

# PRAISE FOR *VISUAL THEOLOGY*

Tim Challies (the writer) and Josh Byers (the designer) have teamed up to produce a truly unique introduction to theology and guide to living the Christian life. This is show-and-tell at its finest. Most theology books merely convey what we are to believe, but this one uses creative and beautiful design to capture and portray these crucial truths. I know of nothing else quite like it, and I trust that God will use it to help his people see and celebrate reality in a new way.

JUSTIN TAYLOR, managing editor of the *ESV Study Bible*  
and coauthor of *The Final Days of Jesus*

This is simple yet profound, clever without being flashy. Helpful and practical. Speaking as a person who avoids diagrams and graphs at all costs, I found the infographics in this book to be illuminating. This cheeky little number is a class act.

MEZ MCCONNELL, pastor of Niddrie Community  
Church, Edinburgh, and director of 20schemes

You've probably seen (or used) a gospel presentation drawn on a whiteboard or a napkin. It's remarkable how God gives us spiritual insight when we behold truths about him with our eyes. With engaging graphics and descriptions of the Christian faith, Tim Challies and Josh Byers have done something genuinely unique in *Visual Theology*. See for yourself!

GLORIA FURMAN, author of *Treasuring Christ When Your  
Hands Are Full* and *The Pastor's Wife*

My mind is blown. Tim Challies and Josh Byers marry rock-ribbed Reformational theology with breathtaking presentations. The effect is something like following John Knox into the Matrix. In this diaphanous world, we encounter no fiction, but very reality itself—God-reality—and we are transformed.

OWEN STRACHAN, associate professor of Christian theology  
and director of the Center on Gospel and Culture  
at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

# **VISUAL THEOLOGY**

# VISUAL THEOLOGY

SEEING AND UNDERSTANDING  
**THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD**

TIM CHALLIES AND JOSH BYERS

 ZONDERVAN®

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*Visual Theology*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:  
Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Challies, Tim, 1976-

Visual theology : seeing and understanding the truth about God / Tim Challies and Josh Byers.  
pages cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-52043-6 (softcover)

1. Theology, Doctrinal—Popular works. 2. Theology. 3. Christian life. I. Title.

BT77.C4526 2016

230.00—dc23

2015031836

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Published in association with the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

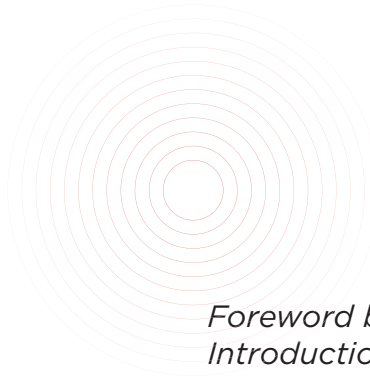
Cover design: Studio Gearbox

Interior design and illustrations: Josh Byers

Printed in China

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15 16 17 18 19 20 21 /CTC/ 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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# FOREWORD

*V*isual *Theology* is a delightful read. It combines wise knowledge of sound theology with a readable, inviting style and frequent perceptive insights into practical Christian living. Tim Challies and Josh Byers repeatedly tie their discussion to relevant Scripture passages and then provide a healthy and balanced application to the Christian life.

Another strength of this book is that it takes sin seriously, an emphasis that is sadly lacking in some evangelical writing and preaching today. This book describes practical steps for progressively overcoming sinful habits and patterns in the daily lives of Christians, something that is essential if we are going to grow in Christian maturity.

I often draw diagrams in the classroom because I find that students can more quickly grasp and retain theological concepts when they can see them in a single visual image. But this book has expanded that process far beyond anything I have ever done. The visually inviting infographics in this book are very helpful in synthesizing theological concepts and showing their application to practical Christian living.

I am happy to commend this book, and I expect that it will invite many readers on a pathway toward regular Christian growth and increasing likeness to our Lord Jesus Christ.

WAYNE GRUDEM, author of *Systematic Theology* and research professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary



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# INTRODUCTION



I knew there would never be a better time than right now. I certainly wasn't getting any younger. Forty was closing in fast, and I wasn't getting any thinner, so I did the unthinkable: I walked into a health club and asked for help. "I want to not die. Can you help me with that?"

I had never seen the inside of a gym before. It was full of strange equipment being used in strange ways. Looking around, I saw athletic people showing off their strength and agility, lifting heavy things and twisting themselves into impossible positions. They all appeared so confident and so fit. I felt awkward, weak, and pathetic in comparison.

I got a glimpse that day of what it feels like to be in a strange and unusual place where everyone knows what to do and how things work, and you feel like an intruder. For many people, this is what it is like to walk into church for the very first time. You are convinced that everyone else is looking your way and muttering to their friends and neighbors, "He doesn't belong here ..."

I stuck it out at the gym, in case you were wondering. They paired me with a trainer who evaluated me, created a program for me, and patiently showed me how to use all of that equipment. Over time, and through a dogged commitment to his program, I got results. I increased in strength, in stamina, in agility, and in health. And as an added benefit, I learned why the Bible calls every Christian to think of himself as an athlete.

Nearly two thousand years ago, a man named Paul, one of the earliest Christians, wrote to his young protégé Timothy and gave him this instruction: "Train yourself for godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). Paul looked to the world of athletics, and there he found a fitting metaphor for the Christian life. Paul imagined the Christian as a kind of spiritual athlete, a person with a longing for spiritual fitness and spiritual success. Where an athlete strives for speed or strength, the Christian strives for godliness.

Godliness is a simple word, but hiding behind it is a lifelong challenge. The Bible sets before us two ways to live. The first way is to live a life that is consistent with God's desires and God's instructions. The second is to live a life that is consistent with our own desires and our own instructions. The great challenge laid before each Christian is to constantly grow in consistency with what God requires — to pursue growth that continues from the moment of salvation to the moment of death.

That is what this book is about. It is a book about growing in godliness. It is a book about how to live the Christian life and how to train yourself not just by believing the right doctrines and truth but by putting those beliefs into action. It will teach you how to live as a Christian; it will teach you how to assess yourself; and it will help you put together a plan to continue to grow throughout all of life. If an athlete disciplines himself until he breaks the ribbon and raises the trophy, the Christian disciplines himself until his life is over and he has received his eternal reward.

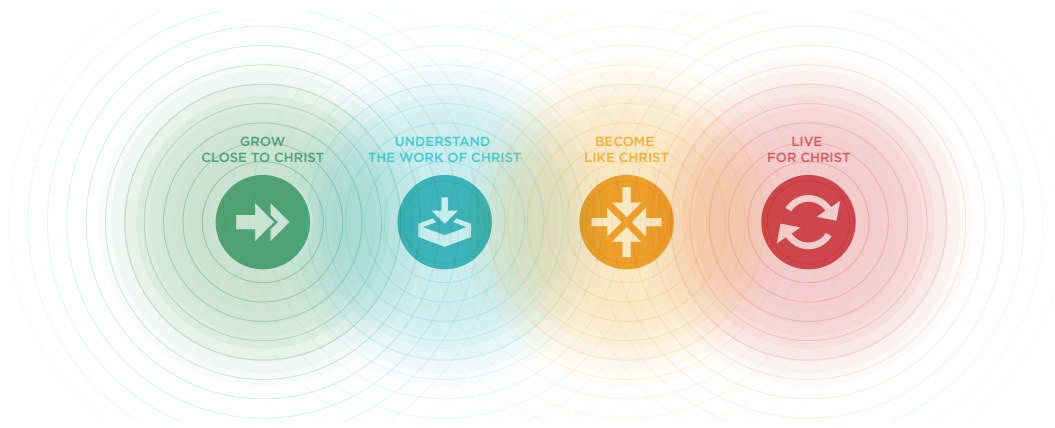
Just before Paul died, he wrote to Timothy once more and said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7 – 8). Every Christian longs to see and to receive that sweet crown of victory.

## **SPIRITUAL HEALTH**

If a physical training program is going to make you healthy, it will emphasize a well-balanced view of fitness. If you lift weights and do nothing else, you may develop strong muscles, but you will not be fully healthy because your stamina will be unaffected. If you run on the treadmill but never learn to stretch or lift weights, you may develop stamina, but you will not be strong or flexible. You can be massively overdeveloped in some areas and pathetically underdeveloped in others. Healthy people are healthy all over. Healthy Christians are healthy all over too. God intends that we grow in balanced and coordinated ways. Let me explain what I mean.

We have all encountered Christians who have massive knowledge about Jesus but who don't seem to act much like Jesus. Yet we also know of some people who love to serve like Jesus served but who don't seem to have much knowledge of the Jesus the Bible reveals. Here, too, people can be overdeveloped in some areas and underdeveloped in others. The best-lived Christian life is one of discipline and coordination.

If we take all that we do and all that we are as Christians, we can divide the Christian life into four pursuits or disciplines. This book is structured around these four parts.<sup>1</sup> As Christians, we need to:



## GROW CLOSE TO CHRIST



One thing that distinguishes Christianity from every other faith in the world is that Christianity is not only a religion but also a relationship. Some have repeated this so often that it can begin to sound trite or cliché, but let's not lose the wonder of this marvelous fact: Christianity is a religion based on a relationship with a person. As Christians, we have entered into a real and living relationship with the Creator of the universe. And as Christians, our first and most basic discipline is cultivating and growing into that personal relationship with Jesus as we hear from him, speak to him, and worship him.

## UNDERSTAND THE WORK OF CHRIST



The Christian faith involves a relationship, but a relationship requires knowing things about the person as well, especially who they are and what they love to do. So there is also an essential content dimension to the Christian faith — information we need to know and facts we need to understand. Our emphasis in this second discipline is primarily on understanding the work of Christ. We need to grow in our understanding of what God is accomplishing in this world through the work of Christ. As we do that, we will also grow in our knowledge of God himself so we can better understand who he is and what he is like.

## BECOME LIKE CHRIST



As we grow close to Christ and as we grow in our knowledge of his work, we will find ourselves with a longing to become like him. The Bible tells us that our purpose in life is to be conformed to his image — to think like him, to speak like him, to behave like him. We do this by putting away old habits, patterns, and passions and by replacing them with new and better habits, patterns, and passions. This will be the emphasis in the book's third section.

## LIVE FOR CHRIST



Finally, the fourth discipline is one that will consume every day of our entire lives. We need to learn to live for Christ from the moment we wake up each day to the moment we fall asleep, to live in such a way that we draw attention to him and bring glory to him. We need to learn to live as Christians, to love as Christians, and to serve as Christians — to do all we do in a distinctly Christian way.

The heart of this book is investigating each one of these disciplines. If you are a new Christian, you will learn how to pursue godliness in a measured and balanced way. If you have been a Christian for a long time, you will take a look at your spiritual health and fitness, identify areas of strength and weakness, and make plans to grow all the more.

Through it all, I want to challenge you to make a lifelong habit of training yourself for godliness, and I want you to approach this training with purpose and order. After all, none of us have arrived. I don't think any of us would say we are as mature as we need to be, as we ought to be, and (I trust) as we want to be. An athlete can never stop training, and a Christian can never stop striving toward godliness.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

I love words. In my mind, words represent the best kind of raw material. As a writer, I begin with an idea — information I mean to convey to others — and I labor to shape that raw material of words into a finished work that expresses the information with nuance, with freshness, with force. The degree to which I succeed is the degree to which I am satisfied with the result. It is a constant challenge and one I love to face.

I love words, but I also love images. Over the past few years, I have especially come to love and respect a certain kind of image — what we call infographics. Information graphics are a means of visualizing or displaying information, which makes it art, but an especially functional form of art. Visualization expert Alberto Cairo writes, “The first and main goal of any graphic and visualization is to be a tool for your eyes and brain to perceive what lies beyond their natural reach.”<sup>2</sup> Infographics allow us to present information in fresh, powerful, and attractive ways — and in ways words cannot express.

This book began with a desire to learn and to teach how to live as Christians in this world. It combines the different passions of a writer and an artist — a writer with a passion for writing what is true and beautiful and good, and an artist with a passion for displaying what is true and beautiful and good.

This book is the product of our shared desire and our unique passions. It teaches the foundational disciplines of the Christian life through both words and illustrations. We want you to read the truth, but we also want you to see the truth. Our hope is that the graphics in this book will powerfully complement the words and that the words will powerfully complement the graphics. We want the truth to blend seamlessly through two very different media.

So come along. Join us as we describe — and display — the greatest of all truths.



SECTION ONE  
**GROW CLOSE TO CHRIST**



CHAPTER ONE  
**G O S P E L**

Recently, I walked into our church building, just like I do almost every day. I opened the office door and was greeted by the familiar screech of our alarm, warning me that I had thirty seconds to punch in my security code. I have entered the code hundreds and hundreds of times, but on that morning, my mind went mysteriously blank. I tried every code I could think of and got nowhere. By then, the alarm was blaring, the phone was ringing, and I was completely flustered. Even when the alarm company told me the code, I had no memory of it. It was the strangest experience. Somehow I had just plain forgotten an important piece of information that I use nearly every day.

We humans are a forgetful bunch. Our lives are busy; our brains run at full capacity; and sometimes it seems like for every fact we remember, there are one hundred we forget. Without help and without discipline, we are capable of forgetting even the most important information.

When we need to remember something, we usually embed it in a kind of habit or ritual. One of my hobbies is memorizing poetry. If I want to master and remember a poem, I need to repeat it to myself again and again until I can recite it perfectly. But that is not enough. I also need to develop a routine to continue reciting it to myself over the months and years that follow. The moment I stop repeating it is the moment I begin forgetting it. And this isn't only true when memorizing poetry. It is true in life, and it is true in our pursuit of Christ. The reason we celebrate Christmas and Easter is to provide the structure to ensure that we will regularly remind ourselves of the birth and death of Jesus. The reason we celebrate the Lord's Supper is to remind ourselves of what Christ has done and what he has promised to do. We are forgetful, so we develop habits and rituals to remind us of the most important facts.

There is nothing more important to the Christian than what the Bible refers to as the *gospel*, the good news of what Jesus Christ has accomplished. This good news is factual and historical, recounting real events that really happened in real places with real people. But this good news is also relational, a crucial component of this pursuit of growing close to Christ.

## PURSUING CHRIST THROUGH THE GOSPEL

One of the best parts of being a pastor is getting down — getting down on the floor with the little children and talking with them. They can't come up to my level, so I've got to get down to theirs. I often find myself sitting on the floor in my office having a chat with a few of them. I learn hilarious facts about my friends, details that have been filtered through the minds of their children. I also get to speak to the kids about their own hearts and souls. I trust this is good for the children, but I know it is good for me. It teaches me how to communicate important information in simple, clear ways. This practice pushes me to learn my facts even better, because if I don't understand something so I can communicate it simply, I probably don't understand it at all.

One of my favorite stories from the life of Jesus is told by his friend John. I love it because it displays the simple, childlike faith that God treasures. Jesus passes by a man who has been blind since birth, and Jesus' disciples ask him a simple but heartbreaking question: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). They assume this man's blindness is God's curse on him — either he or his parents must have done something terrible, and God has responded by cursing him with blindness. Jesus replies that neither is the case — God has made this man to be born blind so God could do a great miracle through him. Jesus then does something unusual and miraculous: He "spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then he anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing" (John 9:6–7).

The man is healed, but the story isn't over. The religious authorities hate Jesus and are driven mad with envy that he is able to perform miracles like this one. They refuse to believe that Jesus is actually responsible for this man's healing. Maybe it was all a trick, or maybe he isn't actually able to see. They call the man in and question him, demanding to know how his sight has been restored and who is responsible. He tells them it was Jesus, so they kick him out and question his parents instead. Still not liking what they hear, they bring the man in a second time and demand better answers: "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner" (John 9:24). The man's response is simple and sublime: "Whether he is a sinner I do not know. One thing I do know, that





## WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

God sent his Son Jesus into the world in the power of the Spirit in order to live a perfect life, die a substitutionary death, and rise victorious from the grave (1 Corinthians 15:1–8). This gospel (or good news) is offered to everyone so that all who believe this message are saved from their sins (Romans 10:9–13). In response, Christians are to take the message of the gospel throughout the whole world, testifying to the glory and the grace of God (Matthew 24:14).

### For further study, see:

*The Gospel: How the Church Portrays the Beauty of Christ* by Ray Ortlund

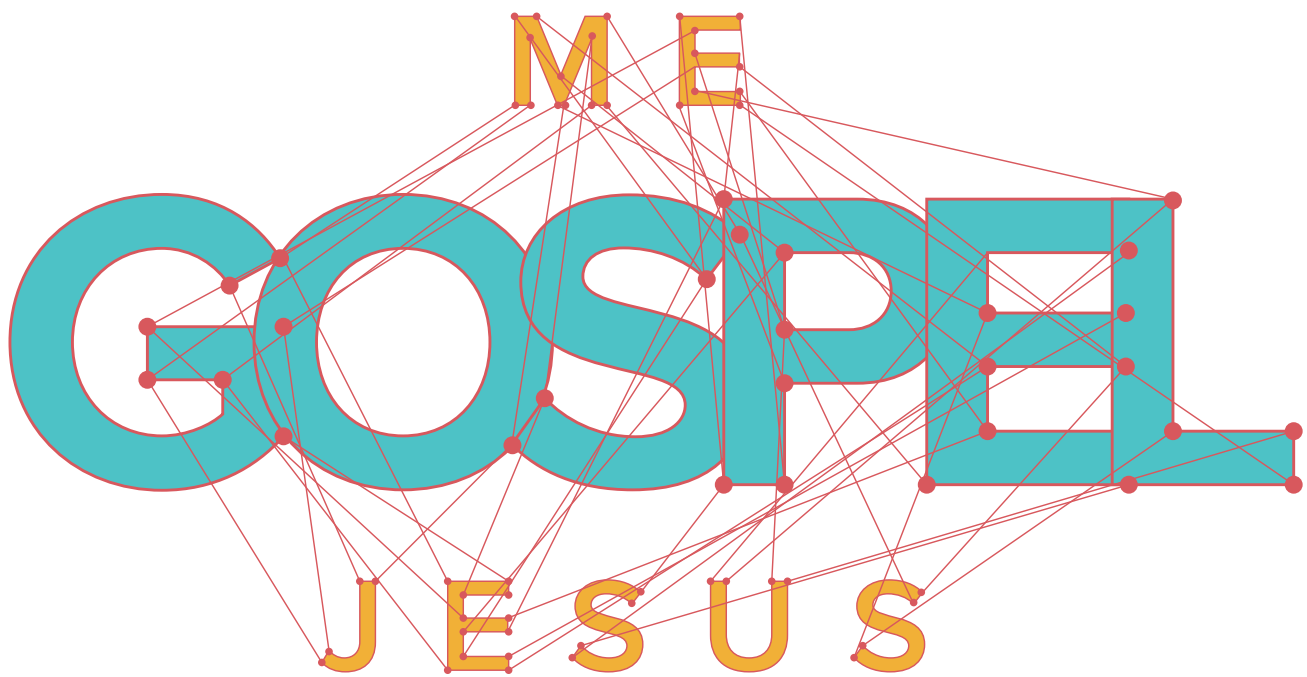


though I was blind, now I see” (John 9:25). This man does not know much, but he does know this: Earlier that day, he was blind, but now he has perfect sight. That is all he knows for sure, and that is enough.

Perhaps you can relate. For every Christian, there was a time when you were spiritually blind, unable to see the best and most important truths in the world. Then Christ saved you, and now you have the pleasure of sight. You see yourself as a sinner; you see Christ as your Savior; and you see the gospel as the good news that changes everything. The gospel is good news—*your* good news. And to draw close to Christ, you need to recount this good news and rehearse it again and again.

I want to pause to make an important distinction here. There is only one gospel—one real and saving gospel—but we can speak about it in at least two different ways. The gospel is objective and universal fact that is true for all people through all time. That is one way to speak of the gospel. But the gospel is also something every Christian experiences in a unique and personal way. In this sense, the gospel is both an announcement and an experience.

Each person who hears the gospel message is exposed to the facts at a different time, and each responds to them in a different way. We all have a gospel story to tell in which God swept into our lives and brought us his salvation. Before we go further, I want to start by considering the gospel in that second sense of personal experience and then return in a later chapter to the objective facts of the gospel. In this pursuit of growing close to Christ, I want you to ponder how you personally have experienced Christ’s saving grace through the gospel.



THE RELATIONAL CONNECTION  
BETWEEN ME & JESUS

## RECOUNTING THE GOSPEL

August 8, 1998. For most people it was a day like any other, but for Aileen and me, it will always be especially memorable, because it was the day we were married. Every year, when August 8 rolls around, we pause to celebrate, and a sweet thing happens. When we sit and talk about that day, when we remember facing each other at the front of that church, and when we remember reciting our vows, we find our relationship growing and our love deepening. As the two of us sit on the couch and look at those old wedding photos, we inevitably find ourselves cuddling just a little closer. Recounting engenders intimacy. The experience draws us together, and our relationship grows through the simple act of remembering and sharing stories with each other.

This is the way God has made us — that as we remember together, we grow together. If we have a real and living relationship with Christ Jesus, it only stands to reason that it, too, will grow through the joy of recounting. We recount the gospel, and as we do, we grow in our relationship. There are specific ways we recount the gospel throughout our lives. We do this privately and publicly, formally and informally. Most importantly, we do it regularly and routinely.

### PREACH

You recount the gospel when you recite it to yourself. Many Christians live with the sad delusion that the gospel is only the entranceway to the Christian life. They believe that the gospel gets you in, but then you need to advance to deeds, creeds, and meeting needs. But the good news never becomes old news. We never move past the gospel and never advance beyond it. Dane Ortlund writes, “The gospel is not only the gateway into the Christian life, but the pathway of the Christian life.”<sup>3</sup>

The gospel is the relational connection between you and Jesus. It is the glue that bound you together and the glue that continues to bind you together. Aileen and I remember and recount our wedding ceremony and our wedding vows, and we wear our wedding rings to remind ourselves of our shared commitment to one another. As a Christian, you need to remember and recount the gospel to remind and assure yourself of your relationship with Jesus.

A WAY TO **SEE** MYSELF  
AS A **SINNER**

THE **GOOD** NEWS

THE  
**GOSPEL**

THE WAY FOR ME TO **SEE**  
CHRIST AS MY **SAVIOR**

**OBJECTIVE & UNIVERSAL**  
FOR ALL PEOPLE IN ALL TIMES



● **UNIQUE & PERSONAL**

THE RELATIONAL  
● **CONNECTION**  
BETWEEN ME & JESUS

● **THE CURE**  
FOR SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

This habit is recounting not only the objective facts of the gospel, but the gospel as it pertains to you. It is one thing to say, “Humanity fell into sin and Christ died for sinful human beings,” and quite another to say, “I am a sinner and Christ died for me.” When you recite the gospel to yourself, you remind yourself of your own experience—how you were lost and how Christ found you. This makes the gospel intimately personal, a powerful experience shared between you and Christ. Recite the gospel to yourself, and you will grow closer to Christ. As C. J. Mahaney wrote, “Reminding ourselves of the gospel is the most important daily habit we can establish.”<sup>4</sup> Do you remind yourself of the gospel every day? Do you recount the joy of your salvation?

## EVANGELIZE

It is good and wise to regularly remind yourself of the gospel, but you also need to preach it to others. This is another way of growing in your relationship with Christ. In my marriage to Aileen, I don’t just love her, but I also let others know that I love her. I tell people about my love for Aileen and the things I find lovely about her, and this honors her and brings me joy. One of the Christian’s great joys is telling other people about Jesus. Not long ago, I spoke to a new Christian in our church who lamented a conversation with one of his clients. He said, “I didn’t really get to tell her about the gospel. I only told her what Jesus had done in my family.” I explained to him that he had done just fine.

Jesus once healed a man who had been oppressed by an entire horde of demons. After Jesus freed him, the man begged Jesus to be able to follow him, to travel as one of his disciples. But Jesus did not give his permission. Instead he told the man, “Return to your home, and declare how



## THE LOCAL CHURCH

All believers are part of the universal body of Christ—the church (1 Corinthians 12:27–28). But God intends for Christians to join local expressions of his body (Titus 1:5) for the sake of fellowship, accountability, and spiritual growth (Hebrews 10:19–25). God calls his people to corporately enter his presence (Psalm 100:4), sing to him (Ephesians 5:19), and hear the Bible faithfully preached (2 Timothy 4:1–2). In order to preserve the unity and purity of the church, God gives elders to lead and shepherd the flock that Christ purchased with his blood (Acts 20:26–28).

### For further study, see:

*The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* by Mark Dever



much God has done for you.” Sure enough, “he went away, proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him” (Luke 8:39). That same call is there for you — to declare what God has done for you through Christ Jesus. As you preach to others, you inevitably preach to yourself, once again recounting all that Christ has done for you and in you. Rarely are you given a deeper and clearer sense of Christ’s love and presence than when you are declaring all the great things he has done in your heart and in your life.

## WORSHIP

You also recount the gospel when you worship as part of a community of Christians, a local church. My love for my wife is strengthened as I hear others recognize the things I love about her and as they point out her many wonderful qualities. When they tell me about her, I think, *What a beautiful person she is!* We need other people to recount truth to us so that we do not grow narrow and selfish in our hearts. The Christian worship service is meant to be an ongoing reminder of the gospel. Worship services have traditionally followed deliberate patterns — a call to worship followed by confession of sin and assurance of pardon and a response of thanksgiving. Then there is the challenge that comes through the preaching and application of God’s Word, and the benediction that serves as a kind of commission to a life of glorifying God by serving others. This kind of service mimics the structure of the gospel and encourages a congregation to join together in remembering and recounting the great truths of what Christ has done. This kind of worship is relational. As you worship God, you grow in your relationship because you are not just recounting facts about a distant deity, but you are experiencing his power and presence as well.

## ORDINANCES

You recount the gospel when you celebrate God’s special ordinances. God has given Christians two ordinances (sometimes called sacraments) that are designed to help them remember and recount the gospel and, by doing so, to grow close to Christ. Aileen and I celebrate anniversaries and birthdays together to recount our love. In a similar way, God gives us certain rituals, moments that mark our commitment and remind us of his love for us.

DEATH

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

SALVATION

PREACH TO YOURSELF  
WORSHIP IN COMMUNITY  
EVANGELIZE TO OTHERS  
CELEBRATE THE ORDINANCES

FUNCTION & USE OF THE GOSPEL



The first such ritual is baptism, and it is a beautiful picture of what Christ has done in your life. The water of baptism represents the washing away of sin, while going into the water and coming back out represents death and new life. God works through baptism to draw you closer to Christ. Wayne Grudem writes that baptism “is a sign of the believer’s death and resurrection with Christ (see Rom. 6:2–5; Col. 2:12), and it seems fitting that the Holy Spirit would work through such a sign to increase our faith, to increase our experiential realization of death to the power and love of sin in our lives, and to increase our experience of the power of new resurrection life in Christ that we have as believers.”<sup>5</sup> Baptism is not merely a symbolic act, but it is also a relational one.

The second ordinance, the Lord’s Supper, is designed specifically to ensure that you regularly remember and recount the death of Jesus. When Jesus instituted this ordinance, “he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me’” (Luke 22:19). The breaking of bread is designed to remind you of the breaking of Christ’s body; the pouring of wine is designed to remind you of the spilling of his blood. And through it all, you not only remember what Christ did, but you also grow in relationship with him as he is spiritually present with you in the celebration. As Dr. Grudem writes, “Today most Protestants would say, in addition to the fact that the bread and wine symbolize the body and blood of Christ, that Christ is also *spiritually present* in a special way as we partake of the bread and wine.”<sup>6</sup> In the celebration, Christ is present, you are present, and your shared relationship grows.

## CONCLUSION

Your pursuit of Christ begins with the gospel and continues with the gospel. As you believe the gospel, you come to understand that Christ has been pursuing you all along and that he has pursued you to the point of salvation. And now you joyfully respond and pursue him in return, growing in the sweet relationship you share with him.



SECTION ONE  
**GROW CLOSE TO CHRIST**



CHAPTER TWO  
**IDENTITY**

**O**n February 6, 2006, Stephen Harper stood before the Governor General of Canada and recited the oath of office: “I, Stephen Harper, do solemnly and sincerely promise and swear that I will truly and faithfully, and to the best of my skill and knowledge, execute the powers and trust reposed in me as Prime Minister, so help me God.”

In the very moment when he recited that oath, he received a new identity: Prime Minister of Canada. His new identity included what the oath calls “powers and trust”: he received authority to represent Canada, power to make decisions on behalf of Canada, and responsibility to lead the nation in ways that are best for all Canadians. As a citizen of Canada, I want my Prime Minister to be constantly mindful of who he has become, to know what he is responsible for, to know what authority is his. I want him to take on the full identity of Prime Minister and to behave accordingly; if he will not take on that identity, he cannot do his job effectively.

I have never met the Prime Minister and have never been able to ask him, but it is my guess that taking on that new identity is difficult. Though he became Prime Minister in the moment he recited the oath, it must have taken him some time to begin confidently behaving like a Prime Minister. There must have been a period of adjustment when he was reconciling himself to all of these new realities — his new abilities, his new title, and his new leadership responsibilities. It must have been strange at first to hear people call him “Mr. Prime Minister” and always look to him for direction.

As a Christian, you also have received a new identity. Just as Stephen Harper was immediately given a new identity when he recited his oath of office, you were given a new identity in the very moment when you put your faith in Christ Jesus and became justified by him. It takes time and knowledge for you to grow into that new identity. All through the Christian life, you will be growing and straining to become who God has declared you to be.

As you attempt to live a spiritually healthy life and as you grow close to Christ, it is absolutely crucial that you understand who you have become and who you are. Let’s look at just some of what is wrapped up in that new identity. We will do this under six headings.

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**I AM  
IN CHRIST**

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Foundational to your new identity is this truth: You are in Christ. When I say you are in Christ, I mean you have been spiritually united to him so you identify with him and he identifies with you. There is a kind of inseparable union between the two of you.

My wife and I recently hiked in the Rocky Mountains, and far up a trail, we saw a massive redwood tree that had split near the base and crashed to the ground. Over time, the stump had begun to rot. As we looked at that stump, we saw that a new tree had taken root there and was now growing out of it. The two trees—the new and the old—had fused together so it was impossible to see where one tree ended and the other began.

Perhaps that can serve as a dim picture of what Christ did when he saved you. He once told his followers, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:5). That means you are like a branch that has been grafted onto a vine, becoming fused to the vine and utterly dependent on it for your life and health. In a mysterious and beautiful way, you and Christ have become one. Many Christians through the years have said that of all the blessings you receive as a Christian, none is greater than this. Why? Because it is only through your union with Christ that you gain all the benefits of Christ. Christ would be of no benefit to you if he had not united himself to you.

You should also know there are past, present, and future dimensions to this union. In the distant eternity past, you were loved by God and chosen in Christ to be an object of his love. God looked into the future, knew you would exist, and decided to bring you into a special relationship with Christ. Even then, he knew you would eventually have the right to share in all the benefits of what Christ would do. So Ephesians 1:4 can rightly declare, “He [the Father] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him [the Father].”

1 Corinthians 15:22

*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*

Romans 8:1

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 1:6

*I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

**I AM  
IN CHRIST**

**I AM  
JUSTIFIED**

**I AM  
UNFINISHED**

**IDENTITY  
IN CHRIST**

John 1:12

*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...*

**I AM  
FREE**

**I AM  
ADOPTED**

Romans 6:5-6

*If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.*

**I AM  
SECURE**

Romans 8:38-39

*I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Then, two thousand years ago, when Christ lived on this earth, God looked at him and thought of you. Anything that Christ did as your representative, God counted as if you actually did it. God was considering you as belonging to Christ, as being one with his Son. In God's eyes, what Christ did, you did. When Christ lived a life of perfect love and obedience, God thought of you as living a life of perfect love and obedience. When Christ went to the cross to suffer and die, God counted your sins as belonging to Christ so that he suffered and died for you.

In fact, God even counted Christ's death as your death; he counted Christ's burial as your burial, Christ's resurrection as your resurrection, Christ's ascension to the Father's side as your ascension to the Father's side. And because you were united to Christ in all of this, all of Christ's blessings are now your blessings, and all of his benefits are now your benefits.<sup>7</sup> Romans 6 speaks of this reality at length: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:5 - 6).

All of those benefits were stored up for you, just waiting for that moment when you would become a Christian and gain that new identity. Even in the future, you will forever remain united to him. First Corinthians 15:22 promises, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." You have been made spiritually alive because of your unity with Christ, and after death, you will be resurrected in Christ so that sweet unity will never end.

You are *in* Christ. He is your deepest identity. Whatever else is true of you, this will never change or waver: You are in Christ, and all that is his is yours. You can truly know him, so that not only do you know about Christ, but you are actually in relationship with him. Through this fellowship, this friendship, he brings you comfort and hope and assurance and peace. He teaches you and leads you.

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I AM  
JUSTIFIED

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Being *in* Christ is the foundation of our new identity and the means by which all God's blessings are ours. It is an incredible privilege, and one that is completely undeserved. And while it is inherently relational, it also has a legal aspect to it. You have also been justified by Christ. *Justified* is a term that comes from the world of law, from the courtroom.

If one of your neighbors robbed you, he would be in violation of the laws of the land. He would go to court and be found guilty. As a guilty criminal, he would need to be punished. This is why nations have penal systems — to enforce the law and punish the guilty. We all know that enforcing the law is crucial to the functioning of society. If we break the law, we are punished — and that is just and right. When your neighbor stole that money from you, he didn't just violate you; he also became guilty of violating the laws of the nation. It is fair and just that he would be punished by the authorities.

Just as you are responsible to obey the laws of the land as they are handed down by the government, you are responsible to obey the laws of the universe as they are handed down by God, its Creator and Governor. Every time you sin, you violate the law of the God who created you to live in perfect harmony with him and with everyone else he created. But you and I have failed to do this. We have sinned countless times, and this leaves us guilty before God — guilty of being a lawbreaker. And guilty people must be punished.

You are a lawbreaker, which means you are guilty before God and deserving of punishment. But as a Christian, you can be confident you will not be punished. Why? Because you have been *justified*. You have been declared innocent. And yet justice is still satisfied. How? Because Jesus Christ took your place, suffering the punishment your sins deserve. In the moment you trusted Christ for your salvation, God declared you were and always will be innocent and the full punishment for your sin has already been paid by Christ. God now thinks of your sin as being forgiven and of Christ's righteousness as belonging to you. He declares that you are fully righteous in his sight. It is as if you never

sinned at all. Romans 8:1 expresses the glorious truth that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

When you belong to Christ, you are made right with God. There is no sin left to pay. There is not an ounce of guilt remaining. There is no sentence hanging over your head. There is nothing you need to do to be more accepted by God, and there is nothing you could do to be less accepted by God. You are forgiven, you are accepted, you are innocent, you are righteous, and you are justified. You can now relate to Christ as one who owes him nothing but your gratitude and service as you join into that glorious relationship.

So we have looked at two aspects of our identity so far. You are in Christ, you are justified, and now, as we will see, you are also adopted.



There are some things Christians do and say out of mere habit, but one thing Christians do that I love is calling other Christians “brothers” and “sisters.” This isn’t just a strange bit of formality. It is the application of a sweet truth. It is a reminder that when Christ saved you and me, he adopted us into his family. You are united to Christ, and through him you are now united to every other person who has ever been saved by him. We become a part of God’s family with Jesus our elder brother and God our



## **THE TRINITY**

God has revealed himself through his Word as one essence (or one being or one God—Deuteronomy 6:4) existing in three persons, expressed in the singular “name” of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). From all eternity, God the Father has loved his Son (John 17:24) and, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), draws believers into that love (John 17:26). The Father chooses to save men from every nation of the earth (Ephesians 1:4; Revelation 5:9); the Son redeems them by his blood (Ephesians 1:7); and the Spirit seals their salvation (Ephesians 1:12–14)—all to display the glory of his grace (Romans 9:22–23).

### **For further study, see:**

*Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* by Michael Reeves





Father. John 1:12 reads, “To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

As a Christian, you have been adopted by God into the one true family that spans the whole globe and the whole of human history. And there are some remarkable benefits that come with being part of this family.

First, being adopted by God means God is your Father. Galatians 3:26 tells us, “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” The God who is all-knowing and all-powerful and all-good and all-loving is your Father. Think about that: He is your Father! He is a good and kind and loving Father who cares for his children, loves his children, wants only the best for his children, and loves to relate to his children. You can cry out to him and praise him and trust him.

Being adopted means the Holy Spirit takes up residence within you. He assures you at the deepest level that God is your Father (Romans 8:15 – 16). He also leads you from within so you long for holiness and joyfully pursue conformity with God’s desires for you. As the apostle Paul writes, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8:14).

Being adopted means you can relate to other Christians as brothers, sisters, fathers, and mothers. It assures you that your relationships with other Christians are deep and meaningful — they are not distant acquaintances between strangers, but genuine friendships between members of the very same family. No wonder Christians love to join together in their weekly worship services. Each one is a family reunion!

Being adopted even brings you the privilege of discipline. At first, you may not think of discipline as a privilege. But as the author of the letter to the Hebrews reminds us, discipline is evidence of genuine love: “‘The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline?” (Hebrews 12:6–7). God is a good Father who will discipline you when necessary, just like any good father disciplines his children for their own good. You may not like the discipline when it is being handed out, but a father who refuses to discipline his children really refuses to love them (Proverbs 13:24).

All of this is your privilege by adoption. As a Christian, you have been adopted by God. You are a child of God.



**I AM  
SECURE**

You are also secure. This means you do not need to agonize about your future or fret about God someday turning his back on you. You do not need to lie awake at night, tossing and turning and worrying about where you will spend eternity. Once you are in Christ, you will always be in Christ. You will never be separated from him. Those who have been justified will always remain justified. The innocent will never be judged guilty. The Holy Spirit will never abandon the one he has indwelt. Those who have been adopted will always be members of God's family. He does not cast out those he has drawn in. (See John 6:37; Romans 8:30; Philippians 1:6.)

Christian, you are absolutely secure. You can live your life free from fear.

You do not need to fear that God will grow tired of you, grow weary of your sin, or wish he had saved someone else, because he knew everything you would do long before he sent his Son to die for you. You do not need to fear hell, because you are promised heaven. You do not need to fear death, because you know that Christ has conquered death, and one day, you too will experience resurrection. You do not need to fear Satan, because Christ has triumphed over Satan. You can confidently believe the great words of Romans 8:38–39: “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

You are secure in God's grip forevermore. There is nothing that ever could or ever will separate you from his love.

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I AM  
FREE

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In all of this, you are free — truly and gloriously free. But you can only appreciate this freedom when you first understand your enslavement. Each of us is born into this world as a slave to sin, under the control of sinful desires (John 8:34).

Some live with a controlling fear of what others think, caring more about earning the approval of men than the approval of God. Some live under the control of addictive substances. Some become trapped in enduring patterns of sinful and selfish desires. And the Bible is clear that this world lies under the sway of our enemy, the devil, as well. Even when we are not bowing the knee to our own sinful desires, we may be bowing the knee to his. There are a million ways in which we are not free, especially in our own desires and decisions. Why? Because apart from Christ, we always seek what *we* want, not what God wants. We are all born into this world in bondage to sin.

Because you are in Christ, however, you have been freed to be like Christ. Because you are justified, you are freed from having to try to earn your salvation and from the crushing guilt of sin. Because you are adopted, you are freed to love your brothers and sisters far more than yourself. Because you are indwelt by the Spirit, you are freed from the power of sin — “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Because you are secure, you are freed from worrying about remaining in God’s good books, freed from worrying that God will someday cast you off.

Christian, you are free. You are free from the dominion of Satan, free to worship and serve the God who has saved you. You are free to stop sinning — you have the power to overcome sin and to do those things that are good. You are truly and gloriously free.

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**I AM  
UNFINISHED**

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Finally, you are unfinished. This means you are a work in progress. Christ has saved you, and he has begun to have a relationship with you. Yet you still sin. You still return to those old ways at times. Too often, you delight to do what is evil. I do not know why God chose not to immediately and permanently eradicate every bit of sin and every desire to sin in the moment he saved you. But I do know he is committed to your holiness and that he will walk with you through all of life as you grow into this new identity, as you learn to be who you already are in Christ. Take heart. “I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). You are unfinished, but God himself is moving you toward completion.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is impossible to overstate the importance of knowing your identity — who you are in relation to Christ. Your new identity makes all the difference. It changes everything as you live this Christian life. If you want to grow close to Christ, you need to know who you are and you need to know whose you are: You are in Christ, and you belong to Christ. There is no better person to be, and no better place to be.

