deeply into that identity in the unfolding future.<sup>6</sup>

9. In light of these points, I trust it is now obvious why I firmly believe that the church as the body of Christ is intrinsically an *alternative community* from the communities of the world and yet that sort of alternative that lives on behalf of the world. It lives on behalf of the world, yet not on the world's terms. Rather, the church lives on its own evangelical terms as a redemptive community summoned by God to witness to God's gracious Life for the redemption of the world.

10. Two further points follow from these. First point: the church is itself the *site* where the conversation occurs as to what are the distinctive and important beliefs of the faith. Accordingly, that conversation is joyfully *theological* and involves that struggle whereby the church and all its members are engaged in that inescapable movement of *faith seeking understanding*. Second point: when that conversation internal to the church falls into disarray and confusion or becomes captive to concepts and beliefs alien to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, then the spiritual formation of its members becomes confused and disordered.

11. If what I have just outlined is helpful in thinking about spiritual formation and Christian discourses, then I hope we can now discern that the *theological content* of the discourses and practices of the church are truly important. It really does matter, then, how those discourses construe who God is and what it means to be human. Hence, we are confronted with the obvious implication that not everything anyone in the church, whether minister or layperson, says is good and truthful theology—that is, good and

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<sup>6</sup> See GCF, 662-670 for what my Disciples friends think is a surprising defense of the Movement's emphasis on 'believer's baptism'.

truthful construal of who the God is who comes to us in Israel, becomes incarnate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the Holy Spirit summons us to life in the church. Professed earnest intentions to speak of God do not of themselves guarantee truthful theological construals. Further, simple citations of the Bible do not guarantee faithful and truthful construals.

Before going further with this inquiry and before you get too nervous as to where I am going with these points, trust that I believe the God we know in Jesus Christ through the Spirit is the One who can work with and through broken and misleading and unfruitful discourses and practices. Many are we who were moved by the Spirit through language that we no longer believe is either true or upbuilding but was nevertheless the grist by way of which the Spirit moved us to greater maturity and spirituality. But that is no reason to be complacent about those discourses and practices in the church that are broken and unhelpful or even false and unfaithful. As Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult I put an end to childish ways.” [1 Cor 13.11]

### **Christian Identity, Spiritual Malformation, and the Discourses of the Church**

If spiritual formation, as I have been arguing, is itself dependent on some discourses and practices that claim to be Christian, isn't it also the case that sometimes persons even in the church are *malformed* by discourses and practices that might seem to be heretical? The concept of spiritual formation thus contains within itself its contrary: *spiritual malformation*. I worry—and I confess this must sound arrogant—that many are the folk in our time who are being seriously malformed spiritually by discourses and practices within the church that are simply false or in contradiction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We all know that it is exceedingly demanding to be an *alternative community called and formed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. Why is it so demanding and troubling? How does it come about that the church itself repeatedly succumbs to being just another mirror image of the world in which it exists? It is a continuing circumstance of the church that it is always and everywhere a community that exists in the midst of some other world/culture/society in whatever place or whenever time. All these other cultures/societies have their own principalities and powers that organize their life together, or strenuously try to organize their life. Repeatedly, however, it is these principalities and powers that exert continual pressure to *form* persons and to tell them who they are and what they are worth and what their place is in the larger order. In short, the worldly powers intend to give persons an *identity* that will inculcate loyalty to the powers and to living on behalf of the powers. These powers want their subjects to answer, ‘I am an Oklahoman’ or ‘I am an American’ or ‘I am a German’ or ‘I am a Democrat’ or ‘I am a Republican’, for example, as the decisive markers of *person's self-understanding and worldly identity*. In ways exceedingly complex, these powers are unceasingly intent on subverting the church as an alternative community and are unceasingly intent on assuring that the church will be a community that serves the

interests of the ruling powers of the world. It takes no imagination for each of us to fill in the blanks here.<sup>7</sup>

The church, then, in its discourses and practices of spiritual formation is continually tempted by these seductions and the history of such seducery is long and distressing. Ask this question of our tradition today here in the USA: am I an American who happens to be a Christian, or am I a Christian who happens to be an American? *Which identity orders which?* That is the disarming and crucial question. It should be apparent to us that the church must maintain a vigorous self-critical dialogue within itself if it is to sustain its identity as the body of Christ and an alternative community to the world.

I would here call your attention to a wonderfully insightful book by one of our distinguished lecturers here, namely, Professor Philip Kenneson's *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community*.<sup>8</sup> His book is a precise and subtle diagnosis and exploration of the many obstacles to Christian spiritual formation in our present American culture. The mirror he holds up to us in the Movement is a mirror that brings to light our hidden beliefs and inclinations and enjoins us to cultivate a distinctive way of life in the church of Jesus Christ.

Many are the ways in which the church's discourses and practices have been malformed by the powerful influences of the world, and we might also infer that such malformation has infiltrated and often confused the spiritual life of the members of the church body.

If we are in any doubt about the perils to which I am referring and about the ways in which appeals to an inerrant Bible have succumbed to these perils, then consider how many brutal wars and battles have been fought defending the belief in the divine authority of kings—an authority repeatedly defended as grounded in the biblical language of kingship or the unrivaled and God-ordained authority of rulers. Yet today, the question of the authority of kings as representatives of divine rule and judgment simply does not arise. It is not a live question. Why was it a live and therefore deadly question for millions of folk over many centuries? How did it happen that seemingly sincere Christians construed their primary discourses as counseling them to be obedient to and defend the rightful authority of kings and other rulers? And to kill on behalf of the king and the maintenance of the king's realm?<sup>9</sup>

Consider the status of chattel slavery. It was for centuries defended by many Christians as directly authorized by the Bible or at least permitted by biblical teaching and practice. And many were they who suffered as slaves and many were they who died to defeat slavery and died to defend slavery. There was the Bible—God's Word—being read in such different ways. Is there any one here today who would like to defend the

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<sup>7</sup> See GCF, 47-52, 648-653 for a discussion of what I call 'the dialectic between church and world', in terms of which I explain three interrelated uses of the term 'world'.

<sup>8</sup> Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Of course, Paul in Romans 13.1-7 is typically invoked in these matters, almost in utter disregard for everything else he says in this epistle. I will say here, though I recognize its insufficiency, that sorting through these issues of 'government' and 'politics' is a major project for my future work.

right to buy, possess, and sell human beings as slaves? Let us hope it is a non-issue for Stone-Campbell Christians today.<sup>10</sup>

Rising beyond issues of kingships and slavery, consider the overwhelming fact of history that Christians have for centuries gone to war when rulers determined it was necessary to go to war. Surely the Christians knew that there was not a scintilla of evidence anywhere in the NT that Jesus called followers to kill in his name or for the sake of his Kingdom. Nor does the NT anywhere teach that it is morally necessary and obligatory to kill others in order to defend the boundaries of a nation or a people. In fact the preaching of Jesus was replete with commands about loving and praying for the enemy and turning the cheek. How then does it happen that persons in the church become spiritually formed to think that killing others is somehow warranted by the one they call their Savior?

Let all of us affirm that it does really matter who we think God is, how we identify the reality and activities of God. The word “God” gets used in many different ways in the English language and in other languages as well. For Christians the crucial question is what do we mean when we use the word “God”. Are we referring to that terrible god vowing to destroy and burn this fallen world and to rejoice in the suffering of the condemned? Are we referring to the god who demands loyalty to the state from all the citizens of each of the nation-states in our time? Which of these gods is the One who comes to us in Christ Jesus?

**Friends in Christ, I am affirming that, if the discourses of the church are crucial to the spiritual formation of its members, then it matters what the contents of those discourses are—it matters what we believe and say about God and human life and the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and it matters to how we live and are formed as the body of Christ. It matters to whether we serve and are inspired by the Holy Spirit or by some other animating spirit.**

### **Some Discourses and Practices that Involve Spiritual Perils**

While many in our tradition have believed that theologizing is itself inimical to the faith, that belief itself has the consequence of hiding from ourselves that we hold deep beliefs about God that are formed by no other source than prejudiced kinfolk or a twisted and untutored pastor or a civic organization we might have joined or by a television evangelist we find congenial to our tastes or what we might have thought up in our own kitchen.

Consider now these beliefs quite common among the folk I encounter in church on Sunday mornings and in their crises around death and suffering. Many believe that everything that happens in the world is directly willed by God and that every event bears a particular divine purpose. So, if one loses one’s child in an automobile accident, then God must have had a purpose in willing that accident to happen—though it remains hidden from us that if that is so, then we cannot really call it an ‘accident’; it was a

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<sup>10</sup> Anyone who is tempted to think of herself as affirming biblical inerrancy must read the sobering account by the church historian Mark Noll of the terrible infelicities embedded in the church’s discussion of slavery because of some biblical passages that seemed to permit slavery. See Noll’s *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Does anyone here today doubt that the ghosts of those debates and that war are hovering around us still?

necessity willed by God. So we are utterly bewildered by the loss of the child and are perhaps rightly angry with God as to why God willed this to happen. Had we more time we could explore the nuances in this line of reasoning, but you would be foolish to suppose that this belief that everything happens for a divine purpose is not formative for many a Christian. I want to suggest to you that this belief really matters in how persons construe their lives, but I propose to you that it is profoundly misleading about the God we know in the cross of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we should phrase the matter this way: God does create and sustain a world of creatures in continual interaction with each other and therewith *permits* many destructive events to occur, while continually working in the world to be bring good out of evil.<sup>11</sup>

Think further about how persons often construe praying—sometimes under the impetus of questionable construals of NT accounts of Jesus’ preaching and teaching.<sup>12</sup> It goes something like this: God is eager to reward those who trust in God and will give to the faithful whatever the faithful ask in prayer, *if* they just have enough faith. Hence, hunker down and have enough faith and God will give you what you want. Prayer gets you what you want. God the Cosmic Fetcher doing what the faithful want! And, when the person who so prays does not get that for which she prayed, then the obvious conclusion is that she did not have enough faith. Consider what this means for persons who pray for the recovery of their dying loved ones who yet go on and die in spite of the prayers. What confusion and bewilderment: did the loved one die because we did not pray with enough faith? Perhaps it would have gone better and the loved one escaped death if we had gotten a hundred earnest persons praying? So, God awaits to be persuaded [bribed?] by the prayers of the faithful but the persuasion does not work if there is not the requisite amount of faith? Who is this ‘God’ anyhow? How much more devastating can life be than to lead the sick and dying to believe that if they just have enough faith then God will cure them? So now these presumably Christian beliefs and practices spiritually form the dying to bear the additional guilt that they are dying because they did not have enough faith?

How do beliefs like these get such a hold on us? Why did we miss that Jesus’ interest was teaching us that God is indeed gracious toward us and eager to bestow blessings on us. But we will only understand what the requisite blessings are when we understand that Jesus is teaching us what we ought to desire if we intend our desires to be commensurate with the Kingdom he is preaching and bringing. Pray for these blessings and God will surely be gracious. Pray for the blessing of being one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness sake. Pray for the blessing of being a peacemaker. How generous God is to peacemakers. Pray for the blessing of a pure heart and be blessed in seeing God deeply. Pray for those who revile and persecute you, those enemies that intend you harm, and you will be blessed. The world may not bless you with honor and esteem, but God will.

Friends, I am not calling into question our praying those intercessory prayers that are vital to our faith. But I do worry about the deep corruption involved in the beliefs and practices of supposing we can pray to God to give us what we want and never question

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<sup>11</sup> See further the lengthy discussion in Chapter Five: God the Creator: Creation, Providence, and Evil in GCF, 233-292.

<sup>12</sup> I have in mind such passages as Mk 11.22-24; Mt 7.7-11; 21.21-22. But see how Luke changes the meaning in Lk 11.13. See my extended discussion of prayer in GCF, 676-688.

whether our wants and desires are appropriate to the presence of the Kingdom. What passes today under the slogan of the ‘Gospel of Wealth’ is an heretical encouragement to use the practice and discourses of prayer as a means to the really important ‘blessing’ of being wealthy. Why is it that we forget to pray for those goods that Jesus taught us to desire or to pray as Paul did that “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” [Rom 14.8]?

Yes, people in the church use the Bible in debilitating ways. I once heard a sermon based on Psalm 91 urging us to believe that this Psalm was the soldiers’ prayer that God will protect them from the enemy, instilling the belief that if a soldier truly trusts in God he will be brought safely home, for God always protects the truly faithful. In that perfunctory greeting line after the sermon, I asked the preacher whether he was aware that precisely this Psalm had been cited by many of the Jewish faithful as the compelling reason why Jesus could not have been the Messiah. How could anyone be construed as the Messiah of God, the one most blessed, if he had been crucified and killed by the enemy? Surely a true Messiah would have been saved by the God of Israel from death and harm at the hands of the enemy. The pastor looked at me as though I was a quarrelsome professor picking on a sincere preacher just doing his duty of proclaiming God’s word. Friends, this is the stuff of spiritual formation and malformation. Persons in the church are often being formed by just these beliefs and just these practices. It is sobering and counter-cultural to think people in the church should be formed in faith by believing in a God who dies on a cross for the salvation of the world. That is odd, very odd, and we dare not forget just how odd that story is and how the Gospel is tethered to it—and how the church’s soul depends on its being tethered to that crucifixion and that salvation.

Friends, it matters what you believe about God. It matters to your own spiritual formation whether you believe God’s aim for the world is ultimate destruction of the many and salvation for the few. It matters whether you believe God called America to be a light to the nations and therefore America is always justified in the purity of its motives and its own going to war against enemies as the enemies of God. It matters whether you believe Muslims are included in that category of the neighbors and strangers we are to love.

Think about it. It may be that our spirituality is at stake in what we believe or do not believe. It matters whether we are formed in Christ or malformed by the spirits of the world.