



KELLY M.
KAPIC

you're
only |
human

How Your Limits
Reflect God's Design
*and Why That's
Good News*

you're only human

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and Why That's Good News

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The background of the entire page is a grayscale, high-magnification microscopic image of plant tissue, likely showing a cross-section of a stem or root. It features a complex, repeating pattern of small, circular or oval cells, some with thick, dark cell walls, creating a dense, textured appearance. Two large, white, irregularly shaped circles are overlaid on the image, serving as a backdrop for the text.

PART 1

particularity
and
limits

have i done enough?

facing our finitude

The result of busyness is that an individual is very seldom permitted to form a heart.

Søren Kierkegaard, journal entry

Many of us fail to understand that our limitations are a gift from God, and therefore good. This produces in us the burden of trying to be something we are not and cannot be.

Not in Control

Creaturely finitude is less an idea we discover than a reality we run into.

Todd and Liz had been married and childless for many years, so Liz's sudden pregnancy filled them with joy and expectation. They were going to have a baby but hadn't found out yet if it was a boy or girl, let alone picked the baby's name. Without warning, however, events spiraled out of control. The baby was born prematurely, at just twenty-five weeks, three days after Christmas. Their joy had turned to alarm. Unsure of how long he would live, they immediately named him Findley Fuller after their mothers' maiden names; Liz and Todd told me that in the uncertainty of whether he would

live or die they chose a name for their son that reflected his place in a larger family and a larger story. He was not alone; to the God of the living they entrusted their son and his story.

In previous centuries, or even previous decades, medical practice would not have been able to save Finn's life. He needed twenty-four-hour care, and even with medical advances the prognosis didn't look great. Would he make

Finitude, *n.* The condition or state of being finite; the condition of being subject to limitations; = FINITENESS *n.*

Finiteness, *n.* The quality or condition of being finite; the condition of being limited in space, time, capacity, etc.

Oxford English Dictionary

it through the night, through the week? His system was very fragile: he struggled with everything from breathing to seizures, from infections to dangers to his young eyes. Each day brought not only fresh hope but also new obstacles. Finn was a strong little guy and a fighter, but the odds didn't look good.

A few weeks into his son's fight for life, despite his exhaustion, Todd found the strength to send out a CarePage update on their son's condition, commenting, "All of this brings loads of new fears and anxieties to Liz and me. But we trust in God's faithfulness, mercy, and love. And we have confidence in the NICU medical staff. We acknowledge fear, but we cling to hope." Todd then reminded us that he was writing on Martin Luther King Jr. Day and quoted from this American minister and civil rights advocate, who once said, "We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope."¹ And then Todd signed off, "God is able." He didn't mention our limits as an excuse for the doctors to give up but rather as the context for their best efforts. Only God was and is infinite.

The vulnerability of their son's life reminded Todd and Liz of their own tiny and comparatively weak place in an incomprehensibly huge and threatening cosmos. Standing in the hospital beside Findley, they were freshly aware that, from the odd asteroid to everyday germs, the parts of the world that can hurt us often operate beyond our control or even prediction. They had given their newborn son into the care of doctors, but even more so into the care of God. Still, even with this, how does one "accept finite disappointment" while maintaining "infinite hope"? Excellent nurses and doctors were working as hard as they could to preserve little Finn's life, and Todd and Liz knew that the infinite God of grace and love cares more about them and their child than they ever could, so they took some comfort there. But

when the brokenness of the world hits our human limitations, it strains our emotions, will, and understanding past their abilities.

All of us bounce between the illusion that we are in control and the world's demonstration that we are not. Thank God Finn has both survived and flourished as the months and now years have passed: as you can imagine, his baptism and first birthday were great celebrations! But the memories of this frightening and humbling season of life remind Todd and Liz and their friends that the boundaries of our abilities to handle life are closer than we would like.

Whether through tragedy or simply as the result of aging, we all are repeatedly reminded that we are fragile and dependent creatures.² But it is not just our bodies that face us with these upsetting limits—we also see them in a coworker with greater intellectual gifts than ours, or a fellow athlete who is so much faster, or an aging parent whose waning emotional and psychological stability has threatened the health of our relationship with them. We have far less control of the world and even of ourselves than we would like to imagine. Some people respond by living as passive victims, while others aggressively seize as much control as possible.

We know our actions matter, and matter a lot. A doctor who studied hard is usually better than one who simply wanted to pass exams. Parents who want to be thoughtful about rearing their children, seeking to avoid mistakes they inherited from their own parents, are better than negligent guardians. Unfortunately, patients still die in surgery under the care of excellent physicians, and earnest parents mistakenly assume they can get it perfectly “right,” ignorant of their own blind spots, larger cultural factors, and personality differences. What we *do* matters. We can and do change things. But when we suppose that we can control all our circumstances, we soon find that we can't. We don't say the words, but we live as though the weight of the world were on our own shoulders. And it exhausts us. Behind the patient grin on our faces we hide a lingering rage about the endless demands that must be met, unrealized dreams, and relational disappointments.

The odd thing is that, even when we run into our inevitable limits, we often hang on to the delusion that if we just work harder, if we simply squeeze tighter, if we become more efficient, we can eventually regain control. We imagine we can keep our children safe, our incomes secure, and our bodies whole. When I complain about getting older, my wife sometimes laughs and says to me, “You have two options: either you are getting older

or you are dead.” Denying our finitude cripples us in ways we don’t realize. It also distorts our view of God and what Christian spirituality should look like.



Finitude is an unavoidable aspect of our creaturely existence. We run into it constantly and in different ways. If we are paying attention, we can see it. It doesn’t take a car accident or an unexpected hospital visit for us to discover our limits and dependency. But are we listening? Do we recognize the signs? They’re all around us. Far too often our lives testify to the fact that we believe we really can and should do everything. Thomas Merton, drawing on an observation by Douglas Steere, once observed,

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of our own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.³

Merton wrote this over fifty years ago, but his concern is even more relevant now than it was then.

The Crushing Weight of Expectation

Are you exhausted? Do you experience a consistent background feeling of guilt about how little you accomplish each day? Are you weighed down by a sense of how much there is to do and how little progress you are making? How are your plans, hopes, and dreams doing?

One of the areas I had not planned to investigate while doing research for this book, but which proved truly significant, was the American educational system. I paid most attention to high schools and colleges. What I noticed was how the educational patterns we learned there often foster unhealthy expectations of how much one should “get done” in a day. Now, before I say

more on this, let me clarify that this appears to affect middle- and upper-income public and private schools more than it does schools in low-income areas. That said, here is an average day for many high school students:

- Leave home for school around 7:30 a.m. or earlier.
- Attend classes until 3:30 p.m.
- Immediately go to extracurricular activity (sport, theater, etc.) until 6:00–7:00 p.m.
- Rush home; quick dinner and shower.
- Then, for the rest of the evening, work almost nonstop on homework, only finishing and heading to bed at 10:30 p.m. or later.

This basic schedule sounds painfully familiar to my own students, but they are hesitant to admit the toll it has taken on them. They have absorbed the view that this pattern is morally “right” and “expected”: pack your day from morning to bedtime with as many things as possible. Consequently, many students who have been rushing around like this and can’t keep up have come to believe they are disappointments, weak, or worse. They can’t keep up and they equate this inability with a moral shortcoming on their part. Add to that the challenges of getting into college, and they reach the unquestioned view that getting certain grades is not just valuable; it defines your worth. It’s easy for adults to say “Grades aren’t everything,” but all our other actions and words teach the students not to believe the intended comfort. So getting a B–, let alone a C, isn’t just taken to reflect one’s struggles in a class; it is often subconsciously used as a moral assessment of them.

I am a college professor who regularly deals with students. Anyone willing to listen will discover that they often live with at least a low-level sense of guilt over how much they are not getting done. So many pages they didn’t read, endless assignments they rushed, activities they missed, and friendships they have neglected or never formed. Sure, it is easy to say they are not using their time well, that they fool around too much (which is sometimes true!), but that line usually functions as an easy excuse to avoid honestly considering whether there are any problems with how we have set things up in formal education. Funnily enough, some students also tell me they don’t feel so guilty about not getting all the assigned work done because they believe their professors (including me) have such unrealistic expectations—they

believe there is no way they could possibly do all of what is expected in any given week. In other words, not only students but professors, too, struggle to have realistic expectations or understand how much time and work assignments really take. So some students detach while others frantically try to keep up even as they feel like they are slowly drowning. However, this is not just a challenge for students and faculty.

At my work there are always people and projects that need more attention than I can give them. Others face similar frustrations: the warehouse operator could always become more efficient at dealing with inventory; the realtor has never sold enough houses; the stay-at-home parent never seems to get to that neglected mess in the corner of the house. Counselors might have asked better questions; teachers could be better prepared each day for classes; and students wish they could focus their attention longer. Receptionists could be more organized and efficient, while managers dream of being proactive rather than reactive. We all constantly collide with our limits. Your work circumstances probably differ from mine, but we both

How I spend this ordinary day in Christ is how I will spend my Christian life.

Tish Harrison Warren,
Liturgy of the Ordinary

wonder if we have done “enough.” Maybe we are being driven by the wrong impulses and have the wrong goals in mind?

What about church and missional concerns? We should offer prayers, write encouraging notes, and provide meals to those in need. Countless excellent organizations desperately require time and resources so someone can care for the poor, adopt the orphan, and come alongside the prisoner; yet how rarely do I participate? And when I do, it almost always feels like a tiny drop in a massive, empty bucket of need. Shouldn't I do more? Then, when I sense my limits, I am tempted to pretend that these problems are not that bad or that Jesus didn't really say that they require his people's attention. Maybe helping the poor and orphan is optional rather than essential. Maybe prayer is a great idea, but not genuinely needed. But such denial isn't healthy either, since it distorts our view of Jesus and warps our understanding of God himself. What should we do, then? How should we respond to these gospel needs and our own limited ability to answer them?

Then there is my body. With every passing year the metabolism slows down, the aches increase, and there is the undeniable sense that it needs greater attention, from the food I eat to the exercise that I need to counter

my sedentary work patterns. To neglect caring for our bodies has greater consequences than we want to admit: the problems are not just related to our waistlines, but to our relationships and countless other areas of life. Proverbs long ago warned us how misusing our bodies or never restricting our appetites can produce negative consequences (e.g., Prov. 20:1; 23:1–3, 20–21; 25:16, 27).

What about my mind? I'm an academic, paid to spend my hours studying, teaching, and writing. Guess what: I simply can't keep up—not even close! Please don't tell anyone. Fresh books and articles appear every week. Not only that, I meet more people every year, including fresh crops of students and new people at church—it is painful how many names I forget. Or, more accurately, it is painful how few names I remember. My mind simply cannot keep up with the endless demands . . . and I feel guilty about it. When Paul calls us to the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2), what does that require of us? And why do we always approach these questions by assuming that an idealized genius is the goal or model, rather than looking to people with severely limited IQs who yet profoundly love God and neighbor? Maybe we have inappropriately valued our brains in a way that distorts our view of *being* human.⁴

What about family? I'm a parent of two amazing children—this should be easy since I know folks with four or more kids. Yet I could always spend more time with my two—more time playing cards, laughing, talking, and just hanging out. Similarly, I'm married, and any self-reflective spouse easily recognizes his or her shortcomings. I want to be more thoughtful, more attentive; there is always more that can be given. We could all do more to encourage, empower, and care for our spouses. And how well am I keeping up relationships with extended family who live all around the country? Shouldn't I check in more? Wouldn't it be good to gather together more often?

The list could go on to touch other spheres of life, from home maintenance to education, from community involvement to recreation. In area after area we sense our shortcomings, our longings to be more, to do more, and yet we run smack dab into our limits. So how should we respond to this guilt and the endless needs and demands?

A Time-Management Problem?

Here we face a crucial question: Does this dissatisfaction always mean that we have sinned, or is something else going on? Are we *required* to overcome

these perceived shortcomings? Some treat these limitations as indicating a moral deficiency or as an obstacle in a competition that can and should be conquered.

One common response in the West is to seek self-improvement through greater organization in our lives. We skim the internet for short articles on time management, since we long ago gave up on reading whole books. Sometimes we decide to get up earlier or stay up later, hoping to add another hour or two of productivity to our lives. Since we can't put more hours into the day, we try to change ourselves. We try to do more, be more.

Normally at this point in the story we draw attention to how much TV the average American watches, how much time is lost consuming mindless digital content and games. But what if our problem is not time management? *What if rather than serving as the cause of our problems, the draw of mind-numbing screen time was a sign of a deeper malady?* Maybe such escapism reveals a sickness in our souls that we have been neglecting. And rather than just being a problem for the “world” out there, these are signs to which Christians should also pay attention.

I think we have a massive problem, but it is not a time-management issue. It is a *theological* and *pastoral* problem.



A few years ago I had a podcast interview with a woman who had read my book *A Little Book for New Theologians* and wanted to talk about it.⁵ Part of what made this interview stimulating was that most of her audience were mothers who primarily spent their time caring for their young children. She wanted her listeners to discover how relevant theology was to their lives.

Near the end of the interview she asked, “Any other big theological concepts that we moms should major in?” She apparently thought I would use the softball question to talk about divine sovereignty or some other high-octane doctrine, but instead my answer was, “Human finitude.” She was fairly surprised. My response grew out of my concern that many of us North American Christians have a very weak and underdeveloped doctrine of creation. This problem is something I can only hint at here, though in a later chapter I will revisit this point.

What I mean is that we must rediscover that being *dependent* creatures is a constructive gift, not a deficiency. Clever readers might even notice that using “dependent” as an adjective for “creature” is basically redundant—there

are no creatures who are not, by their very nature, dependent beings. Our dependency does not merely point to abstract ideas of divine providence, but takes concrete form when we rely on others, on the earth, on institutions and traditions. We must learn the value and truthfulness of our finitude, eventually getting to the point where *we might even praise God for our limits*. I didn't say praise him for *evil*: we need to see the difference between the gift of finitude (i.e., human limits) and the lamentable reality of sin and misery.⁶

Returning to the interview, the connection between finitude and child-rearing was not difficult to make. Our kids don't need to be good at everything. In fact, they are *not* supposed to be good at everything! And once we finally believe and

embrace this, it liberates our children (and us!). We can now start delighting in other people rather than viewing them as challengers to be overcome.

Almost immediately the host responded in a most delightful way. Although she said this “came out of left field,” she started making all kinds of wonderful connections, from parents' inclination to overschedule their children's lives, to how they imagine their kids should be stars in everything. Such homes are consumed with activity and have little space for rest and reflection. Relationships remain superficial when everyone—from the children to the parents—is constantly trying to be the best, to win. That distorting expectation—whether or not one realizes it—necessarily makes all of us come out as losers rather than winners. Thus, we sign up the kids for more activities, hoping they will eventually succeed. And until they do succeed, we lie to them and tell them they are amazing at everything, hoping one day it will be true. Kids start to believe the problem lies not with their own shortcomings, but with the judges, with the teachers, with their peers—with anyone and everyone but themselves. Although meant to encourage self-esteem and success, this strategy eventually undermines our children's long-term self-esteem and view of self because the myth of their “excellence” at everything cannot be sustained.

At some point the course of life will expose what we then receive as painful truths: we are not the best, the brightest, the most able. There are always stronger, more beautiful, more brilliant people. At some point the illusion comes crashing down, and when it does, it can have devastating

As deficient beings, humans are in danger of working themselves up into a frenzy of activity and thus destroying themselves.

Ingolf U. Dalferth,
Creatures of Possibility

consequences. As a college professor, I frequently see young adults coming to terms with these very difficult facts that had been, in various ways, hidden from them. But no “helicopter” or even “bulldozing” parents can protect the child forever. Each of us must face our limits and weaknesses at some point, whether we want to or not.

Finitude Is *Not* Sin

We live in a fallen world. Sin has affected everything from our heads to our hearts, from our body chemistry to sociopolitical dynamics. Because of this we sometimes wrongly attribute all our problems to sin, when in fact they are often a matter of running up against the limits inherent in being finite creatures instead of being God.

We are, by God’s good design, finite. For the purposes of this book, when I say “finite,” I will normally be focusing on *good, created human limits*: all creatures are limited by space, time, and power, and our knowledge, energy, and perspective also have always been limited. In other words, please do not necessarily read “death” into the word “finitude” as used here, since that raises a whole set of different questions and is not, for the most part, what I am focused on in these pages. This book focuses on the limits that are part of God’s original act of making us, which he called “good.”

Often when we rush to meet all the expectations that surround us and look at our bottomless to-do lists, we desire to become infinite in capacity. We think, “If only I had more time, energy, and ability, then I could get everything done, which would make me and everyone else happy.” But meeting endless expectations would require that we possess God’s infinite attributes and prerogatives as our own. Sometimes lurking under our desires to expand our abilities is the unspoken temptation: “If only I were the infinite Creator, not a finite creature . . .”

Indeed, this impulse to reject our creaturely limits is as old as sin itself. Genesis shows us that God made all that is not God, and everything he made was “good” (Gen. 1). But we quickly meet a serpent who seems to appear out of nowhere and raises an unsettling question: “Did God actually say . . . ?” (3:1). Using his words to warp his hearer’s imagination, the snake declares, “God knows that when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (3:5). Subtly insinuating doubt and uncertainty, the serpent introduces distrust into the divine-human relationship.

With these indirect tactics the serpent encourages his hearers to imagine they can and should *know more*. They should *be more*. He implies that divinely given limits are a fault to be overcome rather than a beneficial gift to be honored. This knowledge is not just about information, nor merely about morality, but as Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad observes, it is about “mastery” of “all things.” Von Rad further explains, “By endeavouring to enlarge his being on the godward side, seeking a godlike intensification of his life beyond his creaturely limitations, that is, by wanting to be like God, man stepped out from the simplicity of obedience to God.”⁷ The man and woman disdained their creaturely limits as faults instead of gifts, barriers that kept them from obtaining divine qualities. Taking a bite of the fruit was only the outward sign of the terrible lie the serpent got them to believe.

Though they were the pinnacle of God’s creation in the Genesis narrative, they became dissatisfied, rejecting love to gain power. Being finite creatures, even made in the divine image, was simply not enough. God had given Adam

The human being’s limit is at the center of human existence, not on the margin. . . . There where the boundary—the tree of knowledge—stands, there stands also the tree of life, that is, the very God who gives life. God is at once the boundary and the center of our existence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*

and Eve the fullness of the garden and many other rich gifts; accordingly, the original sin has the shape of *taking the one thing that was not given to them*.⁸ Rather than perceiving this limitation also as a good gift, they viewed it naively and greedily as an opportunity, like children doubting their parents when they tell them not to stick their finger into an electrical outlet. Parents do not set such limits because they disrespect or hate their children, but because they so love them and recognize the danger of ignoring their natural limits. The shock could kill them!

Thus from chapter 3 onward, Genesis tells of our discomfort with any divine restrictions, moving from obedience to disobedience. As von Rad claims, “A movement began in which man pictures himself as growing more and more powerful, more and more titanic.”⁹ In fact, the Genesis narrative appears to represent a turning from the original good ordering of creation to a disordering: shalom is disrupted. And now we all live in this disordered relationship to our limits.



So what does it mean that we are creatures and not God? What does it mean that we have *these* talents and resources and not *all* talents and resources? What does it mean that we are finite, particular, and rooted, and not infinite, universal, or standing above all local circumstances? Answering these questions honestly will change how we imagine the world, ourselves, and our relationship to God and others.

Recognizing and rejoicing in our particular kind of finitude is a massive challenge, especially in the affluent, driven West. This shows up not just in our unrealistic expectations about how much we can accomplish in a day but also in our failure to value rest and slow-growing relationships. This problem takes many forms, from inappropriate expectations placed on our children to dehumanizing practices in the workforce. Christians often burn out from overcommitment to church activities or ministries; or they go to the opposite extreme, never volunteering for anything because they fear the unending demands that will come once they have committed. Too often the options are either try to do everything or simply to do nothing.

So how can we proceed? I want us to take time to carefully think about our creatureliness. This will reveal limits, dependence, love, reliance on the grace of God, and worship. We will examine the joy of being a creature and the freedom of resting on the promises of the Creator. We will question harmful and unrealistic ideals and begin to appreciate the messiness of our complex lives.

As we do this, the following central concepts will guide my reflections:

1. We are not under any requirement to be infinite—infinity is reserved for God alone. Rather, *in and through* our creaturely limits we are called to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

In other words, loving both God and neighbor falls completely within the range of creaturely finitude. This takes us to my second guiding observation.

2. We need to stop asking (or feeling that we should ask) for God's forgiveness when we can't do everything, and we need to ask forgiveness for ever imagining we could!

These and other reflections throughout the book are built on some basic theological assertions:

- God is the good Creator who designed us as good creatures.
- Part of the good of being a creature is having limits.
- The incarnation is God's great yes to his creation, including human limits.
- God designed the person for the community and the community for the person.
- The Creator is also the Sustainer and Redeemer.
- We are never asked to relate to God in any way other than as human creatures.
- God's goal for humanity is for us to become lovers of God, neighbor, and the rest of creation.

Once we see ourselves within this framework, where our creaturely finitude plays a good and essential part, the pressures to fulfill endless expectations take on a different appearance. We begin to relate to God and others in a more fruitful way: no longer do we aspire to have infinite capacity—that is God's job! We worship him as he made us: dignified, purposeful, vulnerable, finite creatures. We do not apologize for our creaturely needs and dependence on others, for we discover this is how God made us, and it is good.



This book aims to help us discover the theological and pastoral significance of embracing the gift of being limited: it is just part of being human. Each chapter will explore a different question that allows us to look at our creaturely limits from a slightly different perspective. We have already observed that we often feel we have not done enough, which raises a nagging concern: *Am I enough?* If we are ever to answer that well, we must ask the central question (which we will look at in chap. 2): *What does God think of me?* Not generic humanity, but me, in my singularity, my particularity, my smallness? How do I relate to Christ without ceasing to be me? We then consider the particular humanity of Mary's son, including his physicality: this gives us a deeper and more realistic appreciation of our own humanity (chap. 3). From there we explore why our bodies are necessarily tied to our self-perception, relationships, and even worship: one aspect of our original makeup is that we worship in and through our bodies, so ignoring or abusing a person's body has significant consequences (chap. 4). God made each

of us with distinct particularity, with different bodies and personalities, but not to be isolated individuals who generate our identities on our own: our identity is necessarily linked to our families, cultures, and historical contexts (chap. 5). Since sin has also affected every aspect of our lives, including our limited self-understanding, we must carefully navigate the daily challenge of being a saint who sins.

Having laid the groundwork for the value of our particularity and limits, we spend the rest of the book exploring what healthy interdependence looks like. We examine humility: concerned about the problematic results

We have no other experience of God but human experience. When I experience God, what sustains me is, at least first of all, God made human.

Emmanuel Falque,
The Metamorphosis of Finitude

that come from too often grounding it in sin, we show humility's true basis in the good of our creaturely limits (chap. 6). Next we explore some of the problematic ways we relate to time. Cultivating awareness of God's presence can liberate us from the despo-

atism of the clock and recenter us in truly human pursuits (chap. 7). On a related theme, our sense that we lack time often leads us to want immediate and radical improvement in ourselves. We discover, to the contrary, that God has purposes in taking his time and that, since process itself is also a good aspect of the created world, we should learn to honor rather than belittle it (chap. 8). We also look at the apparently endless legitimate demands we face in the church, from proclaiming the gospel to caring for the materially poor. Our finitude drives us back together, to depend on each other in the church and on our God. What is impossible for the particular Christian becomes possible for the church as Christ's body (chap. 9). Finally, I offer practical reflections on four patterns of life that can help us have a healthier experience of our human limits: rhythm, vulnerability, gratitude, and rest (chap. 10).

Examining some of our false assumptions (outside and inside the church) will show us why we struggle with our human limits and how to celebrate the goodness of being a creature of the God who loves what he made. God delights in our finitude: he is not embarrassed or shocked by our creatureliness. Since he is not apologetic about it, we should stop apologizing for it ourselves. But if we are ever going to appreciate how this is good, we need to start by asking: How does God view me?

does God love . . . me?

crucified . . . but i still live

The indwelling Christ enables each person to be more himself than he was ever able to be before.

Frederica Mathewes-Green, *Praying the Jesus Prayer*

God loves his children; therefore, by his Son and Spirit he is liberating us from the entanglements of sin that distort our true selves, which were made for communion with the Creator and our fellow creatures.

A FAIR PLACE TO BEGIN thinking about the good of human finitude is by understanding the importance of our particularity. We are often far more uncomfortable with who we are than we might at first realize. Understanding what God thinks of you is, therefore, a great place to start.

What Does God Think of *You*?

If you ask most Christians if God loves them, they don't normally hesitate to answer yes, maybe even enthusiastically. Having listened to plenty of young people and adults, not to mention my own heart, I have come to

suspect that we are not as sure of this as we seem. Are we simply repeating an automatic “right answer” that doesn’t truly reflect our internal world? Often lurking under such quick responses are deep and abiding insecurities about God’s attitude toward us. Consequently, asking a different question has often yielded a more revealing answer that can open up a more compelling conversation. So now I ask you . . .

Does God *like* you?¹

Alicia Zanoni wrote a children’s book titled *I Like You, Samantha Sarah Marie*, based on the experience of her family when her adopted sister joined them.² Samantha Sarah Marie was “as little as a fiddle” when she came to live in the “Zs” house. Everything was new: new adults, new kids, new place. As she entered this new home, she wondered if she would like them, but, more significant, she wondered if they would like her. Zanoni describes the mishaps and misdeeds in the family, from wild dances that resulted in broken vases, to endless loud singing in the car, to coloring on the walls with crayons. In each case Mrs. Z responded with care and grace, never a pushover, but also very warm and never flinching from fundamental acceptance and embrace. Cuddling one evening on the rocking chair, Mrs. Z told Samantha Sarah Marie just how grateful she was to have her in the family. Based on previous experience, the boundary-bursting spunky girl wondered aloud if that was true even when she got in trouble. “Well,” sighed Mrs. Z, “I don’t like it when you break my things or color on my walls. And it makes me very sad when you disobey and yell and I have to discipline you. But that doesn’t change the fact that you are so very special to our family. There is no other girl like you who has your spunk, or your smile, or your imagination, or your laugh.”³ Part of what is so insightful about Zanoni’s book is that she pushes us to think afresh about belonging. She invites us to admit our own lingering fears about being liked, especially when our foibles and failures are exposed. We wonder this not just about parents and classmates, but even about our heavenly Father.

Distinguishing *Love* and *Like*

Love is a beautiful word. Said in the right context and by the right person, it can still bring goosebumps to the most hardened person, enliven the saddest soul, and calm the angriest heart. Love draws together, unites, and heals. God’s love animates the entire gospel story, making it good news for

us sinners. Love, true and real love, is cool water for a parched soul, food for the hungry, and welcome for the stranger. God's love makes the world go 'round and sustains it despite human sin and cosmic brokenness.⁴ However, we have so often heard of God's love that the word often bounces off us like a marshmallow being thrown around in a game of tag. When it hits us, it feels so light we are not sure if it actually touched us or not. "Sure, I'm it," we confess, but not really convinced we were tagged in the first place. We know we are supposed to believe and affirm that God loves us, but if you probe deep enough, you see that the doubts persist.

What about the word *like*? I like cheesecake. I like a cool spring morning. I like leaning back at the table after a meal with my wife and kids, listening to their adventures as well as their painfully accurate teasing of me. I like sitting around a campfire with Jay and Jeffrey, eating, drinking, and filling the evening with ridiculous laughter, philosophical reflections, and tear-inducing stories. I like my coffee black and my office desk clean. *Like* often carries with it a sense of preference, inclination, and delight, as when a woodworker looks at the gorgeous table they built and says, "Oh, I like that, that is really good. I want that in my house."

Have you ever felt that your parents, or spouse, or your God loved you, and yet wondered if they actually *liked* you? *Love* is so loaded with obligations and duty that it often loses all emotive force, all sense of pleasure and satisfaction. *Like* can remind us of an aspect of God's love that we far too easily forget. Forgetting God's delight and joy in us stunts our ability to enjoy God's love. Forgiveness—as beautiful and crucial as it is—is not enough. Unless it is understood to come from love and to lead back to love, unless we understand the gospel in terms of God's fierce delight in us and not merely a wiping away of prior offenses, unless we understand God's battle for us as a dramatic personal rescue and not merely a cold forensic process, we have ignored most of the Scriptures as well as the needs of the human condition.

The story of Samantha Sarah Marie describes a little girl who surely was told her new parents loved her. Of course they did. She knew they "had to" since she was now their daughter. Whether adopted or natural-born, most of us know our parents have to "love" us. But life is more complicated than that, isn't it? In our struggle to make everyday life function, kids inevitably get inundated with corrections, advice, and demands; they also pile up sins and shortcomings. The conflict involved here can create subtle instability

and foster insecurities. Further, parents easily project onto their children what they want to see rather than what stands right there in front of them. Some long for football players while others for math geniuses; some want their children to be popular while others push them to be radically independent because the parents are too busy to be present. All the while, the kids wonder to themselves, “Does my dad actually like me, even when I am not good?”

A long-experienced youth minister recently told me that the current pressure on high school kids is intense, but especially for young women. He explained that the “guys need to at least be excellent at one thing, whether that be baseball, chemistry, or computers. As long as you are really good at one thing you can be okay, but you better be really good at something.” Then he went on: “The young women, they are expected to be great at *everything*. They should get straight As, look gorgeous, be athletic, funny, and socially plugged in.” Plus, they should be able to do all of this without appearing flustered or out of control. Having to be great at just one thing is a high enough standard to make most guys insecure and always on edge; having to be perfect at everything is enough to make the young women feel that they can barely breathe. It’s no wonder that self-harm is a growing phenomenon among our young people.⁵ Reading Shauna Niequist’s *New York Times* bestselling memoir *Present over Perfect* has recently shown me that this is not simply a challenge for high school women.⁶ I believe it is a challenge for most of us, although women seem targeted even more than men. Impulses toward contemporary forms of “perfectionism” are not a joke, but have proven to be mentally, physically, and relationally crippling.⁷

Our culture in the West, even as it glorifies radical individualism, fosters far more of a herd mentality than most realize.⁸ What an irony that our modern age on the one hand exhausts us by its calls for complete self-expression and, on the other hand, suffocates us by its pressures to conform. We must constantly adopt ever-changing fashions, humor, and music, and yet keep up the appearance that we are independently minded. This tension fuels our economy—and our insecurities!⁹

With pressures from home, the classroom, and peers, young people often feel isolated and unsure if anyone likes them. Even with friends, many people sense that these are more like tribal packs that hold together only to the extent that each member keeps up their contribution. Failure to do so produces

a fear of rejection. Your hobbies, your fashion, your athletic abilities all need to be in line with your group; the threat of exile consistently hovers over youth. That can sound silly to us adults, but it is the common experience of many kids and teenagers.¹⁰ If we were more self-aware, we would likely see how common it is among adults as well. We walk on the knife's edge between the demand to "be yourself" and the unspoken requirement to conform to current social trends that often masquerade as self-expression. School and social pressures are not new, since they go back millennia, but social media and other cultural changes have clearly intensified them.¹¹

Even when these young people have been told, just like Samantha Sarah Marie, that they are loved, they still wonder whether anyone actually likes them. Do their parents like them? Similar questions worry

Whoever has any knowledge of people will certainly admit that just as he has often wished to be able to move them to relinquish self-love, he has also had to wish that it were possible to teach them to love themselves.

Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*

them as they consider their teachers and school friends. There is a reason so many kids (not to mention adults) find animals such a relief. When my kids burst through the door at home, Ruby can barely contain herself, wagging her tail so hard it seems her body is being bent in half. Cotton the cat jumps onto the lonely lap, waiting to exchange comforting purrs for kind caresses. No judgment arises from these furry friends, just acceptance and affection. Welcoming Suzie or Sam, the pet enjoys this time with the young person, with its mutual acceptance and kindness. As gratifying and therapeutic as an animal's presence can be, it doesn't resolve the questions about our other relationships. And behind them all is the lingering concern about what *God* thinks of you.



So I ask again, does God *like* you?

I have addressed that question not just to teenagers, but to adults of all ages. When I ask it, I try to keep eye contact, but it is amazing how quickly people drop their eyes to the ground. It is painfully clear this is an uncomfortable question. Rather than interrupting the uneasy silence that often follows such a question, I sometimes notice eyes starting to moisten. Why? What is behind this visceral reaction to a simple question? Let's step back and consider potential roots to this problem.

Does God See *Me*?

Have you ever heard a gospel presentation that starts out something like the following?

- God is holy and loving.
- You are a sinner.
- God hates sin and can't be in sin's presence.
- Don't worry. The cross brings good news because now the Father no longer sees you but instead looks at Christ and his cross.

How many believers have heard some version of this proclaimed by well-meaning ministers and Christian counselors? Sitting there in the unforgiving wooden pews or across the room in a tired leather chair is a tender conscience feeling the weight of sin and failure. The speaker intends to proclaim the good news of Christ's death and to comfort the believer with this presentation. Yes, one's first response to this message can be a sense of promise and profound relief (after all, it is pointing us to Christ and him crucified!). Hearers may be grateful to discover the good news of Christ's death for us and God's complete forgiveness, deeply moved to hear of God's love. But for all that is good and right in this outline, it contains threads of misunderstanding that consequently can distort the hearers' views of God, themselves, and the Christian life.

Some traditions, like my own, place so much emphasis on our identity as "sinners" that we leave no room for our deeper identity as the ones whom God designed in his own image to experience life in fellowship, or to experience his original delight in us ourselves, with our particular spunk, our personality, our difference. Since a presentation like the previous one often works solely in terms of obligations and our failure to meet them, we absorb the idea that God thinks and acts only in terms of obligations too. Thus, we can misperceive God's love, as we misperceive that of our parents, as consisting largely of self-imposed obligations. Things like joy or delight or approval are just too good to be true. God, like our parents, *has* to love us (or so we have been told). That's just part of the deal. He is God after all, and there's no way we can ever meet his standards. We are repeatedly told so. Why should we think that God likes us? Nothing in the sermon outlined above indicates that there is anything especially likable about us—far from

it! We are told that there is nothing good in us, aren't we?¹² Maybe the best we can hope for is that God will put up with us if we keep our heads down and hang around with Jesus. We imagine God's acceptance of us like we're attending a party with our older brother, Jesus. Our presence is tolerable to the host because we tagged along with someone that he actually likes, Jesus. In truth, that is how many of us experience "God's love": mere divine toleration toward us. Some versions attempt to offer comfort to the believer by telling them that since they are covered in Christ's blood, God "doesn't see" them (since they are sinners) but only sees Christ (since he alone is free from sin).¹³ In this version, God really doesn't want to look at you. Or maybe he just can't.

It's entirely understandable (and a symptom of growth) if the listener who has heard versions of this message for years—maybe even decades—at some point gets the courage to ask, "If God only sees me in Christ, does he even see *me*? Does he know *me*? How can you say God loves me? Maybe he just loves his Son?"

Sometimes it is the non-Christian who is first to raise these awkward questions.

Looking at the Christian faith, they ask, "Do I have to stop being *me* in order to become a Christian?" Answering this question may be trickier than most people realize. Dismissing such questions as self-absorbed or individualistic is often just a way of avoiding them. Rugged individualism may be the particular temptation of Western culture, but that isn't the same as asking what place particular persons have in the kingdom of God. Jesus, after all, spent quite a lot of time doing just this.

The unholy is the absurd affair
in which the creature seeks to
be creature in a way other than
that which is purposed by God.

John Webster, *Holiness*

What Does the Father Think of Me?

Difficult questions like these, honestly asked, are immensely helpful. They can slow us down enough to see if we have wandered away from the biblical presentation of the good news. That wandering takes the forms both of misstating God's role as Redeemer and forgetting his role as Creator: the two should not be separated.

Too often in some offerings of the gospel, for example, we are presented with a wrathful Father and a loving Christ. In this way, the Father appears as an easily offended, furious perfectionist, who is only persuaded to forgive

us by a more compassionate Son. The Father is now willing to put up with us, but only because Jesus loves us. The obvious tension between the Father and the Son in such a story clearly violates the oneness of God and the many passages in the Bible that highlight God's love for us flowing out of the Father himself (e.g., John 3:16; Rom. 5:8; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 2:4; 1 John 4:8). When we get this wrong regarding the triune God, we feel that God is like a father who is irritated by his kid's friends but nevertheless lets them play at his house because their presence makes his kid happy. Oh how I wish such a rendering were a figment of my imagination, but I have dealt with far too many people from across the country and beyond who have received such an impression: crudely put, the Father is associated with anger (or irritable toleration) and the Son with love. This is deeply antithetical to the gospel. Try this test: Do you tend to avoid prayer because you feel like a stranger in the Father's presence rather than a safe and welcomed daughter or son?

While I understand where they come from, claims that God can't stand to be in the presence of sin are fundamentally opposed to the gospel and the nature of God. This claim and its many variants are backward: it's sin that can't stand the presence of God. To say that God can't stand the presence of sin makes him out to be like the person I heard of who couldn't stand the presence of a spider and would demand that someone else deal with it. It gives sin leverage over God. It makes God out to be either finicky and weak or a kind of irritable, narcissistic fussy spot who is more concerned that things go smoothly than that his beloved is safe and whole. It makes God out to be the kind of being who doesn't have a beloved at all, except perhaps himself. It undercuts and denies the divinity of Christ, who, as God incarnate, was present with and to sinners his whole life. It misunderstands the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell *in* sinners in order that they might be saints.¹⁴ It can develop from the kind of theology that sees justice only in terms of retribution with little concern for restoration.

When our pulpits and our psychologies link the Father with wrath and the Son with love, we end up with a deeply distorted conception of the triune God. John Owen (1616–83) dealt with a similar misconception among seventeenth-century Christians, recognizing that worship, delight, rest, and love all shrivel up rather than grow when this view takes root.¹⁵ To combat these views, he preached the New Testament, emphatically proclaiming, “God [the Father] so loved the world that he sent his only Son” (John 3:16). Divine persons are not pitted against one another; there is no friction or

tension between the Father, Son, and Spirit, for God is One. There is no friction or tension between his holiness and his love, for God is One. Furthermore, the Son is not passive, but, as Morna D. Hooker observes, he freely and actively “gives himself up” for us, not reluctantly, but for the joy set before him.¹⁶ And the Spirit freely unites us to the Son so that he might liberally distribute God’s gifts as he draws us into the life and love of God. United to the Son by the Spirit, our hearts cry out “Abba, Father.” God is holy. God is love. And this holy God genuinely loves you and does what is necessary to reconcile you to himself.

The gifts of the Son and Spirit are not what secure the Father’s love for us but are the fruit of his love for us. Rather than solving an abstract accounting problem, God’s *love* for his world, his people, and you shapes the meaning of the cross for us. God does not hate you; rather, he manifests his love in his delight to be about the work of redemption. Believers are those who have experienced the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). Redemption is not just for some generic humanity but for particular people: the Shepherd knows his sheep, he lays down his life for them, and he calls them by name (John 10:3, 11, 14). As we will see later, we need to emphasize community far more strongly than is common in the Western church today, but that should not undercut the complementary biblical truth that God calls not just generic humanity or the world, but particular people (cf. Exod. 33:12, 17; Isa. 40:6; John 6:37; 10:3). He knows your name. He sees you. He loves *you*.

If we interpret redemption as merely a form of problem solving, where we are the problem, then we are also apt to forget that the good Creator created us good. We forget God’s delight, pleasure, and satisfaction. God likes what he made, and he apparently really likes human creatures. After all, he made us in his own image and likeness—not just generic humanity, but particular people, young and old, male and female, quick-witted and slow, you and me. This does not mean God is blind to our rebellion and sin, just as Samantha Sarah Marie’s mother did not ignore her child’s occasional ill behavior. God doesn’t like hard hearts, greedy hands, and violent responses. God is not and cannot be indifferent to sin *precisely because it perverts his good creation*. In the end God will deal with it by straightening it out and making it right. But whenever fallen humanity’s sinfulness becomes not just *a* theme but the *chief* theme in our assessment of humanity, then it prevents us from appreciating the particularity of God’s work in individual humans.

We begin to interpret healthy aspects of creaturely life as expressions of sin. Because bad preaching and bad theology also typically present the preacher's specific view of how to live as the only right pattern (e.g., Christians should be highly educated, or work for particular causes), listeners are left to believe that every deviation from this particular pattern is sin.

To disconnect redemption from creation encourages a form of self-loathing and shame among God's people. As we will explore more fully in chapters five and six, right repentance and humility are never about self-hatred, but

You would not see yourself so clearly if you did not already know the love of the Savior.

Fleming Rutledge,
The Undoing of Death

a recognition that we are not living as God created us; our sin damages and distorts us, it warps our understanding, and it hurts the way we relate to our God and his world.

Repentance is always unto life, not death.¹⁷

It is a turning around (Greek: *metanoia*), away from self-harm and toward our heal-

ing God. That is why it is linked to resurrection, which, according to Paul, points to the dawning of a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). But we will need to ask, "What does *new* mean here?" As a redeemed and forgiven people—as *new* creatures—we can and need to respond in gratitude, grounded in the dignity that we have in Christ: the triune Creator is making all things new through "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (13:14), and we praise him for his work of renewal.

To start affirming our creaturely finitude as a good quality rather than an evil to be overcome, we must confess that God loves me and not just Christ instead of me. His love is not driven by ignorance (e.g., "He doesn't see you"), but by delight and purpose (seeing you as his own lost sheep in need of a Shepherd): he likes how he made you, and his overflowing love now pours out toward you, his particular creature; he is about rescuing and renewing *you*.

Holding together creation and redemption allows you to make sense of this dynamic, a dynamic employed by the apostle Paul.

Revisiting Galatians 2:20

Near the beginning of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, he repeats the account of his calling from God (Gal. 1:12–17), mentioning his retreat into Arabia

and return to Syria and Cilicia, where he “preached the faith he once tried to destroy” (1:23). Next we hear of his trip to Jerusalem with Barnabas some fourteen years later (2:1). Paul then recounts the painful story of confronting Peter, who started to distance himself from the gentiles, not eating with them, and holding aloof from them as if they were *unclean* rather than *cleansed* by Christ (2:11–14). Paul would have none of this, for such an attitude betrays the gospel. God shows no partiality (1:6). No one stands justified before God or others because of birth or based on “the works of the law” (2:16); no, our righteousness and our life come through Christ, who lives in us (2:20). And he comes to each where we are, calling us as individuals and communities to believe. Christ alone is the Savior of the world, and so we must view our salvation, our life, our death, and everything else in terms of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. This takes us to Paul’s paradigm-shifting claim:

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

While this is one of the most memorized New Testament texts, it is still possible to misunderstand and misapply it. Have we only listened to part of the verse? What is Paul arguing here, and what is he not advocating? I want to highlight three aspects of this text: union with Christ, “I live,” and the call to believe. These three points help us hold together redemption and creation, and in so doing, they can help us avoid confusing creaturely finitude with sinfulness. They are not the same thing!

To Be United . . .

Has it ever occurred to you how strange it can sound to people when Christians talk about Jesus? We don’t merely talk about him as a great teacher of wisdom, or simply as an edgy sage or prophet, but as the very Son of God who became man, becoming like us in all ways, except that he never sinned (John 1:1, 14; Heb. 4:15). It is one thing to talk about Jesus as a historical figure, as someone who started movements, offered insightful counsel, and was courageous enough to stand up to the power structures of his day. While he did all of that, those actions are not primarily why he has followers to this day. Christian worship around the globe centers on

understanding him as the Messiah, and we make claims far more world-shaking than that he was merely a teacher of wisdom or powerful prophet. Believers claim that we somehow personally (and corporately) continue to have fellowship with this man and benefit from his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing intercession in heaven. What does all of that mean?

Central to our Christian identity is the union of believers with Christ by the Spirit. Paul refers to this in Galatians 2:20 when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ. . . . Christ . . . lives in me.” Wait, Paul wasn’t crucified, was he? What is going on here? This is going to take a bit of work, so be patient, but what we learn here will have crucial implications for our lives.

Although you don’t find the phrase “union with Christ” in the New Testament, this idea is essential to Paul’s view of Christian existence. Woven throughout Paul’s letters are phrases that denote such union: saints are “in Christ” (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; etc.), and Christ is “in” those who believe (e.g., Rom. 8:10; Col. 1:27; etc.). Believers are members of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12–27; Eph. 4:11–13; 5:30). The church is the bride of Christ, united to her groom (1 Cor. 6:15–17; 2 Cor. 11:2–3; Eph. 5:25–32), and thus we are united to one another (Rom. 7:4). We are those who “put on” or are clothed in Christ (Rom. 13:12–14; 1 Cor. 15:53–54; 2 Cor. 5:3; Gal. 3:26–27). Whereas we were once linked simply to the first Adam, now we are to find our identity in the final Adam (Greek: *eschatos Adam*) (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45). Believers are those who are now “in the Lord” and found “in him” (e.g., Rom. 16:2, 8, 11, 13; Eph. 1:4; 2:21; 5:8; Phil. 3:8–9).

Constantine R. Campbell nicely surveys the variety of Paul’s imagery and his interpretation of what we call union with Christ: “A believer is united to Christ at the moment of coming to faith; their union is established by the indwelling of the Spirit. The person united to Christ therefore entered into participation with Christ in his death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification. As a participant in Christ’s death and resurrection, the believer dies to the world and is identified with the realm of Christ. As a member of the realm of Christ, the believer is incorporated into his body, since union with Christ entails union with his members.”¹⁸ These comments reflect the various ways Paul brings together themes of identification, participation, and incorporation within the larger idea of union with Christ.

Similar imagery and assumptions are found throughout the New Testament, not just in Paul.¹⁹ For example, believers are the Israel of God,

adopted into his family, so that those connected to Christ—who “is the new covenant”—live “in the covenant through his representative headship.”²⁰ Because the Suffering Servant (whom Isaiah portrays both as singular and corporate)²¹ entered into solidarity with us, we are able to participate in the benefits of his suffering—specifically, to be healed.²² He has absorbed and dealt with our sin because it has been laid on him (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Matt. 8:14–17); thus, we who had been contaminated with sin have become clean in our union with Israel’s Suffering Servant—we have been crucified with Christ.

John’s writings likewise capture this idea, using such agricultural imagery as the vine and the branches (e.g., John 15:4–20; 1 John 2:24–27). How do we benefit from what Christ has done for us? Like branches on a vine, we are united to the Son of God and draw all our life from him. How? John answers this explicitly: “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us his Spirit” (1 John 4:13). His Spirit brings together what was apart. Again, the triune God acts on our behalf—there is no division within God.

The sacraments similarly highlight the beauty and centrality of this union with Christ and serve as an instrument of it. Baptized into the name of Christ, we are declared united with him (Rom. 6). Having these sacred waters fall over our body links us to his death, and in this we experience newness of life (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 3:27–28). Gathered around the Lord’s Table we give thanks as we drink the wine and eat the bread. Here we encounter the Christ who is present with us, and here we praise him for rescuing us by his death and resurrection and for dwelling in and among us by his life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 10:16–17). By our participation in baptism and the Eucharist, we are likewise united to fellow believers, whether to celebrate or to bear one another’s burdens (12:13, 26). Union with Christ does not dissolve our particularity, but rather establishes it. In Christ we are reborn into a new family, a new life, a new world. Sharing in this feast reconnects us with God’s original desires for human creatures.

United to the Son by the Spirit, our hearts cry out “Abba, Father.” As sons and daughters (via that union), we now moan from a position of hope and trust, rather than despair and apathy.²³ John Calvin understood this when he claimed, “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”²⁴ In Christ we are renewed or

“new” creatures, freed to worship and enjoy our Lord. When Paul says that we have been crucified with Christ, he reminds us that all of our sin and shame were also crucified. In light of the cross we happily see that Christ, not our sin, defines us! Paul’s declaration in Galatians 2:20 means that he “sees his own life as now constituted by the presence of Christ within him.”²⁵ Similarly, in Colossians 3:3 he declares: “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” The result of this union and burial with Christ is that your “life”—your value, dignity, and future—are secure in Christ. They do not depend on your performance or your perceived acceptability before others and God. Instead, they depend on the steadfastness of the risen Christ. This equips us with the confidence to encounter our limits without fear.

This Christ to whom we are united is risen! Therefore, the last word is not death; it is not sin; it is not terror or fear. No, the last words are the first words: “He has risen.” And so we rise. We worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, because in the dawning of a new creation he has come as the King bringing us into his kingdom—yes, us. We who believe are in Christ, and Christ is in us. This union is our comfort, hope, and life. There is no salvation apart from this union to Christ. The Creator acts also as the Redeemer.

I Live

We are not accustomed (at least, outside the church) to concepts like being executed with someone else (Gal. 2:20) or being buried with someone else (Col. 2:11–12) or having died with someone else (2:20), especially when those events happened about two thousand years before we were born. Consequently, we find them awkward to handle. How literally should we take them? If they are metaphors, what are they pointing to?

If you look at what Paul is talking about here and in similar passages (see also 2 Cor. 5:14–17; Col. 3:1–5; 2 Tim. 2:11), Paul seems to affirm two realities we must keep in mind: he tells us how to approach our day-to-day existence (as in Rom. 12:1–2), and yet he also says that our lives—the center of our being—are already elsewhere, “hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). Something is *already* true even as we are also in *process*.

If we only look at Galatians 2:20, it’s easy to get the impression that we have been removed and only Christ is left. “I no longer live.” Asking, “Where

is the ‘me’ in all this?” is a fair question. The more we look at the related passages, however, the more it becomes clear that Paul is not saying you no longer have existence or meaning or value. As Susan Eastman notes, despite being crucified with Christ, “Paul certainly has a strong sense of himself as a thinking, intending, emoting, and acting self with a distinctive history and vocation.”²⁶ Paul is showing us where and what the real “me” is so that we might see ourselves more clearly. He shows us that all of God’s action in creation and redemption embraces me, the real me that is free from the distortion of sin. Recognizing that me amid the ongoing struggles with sin can be a real challenge. But the “I,” the “ego,” does still matter to the Creator.

On November 17, 1867, Charles Spurgeon preached a sermon entitled “Christus et Ego,” based on Galatians 2:20. Right at the beginning Spurgeon observes that the first-person singular pronouns (“I” and “me”) are “swarming” everywhere in this passage, whereas the plural is absent. Elsewhere—and even normally—the apostle Paul will stress the communal, the plural, the whole, but here he speaks in terms of the singular individual. The Creator Lord does not merely love his creation as a system, or some generic humanity; rather, he “loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.” Doesn’t it sound a bit selfish or self-absorbed of the apostle Paul to speak this way? Spurgeon doesn’t think so, because he sees it as a mark of true Christian religion. Again, while the biblical faith commonly will press us to elevate the whole over the part, the community over the solitary figure, it never loses sight of the importance of the single, the particular. God’s love through Christ by his Spirit moves all the way to the individual.

According to Spurgeon’s reading, one “distinguishing mark of the Christian religion” is that, rather than treating humans as cookie-cutter creatures, it brings out a person’s individuality. He clarifies, “It does not make us selfish. On the contrary it cures us of that evil, but it still does manifest in us a selfhood by which we become conscious of our personal individuality in an eminent degree.”²⁷ He then provides a helpful analogy: “In the nocturnal heavens there had long been observed bright masses of light—the astronomers called them ‘nebulae’—they supposed them to be stores of shapeless chaotic matter until the telescope of Herschell resolved them into distinct stars. What the telescope did for stars the religion of Christ, when received into the heart, does for men!”²⁸

Let’s look again at Galatians 2:20. Paul’s statement that we have been crucified with Christ provokes a question: “*What* or *who* was crucified?”

I am still here, standing before you. My biology hasn't changed. My personal upbringing and history did not evaporate. The fact that I prefer coffee over tea didn't change. So, what died?

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, observed that “Christ abiding in me drives out every evil. This union with Christ . . . separates me from my sinful self.”²⁹ *Sin* functioned to separate rebellious creatures from the Creator, but Christ has overcome it, bringing the human creature back into fellowship with the Maker of Heaven and Earth. The distorted sinful self, according to Luther, stands under the law and judgment. That is any “I” apart from Christ. We were originally made as worshiping creatures who are appropriately dependent on their Creator and freely responsive to him. Sin disrupted our relationship to the rest of creation and its Creator; but we have been rescued by Christ and given life by his Spirit, so that the true ego—rather than the sinful self—may live. In redemption, “I” will always and only be free through union with Christ. Again, Luther: “Christ clings and dwells in us as closely and intimately as light or whiteness clings to a wall. . . . Christ himself is the life that I now live.”³⁰ The apostle says not only that we were crucified with Christ but also that “Christ lives in me. And the life *I* now live in the flesh *I* live . . .”

The warnings in the earlier parts of Galatians (especially 1:6–9) are not merely about heretics but also about a far more common problem that we might call “projection.” We tend to portray the Christian life in ways that reflect our own personalities and proclivities. Passionate Christian leaders and spiritual gurus commonly fall into this error. While we do not have space to fully deal with personality differences here, an example may prove helpful.

It has been argued that large swaths of the American church have received a spirituality framed in strongly extroverted terms.³¹ Serious Christians, says this view, need to love being with a lot of people, doing very expressive things, while constantly sharing their feelings and failures with everyone. But what if you are more introverted? Do you have to become extroverted to show signs of sanctification?

Is one personality godlier than another? When Paul tells us that we have been crucified with Christ and “it is no longer I who live,” he doesn't mean you actually need to cease being you. Each of us is different. Some are more extroverted, some more introverted. Some of us are publicly animated, others more reserved. Some seek adventure, others enjoy quiet. Some prefer action, others prefer reflection. Some find energy from being with a crowd,

others from being alone. Some deal with stress through humor, others through increased focus. Each can express a faithful identity in Christ.

Does the call to be a faithful Christian mean that “you” actually have to stop being you? Listen to me carefully. You cannot escape you! Stop running from yourself. The you that Christ lives in is still *you*. He does not obliterate, deform, or deaden you. Who made you? When God made you, did he make a mistake? The Father of life created each of us in our particularity, and he delights in his creation.

When unpacking the doctrine of union with Christ, John Owen anticipated various misunderstandings, including the temptation to think our individuality is absorbed and lost. When the Son of God comes to inhabit a person, Owen reminds us, “he doth not assume our [individual] nature, and so prevent our personality, which would make us one person with him.” No, instead, by the Spirit he “dwells in our persons, keeping his own and leaving us our personality infinitely distinct.”³² From time to time through the history of the church, some have pretended that our union with Christ “destroyed the person of believers, affirming that in their union with Christ they lose their own personality,—that is, cease to be men, or at least these or those individual men.”³³ That misunderstands the whole point of our union altogether and distorts our view of God and ourselves. What secures this union is not the loss of personality or particularity, but rather that “the one and self-same Spirit dwells in him and us.”³⁴ We have received his Spirit, and so his Spirit now produces fruit in us (Gal. 5:22–23; see also John 10). Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are all the Spirit’s fruit, but they often look and taste a bit different among the variety of particular trees that inhabit the Lord’s land. Each tree produces fruit, nourishes others, and grows strong; but that is far from saying each tree is the same as the next. We see evidence of such misunderstandings when Christian artists don’t feel welcomed in the church, when evangelism is always required to have a particular style to it, and when spirituality is always presented in either introverted or extroverted terms (depending on the leader). Sameness is not the goal. The life and fruit of the Spirit are. Similarly, when two people are united in marriage, they do not cease to be a distinctive woman and man, but in their differences they nevertheless become one. When the church is the one body of Christ, this

For where not I, there
more happily I.
Augustine, *On Contenance*

does not eliminate our differences of personality, backgrounds, hobbies, or delights, but it does show our shared union with Christ amid our diversity.

We are not trying to run from ourselves; rather, Christ has freed us from the entanglements of sin, which deface and deform his image in us. The Redeemer has freed us in order that we may be our true selves. Run from your sin? Yes! But don't imagine that to be a serious Christian you need to have a different temperament or personality. God's goal is not for all of us to end up looking, sounding, and being the same. That confuses sameness with godliness. Not everyone needs to wear khakis, nor do they all need tattoos. But everyone needs to be united to the Son by the Spirit that they might fully enjoy the love of the Father: because of this union we actively participate in communion with the triune God.

To Believe

Why is "living by faith" so hard? We are called to live by faith, a faith that we are found in Christ and that his life, death, and resurrection are now determinative for our lives. His story must be believed above our own story. Let me explain.

Union with Christ is not, at least biblically speaking, a universal or generic phenomenon. As Grant Macaskill's Oxford University Press volume on this theme makes clear, even among New Testament authors who "offer the strongest statements of God's universal love, such as John, union with Christ is limited to those who are acting subjects of faith."³⁵ This is because *faith* is the biblical term for the sinner's renewed relation with God; it is a term that includes personal trust, eyes that have been opened to reality, a life enabled by God himself, and a delight in him. The reason it is impossible to please God apart from faith (Heb. 11:6) is that being apart from faith means standing essentially in opposition to God. Faith is the relational dynamic in which we see God and our neighbor as who they really are, and then respond accordingly.

I think the difficulties of living by faith in the Son are related to two specific things Paul calls us to believe in Galatians 2:20. First, that Jesus "loved me," and second, that he "gave himself for me." Yes, this includes each "me" along with our particularities, our differences (Jew, gentile, male, female, young, old), our creatureliness, even our sin.

Many of us don't have a hard time with the idea that there is a God and he loves the world. But even mature Christians, who have spent their whole

life in the church, get very uncomfortable when told individually, “Christ came for you. He gave himself for *you*.” Years ago I had a pleasant and engaging conversation with someone after church. But as I later walked to the car, my then nine-year-old son Jonathan said to me, “That man must have never learned to look at people in the eye, or he was really nervous.” Jonathan had picked up on the situation. Here was a grown man who had done nothing wrong, and yet it was almost impossible for him to look me in the eye as we talked. If we struggle to look one another in the eye (which we do!), how can we ever imagine being secure in the Father’s presence? I think that we all struggle to believe God likes us. So our problem becomes learning how, given our sin, struggles, and inadequacies, we can really receive words of personal grace in a way that reaches the depths of our hearts as well as our rational understanding.

We might believe Christ could die for someone awesome like Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, or an abandoned orphan. But what about me? No one even knows my name. What if I don’t like to lead Bible studies, or I don’t go on mission trips, or I have hardly any money to give to the poor? Your Christian identity needs to be shaped by the fact that God in Christ loved “you,” and gave himself for you—*you!*

The sixteenth-century Heidelberg Catechism beautifully captures the message that the gospel applies to each of us in particular. It proclaims not just that God is good, or that God is love, but that he has been good to me, that he loves me, that he has provided for me. Consequently, when it describes the “holy supper” that God’s people eat, it tells the reader just how personal this sacrifice, this meal, this good news is when the feast is eaten: “As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken *for me* and the cup shared with *me*, so surely his body was offered and broken *for me* and his blood poured out *for me* on the cross.”³⁶ Similarly, that same catechism tells us that true faith is not mere knowledge, not a general acceptance of God’s kindness, but that what “God has freely granted” is “not only to others but to me also.”³⁷ God doesn’t just forgive generic sins: he forgives *my* sin. He doesn’t just save the cosmos; he saves *me*. Why? Because he loves you and me as particular people.

Who are you?

As a believer, you are in Christ, and Christ is in you. You are secure by the power of the Spirit, who applies the finished work of Christ to your

The presence of evil separates us not only from God, but also from our true selves.

John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*

life. He enables you to grow and blossom as the real you, which involves communion with God and with your neighbor. If you were no more than a copy of a single pattern, just like everyone else, we would not have a communion but an echo chamber. You are connected but distinctive, adding your unique voice and actions to the universe. God delights in you as you use the particular gifts he has given. You are a child of the King. You are an irreplaceable member of the body of Christ. God wants you to flourish as the particular *you* that you are, to enjoy his creation and to enjoy him. That is your calling and privilege as a particular human creature he made and delights in. This is crucial for recapturing a healthy embrace of our creaturely limits. He doesn't just love a generic world or amorphous humanity; he loves you, and he even likes you.

Fundamental to what God loves and likes about you is your body, which he joyfully created. Too often we treat our bodies as insignificant or even bad, but when we do that we risk undervaluing what is central to the good news: in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). Part of being human is being limited by having a body. The incarnation—the Son of God taking on human flesh—is God’s great yes to his creation in general, and to finite human creatures in particular. Only when we fully appreciate this reality can we learn to live more comfortably in our own skin. To this story we now turn.