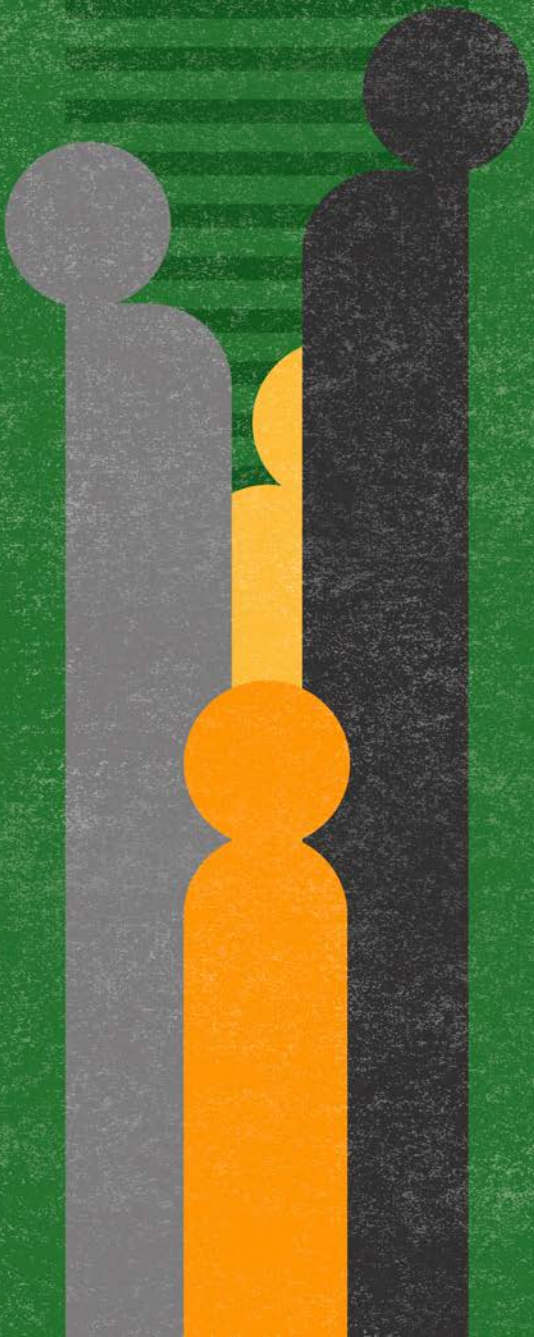
MARTY SOLOMON
CREATOR OF *THE BEMA PODCAST*
WITH REED DENT



THE GOSPEL OF BEING HUMAN

HOW ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS OF THE BIBLE REVEALS WHO WE ARE

Here's why I love this book and everything Marty does: I continually find myself saying, "Huh. I haven't thought of it quite that way before." If you're like me and love being challenged to think and rethink and consider anew the beauty of the Kingdom . . . well, here you go!

BRANT HANSEN, radio host and author of *Unoffendable* and *The Men We Need*

This is a book for the faithful, the jaded, and the curious alike. *The Gospel of Being Human* reminds us that the gospel meets us right where we are—in all our worries, wonders, doubts, desires, and questions. *The Gospel of Being Human* brings fresh eyes to eternal things, helping us see anew what the love and truth of Jesus mean for each of us today.

KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR, author of *The Evangelical Imagination*

The gospel presented here is indeed good news for the self-righteous and shame filled alike. Whether you are new to the Scriptures or a lifelong student, this book earnestly examines some of our most entrenched assumptions about God and humanity, illuminating the story of divine love and allowing the Bible to speak on its own terms.

AMANDA HELD OPELT, author of *A Hole in the World* and *Holy Unhappiness*

We often hear that to question our beliefs is to question the truth of Scripture. But Marty Solomon invites us to a better understanding of Scripture that is only possible when we begin with curiosity and openness. You'll be encouraged to say

maybe and *I wonder* and find new depths in Bible passages you thought you knew. You'll believe better, discovering a way to live as if God is actually completely free and completely good.

MANDY SMITH, pastor and author

In an era increasingly defined by algorithms and automation, self-awareness has become an act of resistance. Understanding how, and why, we show up in the world is no longer optional; it's essential. Curiosity about ourselves and others is not a luxury but a moral and theological necessity. In *The Gospel of Being Human*, Marty Solomon offers a profound reimagining of what it means to be human, revealing our shared humanity as more than mere existence. It is, astonishingly, a divine collaboration. At a time when machines are learning to mimic us, Solomon reminds us why being human is still the most sacred vocation of all. Read this book and stay human for God's sake!

PRESTON ULMER, founder and president of the Doubters' Club and author of *Deconstruct Faith, Discover Jesus*

Blowing the dust off our theological shelves, Marty and Reed awaken wonder and sharpen our spiritual tools for the wilderness of our time—summoning us to journey deeper into the mystery and joy of God.

KATE SCHMIDGALL, founder of BitterSweet

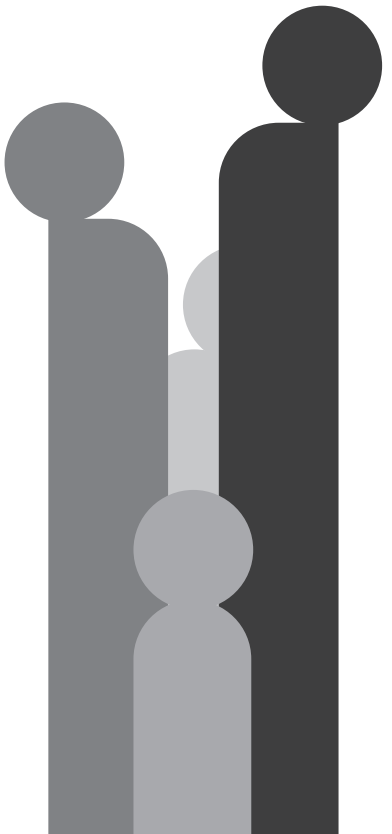
Did you grow up in church hearing about being human as something bad to leave behind and about God as a doctrinal puzzle or ticket to heaven? With curious questions and

wonderful storytelling, this paradigm-shifting book beckons us back into the primal goodness of being human and the vibrant mystery of God. Let it re-gospel your attention to human well and love people labeled as enemies.

ANDREW DECORT, PHD, author of *Blessed Are the Others*

In a time when so much Christian theology begins with what's wrong with us, Marty Solomon and Reed Dent offer us a hopeful view of the goodness of humanity made in God's image. They invite us to develop a posture of curiosity and attention as we ask the kind of questions of our sacred text that lead us to recover the image of God in our humanity, which shapes our purpose and identity. This book reminds us that being human is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be embraced. The gospel the authors proclaim is not merely about escape from sin but about restoration to our original calling as God's image-bearing creatures in the world. *The Gospel of Being Human* will stir your imagination, deepen your faith, and reawaken your joy in being human.

DEREK VREELAND, pastor and author of the God in the Neighborhood Bible Studies



THE GOSPEL OF BEING HUMAN

HOW ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS OF THE BIBLE REVEALS WHO WE ARE

MARTY SOLOMON

WITH REED DENT

NavPress™

Published in alliance with
Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress.com

The Gospel of Being Human: How Asking Better Questions of the Bible Reveals Who We Are

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

The Team:
David Zimmerman, Publisher; Caitlyn Carlson, Senior Editor; Cara Iverson, Copyeditor; Lacie Phillips, Production Assistant; Libby Dykstra, Cover Designer; Cathy Miller, Interior Designer

Published in association with The Bindery Agency, TheBinderyAgency.com

URLs referenced in this book were verified as live and accurate source material prior to publication. Some links may have expired or redirected since publication.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

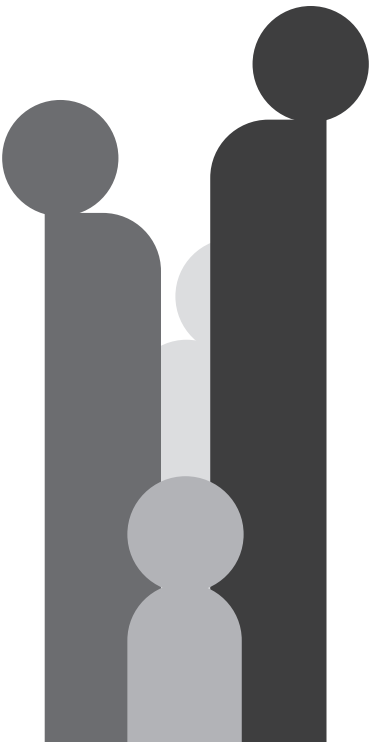
For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 978-1-64158-948-2

Printed in the United States of America

32 31 30 29 28 27 26
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents



INTRODUCTION

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT YOU

It was just a tiny, old, musty church.

The cathedral in Dunkeld, Scotland, had once served as the center of Christianity for all of Scotland before the seat was moved to St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh. Construction on this ancient building began in 1260 and looked as though it had never ended. Fencing surrounded it, keeping visitors from standing close to the walls and in danger of falling pieces of stone.

The back of the structure, housing the nave of the cathedral, was closed and surrounded with scaffolding. The historic society of Scotland was stuck in the middle of plans for restoration after work had stalled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The grounds were supposed to be closed when we arrived. Time had slipped away from us while we'd enjoyed the town

of Aberfeldy, and the winter hours meant the gate of the stone church would be closing earlier. "Well, the drive should be beautiful," my host, David, had said. "At least you'll be able to see the outside from the gate."

But we arrived at the grounds to find the gate still open. Reverend Fraser, the minister of the congregation that meets on-site, was talking to someone who was on their way out. He graciously led us inside for a few minutes to see the small museum that sits in the space above the crypt. The cathedral still houses a handful of burials, and the tomb of Alexander Stewart, the Earl of Buchan, sits in the ambulatory behind the chancel.

As we prepared to leave, I found myself overcome with emotion. Trying not to make the others feel uncomfortable, I looked up and quietly considered all that this building represented and housed. Generations of believers had worshiped together within these walls for centuries. The next Sunday, worshipers would gather in that same space, and songs of worship would reverberate against those same stones.

Many things had changed in those centuries. The sociopolitical circumstances of the early parishioners were far different from those faced today. The "current events" causing anxiety and dread had been things like economic drought, decimating plague, new invaders, and new lords. And the theology forming the songs of worship had shifted significantly over time. The first congregants had been Catholic and likely could not have imagined a future shaped by the Protestant Reformation or what *the Church of Scotland* would have even meant. Over recent centuries, what was once new and novel has once again become established, even ancient.

I try to consider what God has seen in that building over the course of almost eight hundred years. He's seen a more imperial expression of the Western church and her love for sacraments. He's watched a Reformation move his followers to question institutional abuses and return to the heart of faith, Scripture, and his grace in belief and practice. He's seen a world where his followers have moved from assuming cultural dominance to experiencing increased secularization after the French Revolution.

But this building and that theology and those cultural changes have intersected with something that hasn't changed much at all: the human experience. The details of our circumstances will always be unique to our moment and place, but realities like cultural upheaval and anxiety and dread remind us that some things don't change, no matter the century we find ourselves in. The fact that we do sing—and we have sung—and the idea that theology has always been a part of what it's meant to worship in the Western world bring us together with all those who have gathered in that building over hundreds of years.

Standing in that cathedral, I felt a deep solidarity with people I had never met. But why? I am not represented by their flag, their culture, their denomination, or even their heritage. I have never lived in Europe. I do not call the Church of Scotland (or even Presbyterianism) my church tradition. My life—rooted in postmodernity, Western consumerism, and the opportunities of the internet—wouldn't resemble the agrarian life of these parishioners. I likely would not agree with them on nuances of theology.

So why did I feel so connected to them?

Because we're humans—people loved by God, captured by

grace, and being transformed to look like Jesus. And there's something about this truth that feels like really good news. Something about sharing this unique relationship in all of creation as God's image bearers feels appropriately more grounding than denominational ties and theological nuances.

And here's the thing about being made in the image of the same God, invited into relationship with the same God, asking questions and shaping theology out of our connection with the same God: If we were able to step into that building eight hundred years ago, we'd likely find more that is consistent—in our thinking and theology and practice—than is foreign. The heart of worship and the fascination with the sacrifice of Christ. God's desire to redeem humanity and his activity in the world. Our role as God's ambassadors, partnering with him in that activity.

The people who have filled that building have changed a lot over the years. The world that those people belong to has changed a lot too. And yet I bet God looks across time and sees a bunch of kids who want to know him and have hung on to the same principles in different ways and have all clung to the same book (even if they've never all agreed on everything it's trying to say).

As I considered all this, the musty air of the cathedral took on an air of sanctity. I was overwhelmed with how minute my visiting presence was in light of a great cloud of witnesses—not just those who had worshiped in that building for almost a thousand years but also other Christians throughout Europe, throughout the world, throughout the centuries before. That day brought me one of those gifts of perspective that snuck up on me and I didn't see coming.

SOMETHING NEW

I love understanding the history of God's people. It's a big part of what I love to teach about the Bible, this book that means so much to us. It gives me a rush to examine and explore and discern, alone and with others, what we've missed, what we've misunderstood, how we may have gotten things wrong. Because when we approach the Text with that kind of curiosity, we can correct our mistakes and build something better.

As I've shared this journey of exploration with others, one of the most common exclamations I've heard is how liberating it is just to be able to finally ask questions and admit uncertainty. Many of us have been told that doubts are a sign of anemic faith, not vibrant faith. We've been exhorted to trust only in leaders, theologies, and institutions and to leave the question asking to others. Good, deep questions—those for which there will be no easy answers—have been treated with trite theological conclusions rather than an acknowledgment that we might be wrestling with something sacred and mysterious and very difficult.

Simply put, many of us have been longing to ask questions, and we generally have not felt free to do that. In our postmodern world, we have been conditioned to ask Google about any thought that crosses our minds but discouraged from asking questions in the most important arena of our lives.

It's a joy to watch people wake up and come alive as they engage in the work with me. It's been a joy to show people how to stand on God's tools—things like the Bible and our faith communities—and use the tools that we've created through the grace he's given us. Along the way, many of us have asked

questions—questions about Bible facts, literary devices, chiasmus, Pauline theology. This newfound freedom was, and still is, beautiful. What we call asking better questions of the Bible—recognizing that bringing a contextual, curious, Jewish lens to Scripture can guide us to questions the original audience was asking and Scripture was engaging with—is not a step that can, or should, be skipped.

But nor should we stop there. I believe reading the Bible is meant to move beyond a purely intellectual exercise to become an experience that transforms the reader. Most Christians would probably agree with me, and yet we all have ways of holding the Text at arm's length. Some let the hunt for a truly consistent systematic theology keep the Bible's transformational power at bay. Others participate in the quest to once and for all distill the final set of essential doctrines. And for others still, the search for chiasms and *remezim* becomes a treasure hunt for an empty chest. It's not that theology or doctrine or Jewish literary tools are bad in themselves, but we all have ways of turning things that could be conduits for God's transformational power into barriers. We're good at hiding the heart behind a (well-informed!) shell of the mind.

Information alone is kind of like an empty cathedral: a framework with no life in it. The unfolding legacy of our faith happens only because the biblical text took root within a cloud of witnesses who wrestled with God's words and kept trying to live them out. And the history of the humans who follow God shows us how important that ongoing transformation is. There's nothing special about Dunkeld Cathedral if it's just a pile of stones. It's the people who built it, who worshiped in

it—who exercised their faith, wrestled with their doubt, and discovered their own freedom—that fill the site with meaning.

Asking questions about the Bible is actually the easy part of a life of faith. Despite what some people may have told you—that bringing questions to the Text is super dangerous and you'll lose your faith and God will be upset with you—it's also the safe play. When we stick to asking questions about the Bible, we're talking about *that thing over there*. The Bible becomes an object, a thing that we hold in our hands and hug close to our chests. A thing we are fascinated by and reverent toward. A thing we keep on the shelf and study and then put back.

But it's also not *us*. For God's Word to do its work in us, we have to do more than talk about abstract concepts that we can hold at a safe distance. At some point, we need to start talking about our own hearts and souls. It can feel deeply vulnerable to do so, and oftentimes we're scared.

The Bible taught us better than that. It taught us that Jesus can be trusted. And it draws us into vulnerability and risk because there is a life-giving gospel message in its pages.

This, then, is the much harder invitation before us: Will we let our new questions about the Bible open up new questions about *ourselves*? What do these stories and letters and passages mean about us? Is it all just about God *up there*? Is all the history just about what the world of the Bible was like *back then*? Is everything in this text just something we learn from a safe distance so we can shape a worldview in our minds?

This journey of asking good questions and discovering the gospel within its proper context must be about *our* freedom, *our* transformation, *our* salvation—not just as individuals but as a community of humans getting to know God. This learning

journey isn't just for teaching us *about* something; it's also for introducing us to the liberating experience of trusting God in all God's mystery. One of the fundamental questions we can start to ask as we read Scripture is simply this: What does it mean to be human?

If we turn the reality of Scripture inward, to something concrete, if we apply our questions to our hearts, what we will find is a truer true in who we are. We will discover not that we're supposed to be less of who we are today. We will discover that the transforming work of Christ is turning us into better versions of ourselves. We are becoming more human, because to be human is to be made in the image of God.

When we start doing heart work, we begin to realize how shallow simple information feels. There is no Google search that is going to soothe my shame. There's not a TikTok video or a commentary that can truly transform my sense of identity and calling. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. Yes, we needed to start with the Bible, because, after all, it is "the sword of the Spirit."[1] But we must make sure we actually let God wield that sword in healing, transformative ways.

Engaging with our doubt and confusion has shown us that the Bible is more than we realized, not less. Do you suppose the same could be true of you and me?

GOOD NEWS FIRST (BUT NOT ONLY)

Being human, we've been told, is bad news. In many theological traditions, to be a human in this world is a thoroughly sinful and dreadful affair. We're born sinners in a line of sinners going back to the first sinner. Our wretched identity is our birthright;

we're broken from the start. And the gospel, we've been told, is that God delivers us from our human condition.

There certainly is bad news about being human (and we'll see some of that in this book, especially through characters like Eve, David, Jonah, and Elijah). We are very good at making a mess of ourselves, one another, and the world, and not for one second do I want to deny the sin that we all commit and need deliverance from. This book is not a wholesale dismissal of human badness or brokenness or sinfulness; it's an invitation to be curious, to reexamine whether that is the whole story about being human and discover how we change when we live as though our brokenness is not the fundamental reality about who we are.

When we learn to ask the Bible better questions about being human, one of the things we begin to see is that, originally speaking, each person is created *good* (not perfect—and certainly not without the destructive influence of sin upon them), in the image of the loving God who fashioned them. And not only is the origin of our human nature good but our purpose is good too. Far from our being passive, helpless wretches in need of nothing more than a ticket to heaven, an integral part of our humanity is the partnership God calls us to. We tend to segment this partnership piece off into post-salvation/sanctification territory, but the Bible clearly tells us that partnership with God has been baked into his hopes for us from the beginning. Mystery of mysteries, from the outset, God has been determined to cultivate the world and bring it to flourishing *with* humans. He created us with partnership inherent in our nature.

All of it is a gift. Grace doesn't arrive on the scene once sin

enters in. From alpha to omega, nothing is earned, nothing deserved; it's all grace, freely given from the very beginning.

In his book *Telling the Truth*, Frederick Buechner writes,

> The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror all in a lather what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob.[2]

I'm one of Buechner's biggest fans, and so it is with fear and trembling that I suggest he might have left out the beginning of the story. The truth is that the gospel is good news *before* it is bad news—before it is good news again.

If there is a song of the human story, of human nature, some of our theological traditions have begun with the bridge, which is in a minor key, with lyrics about the broken, sinful state we see ourselves in all around every day. But there is a verse before that bridge that says that each and every human is created beloved and given a deeply good call to partner with God in his work in the world. The minor-key bridge ought to serve to connect that verse to the glorious chorus, which we will joyfully sing and shout into eternity, world without end, that Jesus, as a human like any of us, redeems our nature, restores us to our glorious beginnings (new creation!), and calls us to even higher heights in it. He doesn't replace our human nature; he restores it.

That's where we're going in this book. We'll start by detailing a posture of curiosity, attention, and wonder that will allow us to stay open both to questions about what it means to be

human and to what God is saying in response. Then we'll get into some theological perspectives we may be living from, either consciously or subconsciously (stuff like what God's fundamental disposition toward us is, to what extent our nature is sinful and how it becomes that way, what God actually expects from us in terms of partnership, what sort of power he calls us to), and we'll look closely at what specific biblical texts have to say about them. Along the way, we'll discover that the Bible shows us that being human is more complex, more fraught, and more beautiful than we've imagined. And by the end of these pages, we may even find ourselves a little re-gospeled.

The gospel—literally, the "good news"—of being human does not in any way, for one second, negate the Good News of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the truth about our humanness amplifies the grander gospel: that God's mercy, justice, and love—showing up with human eyes and ears and feet in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—are absolutely present and consistent. From the beginning, he has affirmed and endeavored to restore the goodness he created in humanity. And he still wants to.

THE LIVING GOSPEL

Anytime I want to critique some period of history for how shortsighted they were, I just think about our million-dollar sound systems and smoke machines and the other parts of our worship expressions that are meant to help people today connect with God. I wonder how those will be seen in four hundred years (yikes), but I also get it.

I believe that one of the only ways to honor the cloud of

witnesses before us is to keep thinking and growing and asking and changing. We learn from those who came before us, both in what we understand to be true about God and God's Word and in what we discover to be human shortcomings in the mystery of faith. It's not my anger or disregard for those who came before that makes me question and encourage our own evolution; it's my respect and appreciation.

What would the parish at Dunkeld be today without the Reformation? For that matter, what would *we* be without the Reformation? What is our responsibility to consider our response, as a global community of faith, to the changing secular landscape of the past two hundred years? How do we honor those centuries of believers, who were sometimes courageous and sometimes cowardly, when it comes to our own need to be brave today, confronting the idolatry of our political ideologies and desire for comfort, power, and influence?

We continue to consider and reform, to ask questions and strive to be faithful, so that the human beings God loves in our moment in time can get a glimpse of the goodness of the gospel. We are always trying to make corrections, because we're always getting things wrong, even with the best of intentions. Sometimes we're getting those things wrong because of what we don't see, don't know, and don't understand yet. Sometimes we're getting things wrong because we are misguided. Sometimes we're getting things wrong because we're rebellious and sinful and selfish.

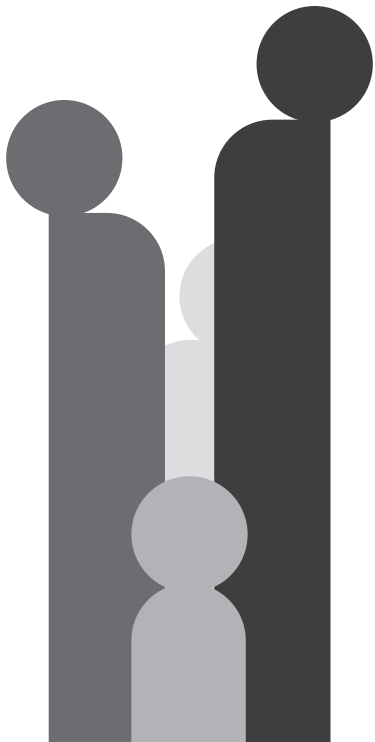
And we're always trying to stay relevant. Yes, I know that the word *relevant* has become a buzzword that makes many of us throw up in our mouths a little. But I don't mean pursuing relevance in the cheap, shallow, consumeristic way. I mean that

we want our faith to be vibrant and alive. We want it to have something to say and to provide us with direction and inspiration to be the people God wants us to be. I want to feel like the words *passion* and *faith* should go together, because I often don't.

And all this matters because the gospel really is that good. The gospel has always been the best news the world has ever heard. There's never been another headline or proclamation or announcement that has packed the power and potential to change the course of human history like the gospel.

I'm writing this book with my good friend Reed, and as we began working on it, there was a point in which he said, "You know, of course, this is just a gospel book. We're just talking about the gospel and what it means." When we started, we weren't setting out to write a theological work; we were maybe trying to envision a better "orthopraxy"—what our lives and actions look like when we let God's Word lead us into better questions. But to do this, we ended up discussing an awful lot about the theology of the gospel. And that's because what we believe about the gospel shapes everything about how we praise, love, and serve God. And what we believe about him shapes what we believe about ourselves.

Becoming aware of the questions we ask ourselves, or the answers we presume the Bible gives about being human, is deeply theological work, whether we realize it or not. Maybe understanding that is a part of where the journey of better theology—and practice—begins.



CHAPTER 1

RECLAIMING A HUMAN POSTURE

Curiosity, Attention, and Wonder

When my wife and I are enjoying a television series together, I'm simply trying to let myself be hypnotized by the story; it's one of the few times in my life when I like experiencing in the concrete instead of analyzing in the abstract. But my wife is different. As soon as we start a series, she likes to start positing how she thinks the season will go. I find this personal quirk of hers irritating, and she knows it; it's a playful banter between us.

"You know what's going to happen?" she'll say.

"No! Don't you dare! Stop it right now!" I shout.

And unfortunately for me, my wife is super good at it. For some reason, she has the mind of a professional screenwriter. She can see how pieces are going to come together long before the average person does. And nearly everyone hates it when somebody ruins the mystery before it's been solved.

When we are consuming a good for entertainment purposes, the entertainment is in the experience. When someone ruins the experience, we feel like it obliterates the value. There is an undeniable pleasure in not knowing.

We humans do love mystery, don't we?

But the storyline of a television episode tends to be a puzzle—a simple plot meant to be solved within the hour. During the commercial breaks, the marketers seek to create other puzzles, all to be solved (by them, of course!) in a mere twenty-eight seconds. According to Ian Leslie, who writes on the science of human behavior, puzzles are how humans instinctively seek to experience the world: We want our problems to have quick solutions, our questions to have clear answers, our concerns to be resolved quickly and neatly. Puzzles reward the puzzle-solver with a pseudo sense of discovery and the completion of a feedback loop. Our survival brains are hardwired to seek this kind of surface-level intellectual stimulation.

Puzzle. Solution. Puzzle. Solution. Puzzle. Solution.

Leslie says we must be aware of this cultural pressure and instead push ourselves beyond the cheap and easy payoff, the expectation that every question is a problem to solve. In a line that first stopped me dead in my tracks, he says,

> Puzzles offer us the satisfaction of answering a question even while you're missing the point completely.[1]

Let the reader understand. We should go back and read that quote from Leslie again.

But let's contrast the concept of puzzles with that of mysteries for a moment. Puzzles are tricky situations that are meant to

be solved. And yes, some mysteries are like that, such as murder mysteries, where we sort through the evidence to discover the truth at the heart of things. But, as Frederick Buechner writes in *Wishful Thinking*, "there are other mysteries that do not conceal a truth to think your way to, but whose truth is itself the mystery."[2] That is why *mystery* is a word we often associate with something of a more transcendent nature.

Not solving a puzzle is a problem; not solving a mystery is an invitation to keep searching and discovering.

Even when we think in terms of mystery in fiction, we understand this on some level. Sometimes the best writers in the mystery genre will satisfy our longing for discovery without ever actually solving the mystery. I think one of my favorite examples of this was the television series *The Blacklist*, with James Spader. That show built up numerous subplots that were never even remotely resolved by the time the series ended. Mysteries invite more and more intrigue and investigation.

What does all this talk about puzzles and mysteries have to do with what the Bible wants us to understand about being human? Well, when it comes to the theological implications of the human experience, our systematic and dogmatic traditions are vulnerable to creating puzzles for us. They present us with the questions and invite us to answer them. As soon as we consider a spiritual puzzle, our particular theological framework is there to give us the answers.

Throughout history, we've created systems of puzzle answers to enable us to develop and evolve in our understanding of who God is and what he's doing in the world. This usually isn't malicious. In fact, many of these puzzle answers weren't quick fixes at all; they were the result of decades, sometimes centuries, of

wrestling about things that deeply mattered to people and society. Sometimes these theologies were battling great forms of institutional injustice or correcting destructive religious belief or practice.

But often we turn the depth of those journeys into a quicker and shallower puzzle. We memorize the answers and test our seminarians, incentivizing them to possess an intimate understanding of very broad and complex theologies so they can quickly and easily respond to the situations that life will throw their congregation's way.

Having this relationship with theology, where we treat it and embody it as a sort of AI response tool, is also why we find disagreement so easy—and frustrating. Because our systems of puzzle answers are designed to work seamlessly, any alternate solution to a single puzzle that differs from our own throws a wrench into an entire category of puzzles that our tradition has solved. We can feel disoriented, dissatisfied, or even threatened. Combine this with our own personal insecurities, a culture of polarized othering of those who disagree with us, and our sociopolitical idolatries, and we have a real fight on our hands, usually led by those who have a deep enough grasp of our puzzle-answer systems to give clever and witty answers.

The easier to make them into a meme, the better.

But maybe discovering what it means to be human is discovering that the gospel is not inviting us to solve all the puzzles. Maybe what God offers us is something far more transformative than comfortably accepting the solutions we've been handed. Maybe the invitation of being human is about remaining present and curious in the mystery. Maybe the shallow, quick-fix, easy-answer-and-move-on approach is often very anti-gospel in

nature. The thing we thought was supposed to give us freedom seems to just be a spiritual sales gimmick. Maybe it's our humanity that knows, on a fundamental level, that we're invited into (and made for) something deeper, more nuanced: mysteries with the power to transform us.

And the Bible is where the people of God have turned for insight into the mysteries.

I'd like to suggest that the Bible isn't a book of puzzles to be solved, even though we can tend to treat it like one; it is, rather, a chronicle of the activity of a God of great mystery in and among people of great curiosity.

When we say that the Bible is inspired, we are identifying that it's not just a book of information; it's a book that is alive. Or maybe more appropriately stated, the Holy Spirt is alive and always using the Book to try to do something in us that is very much happening in real time. Yes, there are objective truths undergirding every part of Scripture. But the *applicability* of those truths is a living, breathing thing.

Engaging with the Text as a mystery to be explored, not a puzzle to be solved, forms us into people who are humbly open to the workings of the Spirit. To discover the possibilities God has for us in our questions about being human, we must first cultivate a posture of curiosity, attentiveness, and wonder.

CURIOSITY

If we're going to encounter mystery, we need to get curious. And one of the leading killers of curiosity is assumptions (which, incidentally, go hand in hand with puzzle-solving).

The reality is that we bring all sorts of assumptions to the

Bible. We assume that the point of the biblical text is to communicate data or truth (as opposed to to provoke us and help us find not data but meaning). We assume that all those who have engaged with the Scripture for centuries have exhausted every perspective or that the perspective we grew up with is the only valid one there is. We assume there is nothing new to be seen. (This makes me nervous too!) We assume that we understand the characters in the Bible. We assume, usually without realizing it, a framework for approaching the Bible that is rooted in a particular philosophy and culture. We assume a lot, and confronting assumptions—particularly when they feel inextricable from our faith—can be daunting.

But the writers of Scripture intended the texts to be engaged with dynamically. The teachings and stories were meant to foster curiosity. The historical, cultural, and literary contexts of the inspired Text teach us that surface-level or black-and-white readings can all too easily miss the point. Instead, we're invited to consider the details that are included or excluded. Those gaps are what make for a good story, a good parable, and a good teaching.[3]

When we engage with the Text as a mystery and not a puzzle, the Bible has a way of indirectly shining a light on our assumptions. The biblical narrative says, "You assumed that God was _____, but what if there's something else?" Or "You thought the world was this way, but maybe it's not." In Jesus' own words, "You've heard it said . . . but I say unto you."

Assumptions have no place in mystery. They kill curiosity before it can even get started, because they keep us from practicing our faith. They move us from question to resolution and prevent us from looking for God in the in-between.

So how can we learn to let curiosity lead us to the mysteries of God?

ATTENTION

I'm connected to an academic society that hosts regular conversations with panels of scholars. A couple of years back, I had the pleasure of virtually attending one of those discussions, where the leading scholar was Dr. Willie James Jennings and the topic of conversation concerned some of the ideas beneath his work *The Christian Imagination*.[4]

Dr. Jennings is a Black man who was born in Michigan. When he was twelve years old, two white men visited his family's home and introduced themselves to his mother as members of a local congregation. They assumed that his family was not Christian. What these men did not know was that his father was the pastor of a church in the exact same neighborhood as their own. They had no clue that they were speaking to a woman who would have been described as one of the most important spiritual mothers in their faith community.

The issue of race and cultural assumptions certainly played a role in that exchange, but I can easily relate to similar assumptions that I made as a young minister in training. As we knocked on doors within our own suburban neighborhood, we brought a long list of assumptions with us. Our assumptions weren't blind; we had the data about how much of our area and region was unchurched. But with that mental framework in hand, we assumed that whoever answered each door we knocked on matched the mental description we had assigned them.

There were many stops where, after a few minutes of

discussion, we would discover that the residents were mature believers. At one stop, we discovered that we were talking to the minister of the Pentecostal church a few miles from our own. I felt a mixture of awkward shame that I had assumed unbelief and the joy of finding others who believed in my neighborhood.

I reflect on that day as a small example of what we Christians often do on a much larger and more systemic level. We knock on the door of a biblical story or passage or verse, and we already have a set of assumptions in place about the theological implications of what we're reading. But rather than starting with a default assumption and having to walk it backward, what if we started with a clean slate of curiosity and investigated the actual situation?

What if the men who visited the Jennings household that day had started with more curiosity and given attention to those they were visiting? What if they'd let their questions lead the way and allowed themselves space to notice what God might be doing in that moment? I wonder whether they would have found a new friendship and opportunity to partner with a community of believers in their neighborhood, a community that was likely different from their own. Perhaps the interaction would have shaped—even in seemingly insignificant ways—who they were and how they lived out the gospel in their context.

It is this idea of attention, of focused curiosity, that was the original impetus for this book. I sensed that although I had given people the tools for good Bible study and historically informed hermeneutics in my book *Asking Better Questions of the Bible*, those tools, while critical, were not wholly sufficient for genuine transformation, either individually or communally.

The next issue was that we had so many assumptions that were going unquestioned.

This was an issue not of interpretive methodology but of the theological waters that we were swimming in. Using the tools for a more properly informed exegesis wouldn't ultimately lead to any change, since we assumed so much that kept us from discovering some of the things that had been there in the conversation all along.

How would we ever be able to change this?

Asking Questions

Curiosity alone can get us only so far. Ian Leslie identifies that dismantling assumption involves not just being curious but being focused. He has explored the work of Dan Rothstein, a community organizer in Lawrence, Massachusetts, running a drop out–prevention program for children not attending school. Rothstein notes that such parents are often nurturing and caring and have a desire to see their children attend and succeed in school, yet they struggle to get their children involved. Some might assume that the parents don't know what to look for or what to do, but Rothstein suggests that they don't know how to engage with the right questions. "Question asking," he notes, "is a sophisticated skill."[5]

Attention points curiosity in the right direction. In the case of those in Rothstein's community, the parents would need to turn their attention to their children's specific needs so that their curiosity could focus on the right questions. Eventually Rothstein discovered that instead of teaching families *what* questions to ask he needed to teach them basic principles of question asking. Once the families mastered those ideas, their

ability to navigate challenging circumstances changed dramatically. To quote Leslie,

> Rothstein realized that the teaching of question asking had the potential to change lives. It could help families in many different situations: at parent-teacher conferences, at the unemployment bureau, when dealing with the police or with commercial services. The more he thought about it, the more important a skill it seemed. Question asking, he came to believe, is fundamental to being human. "You know, it's almost a physical feeling, isn't it?" he says. "When you walk away from an encounter and think, *I wish I'd asked that.*"[6]

Question asking is fundamental to being human. The deep irony is that for some of us question asking isn't a skill we learn in our own contexts. Or we might assume we've absorbed the skill intuitively but rarely give the practice enough intention and attention to put it to work in ways that help the world around us. Learning how to "human well"—understanding the fuller picture of what God tells us about who we are in God's Word—starts with intentionally developing the skill of question asking.

Stopping to See

There is a story in Exodus about Moses and a burning bush.[7] It's a famous story; most people have heard about God appearing to Moses in a bush that is on fire but not being consumed. The burning bush is typically seen as a miracle of God, prepared for Moses to find his calling in the wilderness.

But the ancient Jewish teachers saw it differently. They thought the concept of a burning bush in the desert was too much like a cheap parlor trick. Instead, they noted the fact that seemed rather unnecessary to the larger idea: The bush wasn't being consumed. The sages commented that for Moses to see that, he would have had to have stopped and observed the bush for some time. He would have needed to have been curious enough to notice and then attentive enough to realize the oddity. In other words, if Moses had stuck with his basic assumptions (*That bush is on fire, yikes!*), he probably would have moved on and not encountered the presence of God (*Wait, that bush is on fire . . . but not really . . . it's different and unlike anything I've seen before. What's going on here?*).

For the original audience of this story, the concept of the bush not being consumed was actually the test of Moses' character.[8] Would Moses be willing to pay attention and look hard enough to notice that God was present in something he thought he already understood?[9]

The relevant lesson for me is that part of what God intends for us as humans is for us to stop and pay attention to the things we think we understand. We look and then we look again. We sit and stare long enough to realize that those bushes aren't being consumed: *Maybe there is something more here than what I originally thought.*

Was it curiosity that caused Moses to stop and attend to the burning bush?

Or was it attending to the bush that made Moses curious?

Does it matter? Probably not. But it was Moses' curiosity and attention that changed the course of human history. It may behoove us to stand at some of the biblical stories and passages

that we know too well—powerful words that shape our understanding of the theology of who God is and who we are and what he is doing in the world—and attend to them. If we are curious, we may find that some of these texts are more than what we assume. There is more taking place. The words are not being consumed.

Author Karen Swallow Prior has said, "Serious theologians know that there is room, to varying degrees, for differing interpretations and applications of scriptural texts."[10] The biblical text is alive, burning, not being consumed, which means it's probably not as settled and clear as our assumptions may want us to believe. Sometimes we disagree with one another about what we're seeing in biblical stories, books, letters, and verses. What are we to do with these disagreements?

If it's not about puzzle-solving, maybe it's about exploration. Using stories like Moses' happens to be one of the ways that God invites us to reconsider what we assume to be true.

And maybe the quest itself is deeply connected to what it means to human. Maybe we'll find that the Bible is speaking to that, too. When we do the ongoing work of living from a place of attention, of intentionally cultivating our curiosity, we find ourselves being more and more human—the people God created us (and keeps inviting us throughout the ages) to be.

WONDER

I was once leading a group of students through the desert of Israel on an incredibly hot August day. With temperatures in the triple digits, we set out through the rocky terrain to reflect on what it meant for God's people to trust him to provide for

their needs. One of the greatest lessons we were thinking on was the verse from Deuteronomy about how God wanted to teach his people that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."[11] As the trip leader, I wanted them to experience this trust in a profound new way.

A few miles back in, we reached the top of a desert staircase—and the end of my students' patience. They sat down, exhausted and unwilling to go farther. I invited them and pleaded for them to follow me just a bit farther, but to no avail. We sat for some time in the blazing-hot sun before they were willing to continue. We followed the steps down into a ravine covered in shade—and into a waterfall oasis that caught everyone by surprise.

In fact, we could have been refreshed almost thirty minutes earlier if we hadn't stopped short of the destination that only the "rabbi" knew about. What a lesson.[12]

Sometimes wonder finds us—out of the blue—and sometimes attending to our curiosity leads us to wonder. But wonder always has the ability to open us up to possibilities we weren't as open to before. Without wonder, we don't realize that we're stopping short of the *more* God invites us into. On some level, wonder is our doorway to humility and remembering our place.

How much hubris does it take for us to believe that a story in the inspired Word of God has been completely mined for all its data, wisdom, and value? Wonder is that moment that reminds you of just how big this whole thing is. Wonder is what sits in those times when you notice that some other Christian tradition has thought about something for centuries that your

tradition just seems to ignore. Wonder is that tantalizing, invigorating experience of realizing that our human experience was built for more, that we can endure more, that we can show more mercy than we ever imagined.

Wonder at the unfathomable love of God makes me ponder, *What if I'm not just a wretch?* The wonder of the forgiveness of God invites me to reconsider whether my enemies are as evil as I assume them to be: *Could we share more humanity than I've ever dared to imagine?*

Wonder also invites us to a place of surrender or submission to something bigger—a recognition that a loving and compassionate God is the one running the cosmos, who knows us more completely than we know ourselves.

We can engage and pursue our curiosity and attention with a sense of control; we can hold on to this idea that we are the ones learning and putting in the work to develop. But we can't spend too much time in curiosity or attention without coming to terms with how much is out there that we'll never know, master, or understand. It's this wonder that will make us more comfortable with paradox, mystery, nuance, complexity, and the fact that we aren't the ultimate possessors of the knowledge of good and evil.[13]

Wonder is an experience of discovery—of seeing the world in a way you never have before—and because of that, wonder cannot be separated from imagination.

Now, I immediately recoil against using the word *imagination* in a book about theology. Like not letting the fifth graders out on the playground with the first graders during recess, it kind of feels as though we shouldn't be letting imagination and theology play together. I know it certainly feels like theology

is already preparing for how it's going to bully the soft and pathetic playfulness of imagination.

But here's why holding both together matters: It's impossible to be curious, impossible to question our assumptions, impossible to encounter wonder if we cannot imagine any other way of seeing things.

Certainly there's value to checking our thoughts against the data that's saved in our theological hard drives. I want to make sure my faith and understanding of Scripture are anchored in something historic and tethered to the intention of the apostolic teaching. But imagination opens us up to the experience of wonder, creating the space, the sense of possibility for us to ask, *Are there parts of that teaching that my particular theological vantage point has missed? Is there no other way of seeing what could be understood in any given story? Is the conversation over?*

We're going to need to be curious and attentive to realize that a burning bush isn't burning up, and we're going to need to get really comfortable with wonder.

MAKING MEANING AND DOING THEOLOGY

Why are curiosity, attention, and wonder so important for us to consider before we examine our theological assumptions about being human? Because the work of theology is, at least on its better days, the work of *making meaning* (a phrase that I'm borrowing from Prior's great book *The Evangelical Imagination*).[14]

Now, when I say "making meaning," I'm not implying "making stuff up." In fact, I'm not even talking about "creating" theology at all. For me, this conversation is about examining, and then reexamining, the theological conversations we've

been having—and then assuming, wielding, and exploiting—without being aware of how our own imaginations and creativity were functioning when we were having them.

We tend to assume that theology does the work of a conveyor belt. Theologians go into the Bible, which is a great book full of truth, and they mine that truth. Out of this biblical mine, a conveyor delivers the good stuff to the believers who are outside the mine.[15] But in reality, theology isn't just a delivery system; it's a manufacturer and distributor. It takes the resources and creates something useful. It packages the product in relationship to other resources and then distributes it to the rest of us, always inviting us to trust in the processes that got it to us.

And to be frank, I don't believe this is a dirty truth. I just don't think we're honest about what we're doing much of the time. A rabbi once described the difference between Christian engagement with the Bible and Jewish engagement with the Bible by saying that Christians go to the Scriptures looking for truth but Jews read the Scriptures looking for meaning.[16] We convince ourselves that we simply peddle in truth transfer rather than the work of meaning making.

The biblical library is too rich and varied to be handled by a conveyor belt. There are letters written to churches and catalogs of wisdom and tales of history—all these things are different and packaged in unique ways. Some of them are about facts and data. Some of them are about beauty. Some of them are pieces of music. Theology is about making meaning out of all of it.

Curiosity, attention, and wonder change how we approach our questions about theology. We learn to ask things like

- Are there ways to consider this idea other than what we assume?
- What was it about the point in history that made us package it that way?
- Were there other points in history where people made meaning differently?
- Is there a more helpful, even a more biblically accurate, way to do theology about this today?

It probably felt as though that last line needed some grammatical work. You don't "do" theology, do you?

But then again, what is the point of making meaning if it doesn't change how we live?

Prior suggests that the disconnection between *knowing* and *doing* is actually the essence of where we find ourselves in history now:

> If the Reformation was over the Word as written (over who can and should read and interpret it), then this reckoning of evangelicalism concerns the Word as it has been incarnated. If the Reformation was over the truth revealed in Scripture, then this evangelical reckoning is over the way and the life revealed in Jesus—and how the church has failed to follow and embody it.[17]

Whew, that's a word. Prior is quick to add that we can't separate these three things: the biblical Text, theology, and incarnation. I couldn't agree more. I think she is right to suggest that

evangelicals have focused on the first and avoided the second, which has caused a failure to live up to the third—that is, integrating our theology and our actions in the real world. It's time to do our best to rectify that.

We will never engage with this reckoning if we don't demonstrate an unflinching commitment to pursuing curiosity. *How did we get here?* We won't persevere through the reckoning if we aren't willing to stand and pay attention to our theological burning bushes. *What is really taking place here?* And we won't ever be able to reckon at all if we aren't captivated by something that has always been much bigger and better than what we put together in the first place. *Is God really this good?*

FINDING OURSELVES AGAIN

The college students I work with love the word *adulting*, making the concept of life maturation and duties a verb. But "humaning" and adulting are not created equal. There is something far more profound and complex about what it means to be human—something that both reclaims and transcends what we may have lost along the wearying road of life.

Children are hardwired for curiosity, attention, and wonder, and they may be our role models when it comes to remembering and rediscovering this wisdom and thinking about it theologically. The child simply has a different relationship with assumptions than the adult.

In 1910, an American philosopher and psychologist named John Dewey published some research on curiosity in which he claimed that he had discovered three stages of curiosity by

studying the development of children.[18] In the first stage of curiosity, the child has a hunger to probe and explore their world. Dewey noted that this hunger is instinctual and not intellectual; it is a part of us as creatures.

The second stage of curiosity is a learned skill. The child discovers that other people are wells of information and resources. However, the child also finds out that the process of discovery, what we might call interpersonal curiosity, is the true treasure and resource, not the data itself. The child sees that the specific questions are not as valuable as the process of gathering the data and assimilating the learning itself.

Finally, Dewey said, there is a third stage of curiosity. It is here that the child finds an interest in the problems that have been provoked by the learning process. Curiosity becomes transformed as the child develops a deepening connection with others and the world in which they accumulate their learning. The child actually finds delight, not frustration, in the growing layers of complexity and nuance.

Although Dewey believed that the first stage could be assumed as instinctual and the second stage typically developed for most subjects, the third stage remained somewhat elusive. He notes,

> In a few people, intellectual curiosity is so insatiable that nothing will discourage it, but in most its edge is easily dulled and blunted. . . . Some lose it in indifference or carelessness; others in a frivolous flippancy; many escape these evils only to become incased in *a hard dogmatism which is equally fatal to the spirit of wonder*.[19]

Goodness, that paragraph will haunt a person. Our dogmatic certainties can be the very things that kill our worship and the wondrous relationship that leads us to surrender and transformation. But when we choose to pursue curiosity, attention, and wonder, we find our dogmatism softening and become more aware of how we're finding the freedom to step into the transformation God wants for us.

We were created for curiosity that invites us to be open to the idea of something more, for attention that calls us to look more closely, and for wonder that draws us forward to discover what God is up to. These postures are the first steps toward finding what it means to be truly human, to finding ourselves again. As we do, we begin to approach his Word differently.

If the invitation from God is to help us discover the good news about being human, it would make sense that he would warn us against forgetting where the journey starts from: being a child. Don't stop being like little children, Jesus tells us.[20] I have heard many sermons use this admonition to talk about innocence and love for others, and certainly these are relevant observations about childlikeness. But this concept also must include our willingness to humble ourselves and to learn.

As children, we start from a place of curiosity, and there are incentives to risking discomfort to learn something new. This journey we were created for doesn't feel awkward when we're young. It's one of those "of course" experiences: Of course she's learning something new; she's just a kid.

But then we do it less and less as we grow. We start to assume that such a learning posture is for babes, and we start to lose a bit of our humanity.

We begin to rediscover our humanity as God intended

when we allow the stories and reflections and ideas in the Scriptures to nudge us to question assumptions and suspend conclusions just enough to be stirred. We begin to stand in these words long enough to see if they are simply a bush on fire—if we have correctly seen everything there is to see in them—or if there is something more going on that invites us to take off our shoes.

In the rest of this book, we're going to examine ten different biblical texts with a sense of curiosity, attending to what each points to and seeing if our humanity can lead us into a better way to embody and incarnate the stories of God and his people. As we go along, we will continue to examine assumptions that might need to be questioned; unintended consequences of these assumptions; new truths that our posture of curiosity, attention, and wonder may lead us to explore; and the potential applications and implications for how we show up as humans who incarnate the way of Jesus in the world.

Even as we look critically at some familiar theological perspectives, I'm not suggesting wholesale rejection. Not all assumptions are incorrect. Some of our theology is useful and life-giving. My grasp of history is limited, flawed, and just as biased as any other perspective has been, and there are many theologians who could run circles around my knowledge and understanding.

Curiosity is allergic to dogmatism on all sides. Attention may draw us back to something we already know, or it may lead us down a path we've never considered. Wonder keeps us humble enough to trust that God knows every intricate detail of mysteries we have only begun to glimpse.

So, while so much of our world will double down on

assumptions, let us consider what it means to let curiosity lead the way. Let us imagine how these truths, some new and some old, could be constructed into better stories to live by. Let us engage in the work of making meaning in our theology—meaning that will lead to more reconciliation and redemption. I suspect that as we do we'll find a place of delight, not frustration, in the complexity and nuance; we'll find ourselves free to reconsider and accept (and potentially grieve) what needs to be discarded; and we'll find ourselves free to celebrate what needs to remain.