

Introduction

As many of you know, I grew up in a pagan home. When I was five my step-father was a wizard, which is distinct from a witch and a warlock. Though he was only around a short time, my mother continued using Ouija boards and Tarot cards. Though it was all I ever knew, I had no real interest in it. Then, when I was thirteen, God saw fit to draw me to himself and I began attending a small Baptist church a few miles from my home.

I didn't know much about it, but I knew we were *Independent Fundamentalist Baptists* and we believed in the *verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture*. Further, we held to a *premillennial pretribulational Dispensational view* of the Bible, because we were true Christians. I didn't know what any of those words meant, but we were most definitely not like that *other* Baptist church in town. You know, the one that wasn't really a Christian church. They didn't use the inspired King James Version of the Bible; they used the *NIV*. I didn't know anything about Bible versions but I knew the NIV denied the deity of Christ, cuz... Well, we were Independent Fundamentalist Baptists! We had the true word of God!

We certainly weren't like that Pentecostal church not far from our church building. Not only did they speak in tongues, they... I can hardly say this because it was so bad... they had *drums* in their worship services. Oh, and don't even bring up the Roman Catholic church. *They had candles*.

Then one fine day my mother kicked me out and I found myself moving around quite a bit and homeless from time to time. For my last semester of high school a family took me in and gave me a bit of stability. It was a great act of kindness, but they went to *that* church. You know, the Baptist church that wasn't really Baptist? I thought to myself, "You know, J-T, make the best of it. Maybe you can be a witness to these lost people. Maybe you can be the one to tell them about Jesus since, you know, they use the New International Version of the Bible, *which as we all know*, doesn't really talk about Jesus."

The strangest thing happened, though. On my first Sunday the sermon was about Jesus. So was youth group. And though I looked, I didn't see any of the drunk deacons they were apparently known for. I was intrigued so I asked for a copy of the NIV and started reading. I was really surprised to read that in the NIV Jesus walked on water and raised Lazarus from the dead and said he would rise from the dead, and then, even in the NIV, he really and truly did. Do not thou getteth me wrong; it was no KJV! But it was a lot easier to read!

I will always treasure this dear little church for that is where the Lord grabbed hold of my life. May God bless this dear little Baptist church, for they taught me about Jesus, but what they failed to grasp is this: the more we focus on the nuances and the specifics of our particular theological traditions, the less we focus on Jesus.

My aim today is for us to see how a right understanding of our particular faith tradition should cause us to look to Jesus more and more, even as we hold to our particular understanding of Scripture.

Thessalonica

We're going to be in Acts 17 this morning. Paul and Silas were traveling and preaching the gospel and planting churches. In Acts 17 we read of Paul's custom: when visiting a new city he would enter the synagogue and proclaim the Lord Jesus to them. Outside the land of Israel, synagogues were a rather diverse place. Many Gentiles were intrigued by the Jewish faith and even worshiped the God of Israel. They did not convert to Judaism, however, because of the requirement for circumcision and for the various food laws. In short: they didn't want to change their culture.

When Paul preached the gospel of Jesus he made it clear Jesus had fulfilled the Jewish law, and as we read in Acts 15, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem determined that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish in order to follow Jesus. That is, they did not need to keep the law of Moses. They only had to avoid idolatry.

Because Paul was proclaiming Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, many Jews recognized Jesus had fulfilled the promises, even if in an unexpected way. Far more Gentiles believed, however. Those Jews who did not would often become hostile. The stumbling block was the crucifixion, just as it had been for Paul. This was the reason he persecuted Christians. To say God's Messiah was crucified was to say God cursed his own Messiah, which sounded like blasphemy.

The truth is the Messiah took that curse upon himself and then conquered death and thus emptied the curse of all its power when he rose from the dead. This was not blasphemy, but the fulfillment of Scripture. One of the most amazing things Luke recorded for us is this:

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Lk 24:25 And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" ²⁷ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24:25–27

After his resurrection Jesus himself proclaimed what the law and prophets said about him, including his suffering and death and resurrection. The Scriptures proclaimed this and so this became Paul's message whenever he entered a synagogue. In Acts 17 Luke tells us his practice.

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Acts 17:1 Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd.

Acts 17:1–5

The Jews were people of the Book. They had the holy Scriptures—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. These all pointed God’s people to Jesus, and Paul’s practice was to show them how the Scriptures taught the necessity of the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead. Remember, this was the big stumbling block for many Jews because the law said anyone who was hanged on a tree was cursed.

Notice that Luke says some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas. This means they became followers of Jesus. They recognized their Messiah had come and they worshiped him. While *some* of the Jews believed, “a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women” believed. These are Gentiles who attended synagogue regularly and worshiped the God of Israel while not fully converting to Judaism. Luke says “the Jews were jealous”.

These Gentiles had been participating in the life of the synagogue for years without fully converting. Paul comes along and preaches about Jesus for just three weeks and suddenly they’re becoming full converts, but of *Jesus*, not of *Judaism*. Jealousy can drive men to do crazy things. These jealous men formed a mob and created an uproar and attempted bodily harm.

The truth is that much of Paul’s fruitfulness in planting churches came from Gentiles who were familiar with the Scriptures through an association with the synagogue. Many were “devout” or “God-fearers” in that they no longer worshiped the various gods they once did but instead worshiped the God of Israel. When they heard the God of Israel had become one of us, lived, died, and rose again, they were ready to follow him fully. This created lots of problems for Paul and led to a lot of suffering. Luke seems to suggest that jealousy was as much a reason as their sense of blasphemy.

After being chased out of the city of Thessalonica, we come to verse 10.

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Acts 17:10 The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹² Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

Acts 17:10–12

Berea is about 45 miles from Thessalonica. It would take about three days of hard travel to get there on foot. The danger for Paul and Silas was so great they left under the cover of darkness. Since so much of the anger was directed toward Paul personally, he could leave the city knowing the gospel had already taken root and thus the new church there would be safer.

Did you catch the very first thing Paul and Silas did when they arrived in Berea? “They went into the Jewish synagogue.” This was his practice! There he would proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the Jews who had long waited for the Messiah and to the Gentiles who had recognized the futility of worshiping the Roman gods and goddesses. This was Paul’s primary method of preaching the gospel on his journeys.

Berea

Luke says the Bereans' response to Paul's preaching was significantly different from that of the Thessalonians. The Jews in Berea heard what Paul had to say and "received the word with all eagerness". They were delighted to hear Paul preach and teach the Scriptures, with which they were so familiar.

Luke says they were "more noble" than the Jews in Thessalonica. He doesn't mean they were born to the right family. He uses the word to describe their attitude, rather than their earthly status. The Jews in Berea were thoughtful and eager to receive truth. They were open-minded, yet were not gullible. They were open to being challenged, yet they received Paul's words with a dose of skepticism, but not the crass skepticism that says, "You're full of it." Luke explains what he means when he says they were noble: they were "examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so".

What made them noble wasn't their upbringing. It wasn't their family of origin. It wasn't their social class or anything of the sort. It was their willingness, their eagerness to hear the message of Paul and then to evaluate it in light of the Scriptures.

As Jews they were swimming in the waters of developing oral tradition. We see this in the Gospels. In Mark 7 the Pharisees and the scribes demanded to know why Jesus did not require his disciples to wash their hands before eating. Their concern wasn't germs but *ritual purity*. Jesus said to them, "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

Mark goes on to highlight part of their oral tradition. They had a practice where they could declare a thing to be "Corban"—devoted to God. If it were devoted to God it could not be used for any other purpose. Even though God's word commands us to honor our fathers and mothers, they were using this tradition to deny helping their parents when they were in need:

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Mk 7:9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! ¹⁰ For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'¹¹ But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)—¹² then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, ¹³ thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

Mark 7:9–13

This tradition allowed a man to avoid honoring his parents by falsely claiming his money was devoted to God. Jesus said this tradition was voiding the word of God. Oral tradition like this had been developing for some time and as Jews the Bereans were familiar with it and would even have been affected by it. Oral tradition covered all of the law of Moses. Their understanding of the world would have been colored by oral tradition. As Paul's success in church planting continued to grow, there became a concerted effort to defeat the arguments for Jesus being the Messiah.

When Paul arrived in Berea they heard his message and they were intrigued by his arguments, but then they demonstrated their *nobility* by examining the Scriptures to see if what Paul was saying were true—even if it went against their traditions.

Jesus had taught his disciples all the things in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning himself, specifically those that spoke of his death, burial, and resurrection. When the apostles proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus, any guesses as to what *they* taught? The very same Scriptures!

When the Bereans heard things about Jesus that seemed to go against the tradition they had received, namely, that Messiah could not be crucified because the law said anyone killed on a tree was cursed, rather than blindly reject it because “it’s not what we believe”, they searched the Scriptures to see if it were true. They also didn’t blindly *accept* Paul’s message because, “Wow, this *sounds* great!” Instead of blindly rejecting or blindly accepting, they *searched the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so*.

The Bereans were noble because they understood that the Scriptures are God’s written revelation of himself. Through the Scriptures God has revealed himself. That revelation culminates in Jesus, who is the full and complete revelation of God. We look to the Scriptures as the final source of faith and practice. That is, the Scriptures are the source of our doctrine and theology, and because Scripture shows us what God is like, Scripture teaches us how to live. Millard Erickson makes an excellent point.

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In making the Bible the primary or supreme source of our understanding, we are not completely excluding all other sources. In particular, if God has also revealed himself in general ways in such areas as nature and history (as the Bible itself seems to teach), then we may also fruitfully examine these for additional clues to understanding the principal revelation. But these will be secondary to the Bible.

Millard Erickson, “Christian Theology”

He’s saying that while history and even tradition may inform our understanding of Scripture, Scripture itself carries final authority for what we believe and how we live. The Bereans let Scripture be primary, even over the preached word of the apostles. That is to say that even the apostles’ own teaching was subject to what they had received; they were not free to innovate.

reformed

Gavin Ortlund makes an amazing point about this. Gavin is an early church scholar and serves as lead elder of a church in California. In a recent video he pointed out that Christianity is a *revealed* religion; the idea that “the church” can make up doctrine is contrary to the teaching *passed on* by the apostles. Consider Paul’s own words in his first letter to the Corinthians:

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¹ Cor 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
1 Corinthians 15:3

The teaching and preaching of the apostles was subject to the Scriptures. Even as they *wrote* Scripture, they were not acting on their own authority but were inspired by the Spirit of God, and do you remember where the Spirit got the words with which to inspire them?

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Jn 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

John 14:26

As the Spirit inspired the writers of the New Testament to write holy Scripture, the Spirit did so by ensuring their words were in submission to the authority of Jesus and were in line with what he had taught them. Not even the apostles could innovate, despite their great authority over the church. The Lord Jesus revealed God to the apostles and they were constrained by this revelation. They each passed on what they had received.

This doesn't mean Jesus detailed every aspect of following him. There's nothing in Scripture specifying how many songs we sing in worship, for example. There's nothing in Scripture about how we ought to collect the offering. If Paul were writing to the Corinthians today, in 1 Corinthians 16 he would have written, "Now concerning the collection for the saints, on the first day of the week each of you is to log on to newcitychurch.org and click 'GIVE'..."

When it comes to the *practice* of our faith, we have lots of room to innovate and grow. When it comes to the *teaching* of our faith, we must pass on what we have received, for our faith is a *received* faith. The idea that the church can declare a new teaching a dogma, that is, necessary in order to be in the Christian faith, is an idea that is completely contrary to the very nature of Christianity.

This is why, 506 years ago on October 31 Martin Luther issued a series of 95 points—*theses*—that he wanted to debate. He recognized that when it came to the sale of indulgences the church had gone beyond what was passed on to us by the apostles. He wanted to be like the noble Bereans and "examine the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so".

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Word

When we say that we are reformed, this is what we mean: we are in submission to the authority and teaching of holy Scripture. If a teaching, *no matter how ancient*, is in conflict with Scripture, we will reject that teaching, and if a teaching, *no matter how ancient*, is not directly from Scripture, there can be no requirement that we believe it. Let me give you an example.

In the third century a man named Hippolytus claimed Mary was "ever-virgin". That is, Mary the mother of Jesus, he said, did not actually become the wife of Joseph and have other children after Jesus was born. This teaching originated in the so-called "Gospel of James", a book that written in the second century and was not holy Scripture. The book claims to have been written by James the brother of Jesus and says Mary remained a virgin.

This is not taught in holy Scripture. Mary was a virgin when she conceived and remained a virgin until she gave birth to Jesus. A simple reading of the text suggests after the birth of Jesus Mary and Joseph engaged in normal marital relations. Joseph was instructed by the angel to "take Mary as your wife"—not "take care of Mary". The Greek of Matthew 1:25 says, "he was not knowing her until she had given birth to a son". If Matthew meant to say Joseph *never* knew her, why didn't he just say that?

I want to be clear: if someone believes Mary remained a virgin despite the strong evidence to the contrary, so be it. Scripture also doesn't explicitly say Mary and Joseph engaged in normal marital relations; why would it? The problem really comes when such a teaching is *dogmatized*—claimed to be necessary for all followers of Jesus. To say I am outside the Christian faith because I believe Mary and Joseph were married in all the ways implied by marriage and had other sons and daughters after Jesus is to go beyond the authority of holy Scripture. *This is why we are reformed.*

In the third century Tertullian denied this doctrine. In the fourth century a man named Helvidius attempted to correct this new teaching that had been spreading, though he was clearly unsuccessful. These men were reformers in the sense that I am using it.

One of the amazing and often overlooked details of the Protestant Reformation is the appeal to the church fathers by the Reformers themselves. In his introduction to his “Institutes of the Christian Religion”, John Calvin wrote this about those in Rome:

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Moreover, they unjustly set the ancient fathers against us (I mean the ancient writers of a better age of the church) as if in them they had supporters of their own impiety. If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory—to put it very modestly—would turn to our side.

John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion”

He's saying the Reformers were merely trying to reset the Christian faith to the faith taught by the early church. This is why Calvin frequently quoted the church fathers in his writings and in his public debates with Roman theologians. A frequent point he made was this, speaking of the north African theologian Augustine who lived over a thousand years earlier:

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It was a father who affirmed it rashness, when judging of some obscure matter, to take one side or another without clear and evident witness of Scripture. They forgot this limit when they established so many constitutions, canons, and doctrinal decisions, without any word of God.

John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion”

It is rashness to dogmatize any teaching without its basis in holy Scripture. We can all have lots of opinions on lots of things but we must submit our opinions and our thoughts to holy Scripture, the doctrines received by the apostles and passed on to us. In a real sense there is a fence, a boundary marker around true teaching that we cannot move. Again, Calvin said this:

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It was a father who deemed that one must listen to Christ alone, for Scripture says, “Hear him” [Matt. 17:5]; and that we need not be concerned about what others before us either said or did, but only about what Christ, who is the first of all, commanded. When they set over themselves and others any masters but Christ, they neither abode by this boundary nor permitted others to keep it. It was a father who contended that the church ought not to set itself above Christ, for he always judges truthfully, but ecclesiastical judges, like other men, are often mistaken. When this boundary is also broken through, they do not hesitate to

declare that the whole authority of Scripture depends entirely upon the judgment of the church.

John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion”

The first father he mentions was Cyprian who said in the 200s that what matters most of all in the Christian faith is what Christ has commanded and taught. The church does not have authority over Scripture but must always be in submission to its teaching for it points us to Christ, who is Lord over all.

not Reformed

Every generation of Christians must look to correct the errors of the generation that preceded it and must look for the areas in which they themselves might be introducing error into the church. In short, every generation of the church must be reformed—lower-case reformed.

Let me say that I love our capital-R Reformed brothers and sisters. Two of the men I pray with weekly are capital-R Reformed. I have tremendous respect for the Reformed tradition. It is because we are lower-case r reformed that we cannot be capital-R Reformed.

This is, of course, far more complex a topic than I can cover in a few minutes, but here’s the reason. In the late 1500s many Protestant Reformers sought to understand Scripture by introducing a framework through which to see the whole of it. The framework is this: in the garden of Eden God made a “covenant of works” with Adam, which he failed to keep. As a result God then made a covenant of grace with Adam and sending Jesus was the ultimate outcome of this covenant of grace.

The concept of a covenant of works was first introduced by a man named Zacharias Ursinus in the late 1500s. This concept came about *theologically* rather than *exegetically*. That is, it was not a study of Scripture that produced this concept but a theological attempt to make sense of Scripture. In other words, rather than coming out of Scripture, it was placed *onto* Scripture so as to comprehend it.

These two covenants are called *theological covenants* and represent an attempt to understand Scripture as a whole. Biblical covenants are those stated in Scripture such as God’s covenant with Abraham and the covenant at Mount Sinai and the covenant made with David and then the new covenant brought about by Jesus. You will not find a covenant of works or a covenant of grace in Scripture, except by logical inference.

The very fact that we can trace a doctrine to a specific individual in the late 16th century tells us it was a doctrinal development and not a received teaching from the apostles. The fact that there is no hint of a covenant of works in the 1500 years prior to its introduction further tells us it was a development.

It may well be worthwhile development, but it is our rejection of this development that prevents us from being capital-R Reformed. The truth is that in embracing this new-found theological framework the Reformers did what they criticized Rome for doing: introducing theological novelties. I am not suggesting that their novelty was on the same level as those introduced by Rome. Let me also add for a bit of balance and for clarity, just as covenant theology originated in the late 16th century, Dispensationalism, another framework placed onto Scripture, originated in the early 19th century and so we reject it for similar reasons.

While there is a whole lot more that could be said about this, now is not the time. I plan to write an article about the need for each generation to reform on Tuesday and I will say a bit more about it then.

Application

Why does this matter? Why did we just spend all this time seeing that the Bereans were *reformed*, as were *the* Reformers, as were many in church history who sought to correct errors that crept into churches? Why is it so important for us to care for these distinctions I have been making this morning? Here's why, and to explain, let's take another look at the Thessalonian Jews versus the Berean Jews. Keep in mind they were only separated by about 45 miles, yet the Bereans were *reformed* and the Thessalonians were not.

The Jews in Thessalonica became jealous at Paul's success in winning many god-fearing Gentiles to Christ when they had been wanting them to convert fully to Judaism. By refusing to examine the Scriptures to see if what Paul was saying were true, they embraced error and compromised in ways they would never have dreamed compromising. We already read versus 1–5 where the Jews stirred up trouble and we read verses 10–12 where Paul and Silas had to escape by night. Here's what we missed.

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Acts 17:5 But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus."

Acts 17:5–7

Given the scene Jason was likely one of the Jewish converts to Jesus. The name "Jason" was just a Greek variation of the Jewish name Joshua or Jesus. The Jews in Thessalonica stormed Jason's house and dragged him and some of the other believers to the city authorities. The worst crime in the Roman empire was rioting, for rioting could lead to all-out rebellion against Caesar. No government official at any level would allow a riot on his watch.

They dragged Jason and the others to the city officials and notice what they said: these men have been hanging out with those dudes who are turning the world upside down and even worse—they are saying there is another king, Jesus. They mentioned "the decrees of Caesar".

In the year 11, Caesar Augustus issued a law forbidding the use of astrology to predict the day of his death. Years later Tiberius reaffirmed this law and even put to death some foreigners who were utterly ignorant they were breaking the law when they attempted to do this very thing.

Think of what you know of history and why so many Jews rejected Jesus in the first century. They were waiting for Messiah, and were waiting for him to do *what*, exactly? Free them as a people by defeating Rome! More than anything else they wanted Rome defeated

and for the land of Israel to be free of Roman taxation and free of the presence of Roman soldiers.

To accuse Christians of saying there is another king, Jesus, was to accuse them of seeking to overthrow the emperor, which is what they themselves wanted! This sounds a lot like something the chief priests said when Jesus was on trial before Pontius Pilate.

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Jn 19:15 They cried out, “Away with him, away with him, crucify him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.”

John 19:15

Rather than search the Scriptures to see what they actually said about Jesus, they held to their traditions and compromised and went along with the empire against the church, and thus rejected God himself.

Here’s what we need to understand. Teaching error isn’t always teaching false doctrine. There are churches that always talk about end times or rail against “modernism”, still fighting battles from over a hundred years ago, or every sermon is about baptism and its mode and proper recipients or they rail against some social ill. So often preachers and whole churches define themselves by who they are not and what they are not rather than *by Jesus*.

The church I was converted in was in error, not because they were Baptist or Dispensational or because they insisted on a really old translation, but because they thought this is what defined them. In defining themselves by their theological tradition, they lost sight of Jesus. To be reformed is to be vigilant to preach Christ and Christ alone. When we focus on all the ways we are right and all the ways others are wrong, we are no longer focusing on Jesus but on ourselves. Let us always fight to keep our eyes on Jesus.

Yes, we should pursue theological accuracy. We should seek to rightly interpret and understand Scripture. We should seek better and more precise ways to express biblical truth. We must remember, though, that the outcome of this must always be the proclamation of Christ and not the proclamation of ourselves. Our pursuit of biblical and theological accuracy should never make the kingdom of God smaller. Instead, it should make Jesus bigger.