

PERSPECTIVE

FEBRUARY 2016



What is the Meaning
of the Lord's Supper?

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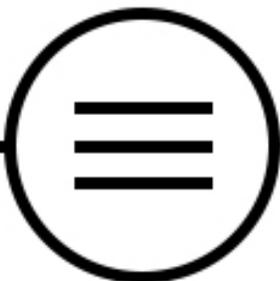
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What is the Meaning of the Lord's Supper?

The article is adapted from a sermon originally preached on November 15, 2015. You can find the audio at www.mvbchurch.org.

LOOKING FOR UNITY

It's easy to see we are not united. The ISIS attacks around the world remind us that religious differences can lead to bloody battles. This world is not what it ought to be. In America, unity is a scarce commodity. Political, cultural, economic, and racial strife tears at the fabric of society. This year's presidential election makes it clear we struggle to be a nation united.

But before we lament the division in the world around us, maybe we should take a closer look at our personal lives. This past week, did you have a serious fight with someone you love most: your husband, wife, or child? And what about the evangelical church? Do we know how to submit to each other when it comes to musical style? Is the church today a model of racial diversity? Are there cults of personality with some saying, "I follow this podcast," "I follow this blog," and "I follow this ministry?"

At every level of society, from the United Nations to Congress, from the sanctuary to the living room, we see division. This division should sadden us. Christians ought to long for the new heavens and new earth where there will be no division. On that day, in that place, all of God's people will know a unity that transcends understanding.

But what are we to do in the meantime? Is there any unity we can celebrate today? There is! It's the unity that marks those who have been reconciled to God the Father. It's the unity of those who are brothers and sisters in Christ. It's the unity on display in the local church. The picture of that unity is called the Lord's Supper, and it's important for every Christian to understand what the Lord's Supper means.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:17 that in the Lord's Supper, "we who are many are one." Of course, we won't see this unity perfectly until the day every believer is in heaven and seated at the marriage supper of the Lamb, with Christ at the head of a table longer than the eye can see. But until that great day arrives, each local church is to pursue this reality of unity with passion and vigor and

prayer. We are to unite to Christ and we are to be united to each other. This is the reality the Lord's Supper presents.

In last month's *Perspective* I wrote about baptism. There we saw that baptism symbolizes a new family, a new identity, a new life, and a new Lord. Now we need to think about another ordinance and ask the question, "What do we do when we celebrate the Lord's Supper?"

A HISTORICAL REVIEW

Before I answer that question, let's look for just a moment at the historical context. The Lord's Supper has been practiced since the birth of the church. The first Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper the moment they were saved. In Acts 2:42, for example, we learn that after their conversion the disciples devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to prayer and to the "breaking of bread," which was a meal commemorating Christ's death.

What do we call this meal? In 1 Corinthians 11:20 it's called the Lord's Supper. We also call it the Eucharist, which is from the Greek word, *eucharistesas*, which simply means "thanksgiving." This is because Jesus "gave thanks" before he broke bread at the Last Supper. Some refer to it as "communion" because of 1 Corinthians 10:16 where Paul states we participate in or commune with the body of Christ when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Roman Catholics call it the Mass—this is because in the Catholic liturgy the service ends when the priest sends the church out on *missa* which is Latin for mission.ⁱ

The Lord's Supper has always been intended as a celebration for baptized Christians. It's a sign of genuine conversion. Note Justin Martyr's words written in the second century—the earliest words outside the New Testament about the Lord's Supper:

Now, this food is called by us "the eucharist," from which no one is allowed to partake except the one who believes what we teach to be true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the forgiveness of sins and regeneration, and who lives in exactly the way Christ handed down to us.ⁱⁱ

As time went on, Christians wrestled with Christ's relationship to the Lord's Supper. Is there a sense in which he is literally "in" the bread and the wine? In the ninth century two medieval monks debated this question with a man by the name of Radbertus arguing the bread

and wine actually become Jesus.ⁱⁱⁱ For hundreds of years Christians debated, but by the thirteenth century the church declared this doctrine of transubstantiation official. This is the teaching that during the communion service the substance of the bread and wine, in its

First, we remember.

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper the night before his crucifixion when he ate the Passover meal with his disciples. For centuries, the Jews celebrated the Passover

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essence, is changed into the body and blood of Christ. Eventually the church declared that far from being symbolic, the Lord's Supper is actually a sacrament of the church that gives grace to the recipient regardless of whether that person had faith. Taking the Lord's Supper became thought of as a work a person could do to help merit salvation.

Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin rejected transubstantiation and the idea that the Lord's Supper worked without faith. But they still wrestled with whether Jesus is somehow "in" the bread and the wine. They all agreed the Lord's Supper is a symbol of Christ's death, and some argued for slightly more. They maintained that in a mystical way, Christ is spiritually present in the bread and wine.^{iv}

In America, Baptists have debated who should be allowed to take the Lord's Supper—should it be restricted to the members of a local church, for example? Baptists have also discussed, as you can imagine, what to drink. Until about 1850 it was wine, but the temperance movement put an end to that! Today most churches, including our own, celebrate the Lord's Supper with bread and grape juice.

WHAT WE DO WHEN WE CELEBRATE

Christians today are united in the belief that the Lord's Supper is a symbol of Christ's work for his church. But what does this mean, exactly? What are we doing when we celebrate the Lord's Supper? I have five answers: First, we remember. Second, we abide. Third, we examine. Fourth, we proclaim. Fifth, we gather. And if you rearrange those words you have an acronym to help you remember: GRAPE.

to commemorate the day God delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

We read about this in Exodus 12. Years after Joseph led his brothers to Egypt, Pharaoh enslaved Israel, enslaving Jacob's family. For over 400 years they lived in Egypt under Pharaoh's thumb. God raised Moses to lead them out of Egypt. Through Moses God announced plagues that would inflict Egypt until Pharaoh let them go. Pharaoh refused. The final plague was the worst: God said the firstborn of every family would die.

But God made a promise to his people: if they would sacrifice a lamb and paint the doorframe of their home with the blood, God's wrath would "pass over" that home. They believed God. They painted the doorframes with the blood of the lamb. God's judgment came on everyone, but spared the Jews. The next day, Pharaoh let Israel leave.

God told Israel to remember this day, every year, with a great feast. But God knew future generations who didn't live through the Passover would wonder what this feast is all about. This is why God gave Moses these words in Exodus 12:26:

And when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' you shall say, 'It is the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses.'

Year after year, generation after generation, fathers talked about God's redeeming grace whenever the Passover feast took place.

For this reason, it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus chose the Passover meal to be the feast where we remember his death. In Luke 22, we read of Jesus celebrating the Passover. But this Passover was unlike any that went before it: "And he took bread, and 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). What an audacious statement! The Passover feast had always been celebrated in memory of the God who redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt. They were to remember God. And now here is Jesus saying his disciples are to remember *him*.

Luke 22:19 rules out anyone thinking of Jesus as a nice rabbi, an important philosopher, or a wise sage. Here he claims equality with God. He claims the right to be remembered as the divine Redeemer. Now when Christians eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember the sovereign and saving hand of Christ.

New York City established a memorial to the nearly 3,000 who died on 9/11. You don't go to a place like that for a history lesson. It's hallowed ground. You go to reflect on the reality of evil, the fragility of life, and the resilience of America. As more than one tour guide repeats: it's not the place for jokes and selfies.

When we gather to celebrate the Lord's Supper, it's not a trivial event, either. There's nothing rote about it. It's not a history lesson. We reflect on the reality of our sin, the fragility of Christ's life—he was really human—and his divine power to give life to everyone who believes. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we remember the Lord's death for sinners like us.

Second, we abide.

In the New Testament eating is a metaphor for believing in Christ—for resting in him, for abiding in him. Think on Jesus' words in John 6:53, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." This isn't a saying about cannibalism—it's about faith. It's about leaning into the Lord, trusting him, and believing him completely. Jesus isn't talking about what we do with our mouth, but what we do with our heart. It's why Jesus also said in a parallel passage, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Eating is believing is resting is abiding.

The Lord's Supper capitalizes on these metaphors. By eating the bread and drinking the wine we are saying

Christ is in us and we are in Christ. By God's grace, we have been united to him. We are saying the same thing we said in baptism: Jesus is our identity. We derive our worth, our value, and our purpose from him—not our work, not our station, not our kids, not our spouse, nothing else but him.

Nothing magical happens when we eat the bread and drink the wine. It doesn't actually become the body and blood of Christ. But Christians have always believed that this symbolic event is powerful. Justin Martyr said when we eat the Lord's Supper in faith we are nourished and changed. He wrote the bread and wine are not:

ordinary drink; but just as Jesus Christ our Savior was made flesh by a word of God and took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food for which thanks has been given by a word and prayer this is from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by a transformation.^v

Centuries later, Charles Spurgeon wrote something similar. When we eat of the bread and drink of the cup we are, "by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace."^{vi}

How exactly the Lord's Supper nourishes us is a mystery. At the very least, I would say this: when our ears hear God's Word, when our hands touch and our tongues taste his body and blood, we deeply sense our union with the Lord where his righteousness became ours and our sin his. We sense our sins being nailed to the tree and his white robe being draped over our shoulders. We sense we belong to the Lord and the Lord belongs to us.

Sometimes you come to the Lord's Table and you are weak. Maybe you are struggling with doubt, with temptation, or with sin. You feel like you have nothing to give and you are tired of putting on a show, tired of trying to be something you aren't, or tired of trying to pretend you aren't in pain. When you come to the Lord's Table, the words of Isaiah 55 spring to life, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price...eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." In the Lord's Supper, it's as if Jesus says, 'Come and delight yourselves in me. I'm all you need. Abide in me, I'm enough.'

Third, we examine.

Before we eat and drink we are to examine ourselves, to assess our spiritual condition, and to be sure no unrepentant sin exists in our lives that would disqualify us from the Lord's Supper. This bit of instruction comes straight from Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29:

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

If we are to eat the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner we must *discern the body*. "Body" in verse 29 has a dual reference. First, it is the body of Christ, the Lord who saved. Second, is the body of Christ, the church we've been saved into. Therefore, we discern the body by examining our relationship with Christ and his church.

How can we examine ourselves before we take the Lord's Supper? Let me encourage you to ask yourself three questions:

First, are you clinging to your performance as the reason God loves you? To eat in a worthy manner you have to make sure your confidence is in Christ—*his* death and resurrection. You need to be convinced he is the reason you are saved and not your own performance.

Second, are you clinging to patterns of sin? Believers still sin. That's not the question. The question is are you holding on to *patterns* of sin inconsistent with a life transformed by the gospel? The Lord's Supper is for sinners who have rejected their former way of life. But if there are sins you have not rejected, sins you are holding onto, it would be unwise for you to take the Lord's Supper.

Third, are you clinging to division between you and a brother or sister? This is Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 11. Paul rebuked a church that pretended to have unity when in reality the members treated one another like dirt. If you are at odds with another member of the church, you should reconcile before eating the Lord's Supper.

Examining yourself takes some time and effort. It probably can't be done in the few moments prior to actually taking the Lord's Supper. Check the church

calendar to see when the Lord's Supper is on the schedule. Carve out time during the week ahead to reflect on your life, Christ's death for you, and your relationships in the body of Christ. As the Spirit makes you aware of sin, repent. As the Spirit reveals relationships that need repair, make every attempt at restoration. This is all part of self-examination.

Fourth, we proclaim.

When we take the Lord's Supper we are doing something powerful. We are letting the world know the King is coming. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). When we eat together, we are doing more than remembering what Jesus did. We are proclaiming, we are professing, we are announcing, we are affirming, we are preaching that he died for us. Most Sundays I preach and the congregation listens. But when we take the Lord's Supper, we all preach. Each of us declares with one voice that Jesus died for us.

One day we won't need to proclaim anymore. Proclamation ends when the Lord arrives. As Paul wrote, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." This means we don't merely proclaim Jesus' death, we proclaim his resurrection and return. The King is alive. Death did not defeat him. Sin did not have the last word. The tomb is not occupied. History is not completed. I love how the hymn writer prayed, "You have been raised, the work is completed, Hell and its powers have been defeated."^{vii}

Not far from the 9/11 memorial in New York City is Freedom Tower—the fifth tallest building in the world, and the first of the World Trade Center towers to be rebuilt. There is usually a long line to the observation deck and by the time you reach the 104th floor you are ready for the view. But they make you wait as an usher leads you into a dark hallway to show a movie about the building of the skyscraper. A narrator recounts something of the tragedy of 9/11 and the commitment to rebuild in the ashes. When the movie ends, the wall mechanically and unexpectedly rises, suddenly displaying a view the Manhattan skyline. When I witnessed this the crowd spontaneously erupted into applause. Why? Because that view represented victory. That view meant the terrorists didn't have the last word. 9/11 was a dark day, but it wasn't the final day.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we don't just remember Good Friday, we applaud at Resurrection Sunday. We tell ourselves and the world that our God

lives, and he reigns, and he's coming back for us. We joyously proclaim Jesus' death until he returns.

Fifth, we gather.

One of the most important, obvious, and neglected truths about the Lord's Supper is that it's for a local, gathered church. This is because the Lord's Supper is not merely a symbol of your personal union with Jesus Christ; it's a symbol of the fact that in Christ we are united to each other. Paul put it this way, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:16-17).

"Participation" in verse 16 means fellowship or communion. It's from the Greek word, *koinonia*. When we eat the bread and drink the cup we are declaring not only our union with Christ but with one another. This is why what took place in the Corinthian church was so scandalous to Paul. The rich believers gathered early and ate while the poor came later and had leftovers, if anything at all. One faction in the church feasted while the other starved. What was supposed to be a symbol of unity had become a symbol of division. Paul went on to rebuke:

¹⁷But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, ¹⁹for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. ²²What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

For this reason, the Lord's Supper is not meant to be taken individually. The Lord's Supper is to be celebrated by the whole, local, gathered church as a symbol of our unity. Throughout chapter 11 Paul talks about the church coming together for the Lord's Supper. "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another" (1 Cor 11:33). Isn't that beautiful? There are restaurants you may go to that other Christians could

never afford. In this world there may be doors that open for you that won't open for others. But in the church all doors open equally for every child of God. In the church we wait for each other, we eat together, because in the church the only title that matters is "brother" and "sister." The Lord's Supper is for a local, gathered church. It's a family meal, a family celebration.

At Mount Vernon we often have Christians visiting us. They aren't members of this particular family of faith. How should someone in this situation think about taking the Lord's Supper? At MVBC, visitors who are members in good standing of another local church (in other words, they are allowed to take the Lord's Supper at their home church) are welcome to take it here, as well. For the day they are with us we recognize them as part of our church family.

However, if someone is visiting with us who is not a member of another local church, I would encourage them to talk to an elder. Someone who hasn't locked arms with a local church hasn't really become a part of a church family. Since the Lord's Supper is supposed to be a picture of a church family, that person should get to the bottom of why he or she hasn't joined. He should ask what's keeping him from pursuing the very unity the Lord's Supper is supposed to represent.

The Lord's Supper is for a local, gathered church; a church full of men and women who don't show favoritism, who don't fall into cliques, who look out for the new, the lonely, and the weaker brothers and sisters. As the Lord adds people to our church, are you prepared to meet, love, and serve them? Are you reaching out to help knit new faces into the family of faith here? You are not modeling the gospel well if every time you come to this gathering you simply greet the same handful of people you already know and love. When we gather as the body of Christ, for the Lord's Supper service and every service, we gather to show Christ-like love and humility.

This is what happens when we celebrate the Lord's Supper: We gather as local church. We remember the death of Christ that saved us. We abide in him. We proclaim him. We examine ourselves. Again, if you need a way to remember this, just think of the acronym, GRAPE.

GAIUS THE BLACKSMITH

When we studied baptism, we imagined a first-century slave-girl by the name of Lucilla who came to know the

Lord and was baptized. Now pretend you are back in ancient Antioch where Gaius recently heard the gospel. Gaius is 32 years old. He's a blacksmith from a pagan family. He heard the gospel when someone came into his shop for a new chisel. As Gaius hammered away, his new friend told him about Jesus, the carpenter, who lived a perfect life, died a cruel death on the cross, and rose from the dead. Gaius also learned about the church, where Christ's disciples, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, gather to worship Christ as God.

Gaius is curious. He asks if he can visit one of these services. His friend agrees to take him. They gather before work very early on Sunday morning. Gaius shows up just in time to see the elder talking about the same gospel he heard while hammering the chisel. Gaius notices everyone is listening intently. At the end of the service nobody leaves. People bring out dishes—some have some dates, some rice, someone brought milk. All the food is laid out on a back table. Then the elder stands up with a loaf of bread in his hand and he walks through the gospel again, explaining how Christ gave up his life and shed his blood for the church. He breaks the bread and passes it around. Then quietly, every person in the room walks to the table and fills his plate with food—the slaves eat right next to the merchants, the Jews are seated with the Gentiles.

Gaius has never seen anything like this before. He goes up to the elder and asks why they don't have the wealthy eat first since they brought more food. And the elder says, "Don't you see, Christ who had all riches became a slave for us so we could all be rich. None of us had anything to give him. He gave us everything." As the elder spoke the Holy Spirit worked in Gaius's heart. And for the first time he understood. Christ died for the many to make us one in Christ.

~Aaron Menikoff

ⁱⁱ From First Apology cited by Michael A.G. Haykin, "A Glorious Inebriation: Eucharistic Thought and Piety in the Patristic Era," in *The Lord's Supper*, 106.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shawn D. Wright, "The Lord's Supper in History, Theology, and the Church," in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, eds. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (B&H, 2015), 146.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 150-58.

^v Cited by Haykin, "A Glorious Inebriation," 106.

^{vi} Cited by Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (B&H, 2012), 111.

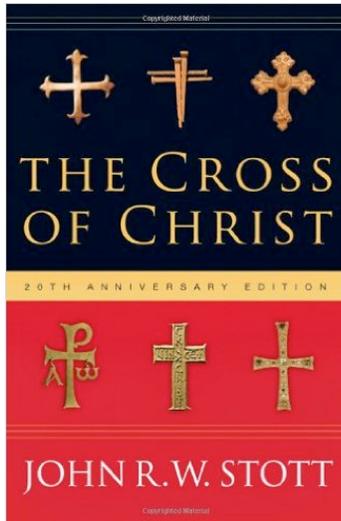
^{vii} "You Have Been Raised," words by Mark Altrogge and Bob Kauffin.

ⁱ Greg Allison, "The Theology of the Eucharist According to the Catholic Church," in *The Lord's Supper: Remembering and Proclaiming Christ Until He Comes*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Matthew R. Crawford (B&H, 2010), 155.

The Cross of Christ

Written by John Stott

Bookstall Price \$18



For Paul it wasn't enough to know Jesus Christ. Paul knew everything depended upon knowing Jesus Christ and *him crucified* (1 Cor. 2:2). Paul saw the centrality of the cross of Christ. The aim of this book is for us to see it too. Stott's general premise doesn't stray far from that of the epistles. He wants his readers to truly see themselves and God (Father and Son) for who they really are in light of the cross and to live accordingly. He does this by first walking the reader through the progression of the cross in the history of the church leading them to inquire

of its importance. Stott gladly responds with necessary thoroughness in his second and third sections of the book with the "Heart of the Cross" and the "Achievement of the Cross." Now fully aware of its glory, his audience wondering, "now what?," Stott closes the book with instructional "Living under the Cross."

I recommend this book as a solid resource to any Christian wanting to shore up their understanding of how the work of Christ on the cross impacts every facet of the gospel; believed and lived. Although the book was written 35 years ago, many of the topics Stott addresses such as human moral responsibility, substitutionary atonement, propitiation, and holiness through suffering are all the more pertinent today demonstrating its timelessness. As an avid history reader, I found myself easily floating in the deep waters of the heart of the gospel thanks to Stott's frequent references to the development of doctrines throughout church history. Stott also sensibly assists his readers by logically leading them to ask the relevant questions and subsequently answering them to his readers' satisfaction. He first recalibrates our hearts' alignment to a cross-centered faith through rich doctrines like substitutionary atonement and adjacent doctrines (chapters 4 -9). Next he admonishes us how to live well (chapters 10-14). This biblical paradigm—focusing on the heart, then the hands—is a welcome alarm to any ears that have become dull of hearing.

— RECOMMENDED BY ROBERT VERSELE

Excerpts from the Book

1

"It is more characteristic for us to clap our hands with joy than to blush with shame or tears. We saunter up to God to claim his patronage and friendship; it does not occur to us that he might send us away...It must even be said that our evangelical emphasis on the atonement is dangerous if we come to it too quickly. We learn to appreciate the access to God that Christ has won for us only after we have first seen God's inaccessibility to sinners. We can cry "Hallelujah" with authenticity only after we have first cried "Woe is me, for I am lost."

—The Problem of Forgiveness, p. 110

2

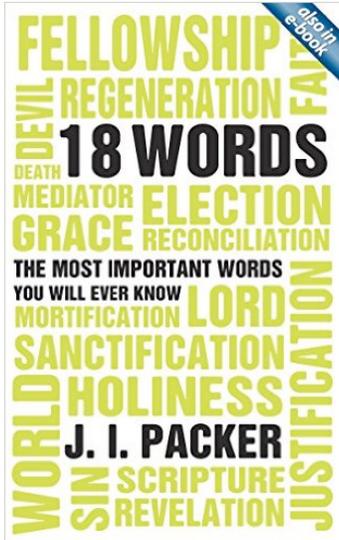
"The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone."

—The Self-Substitution of God, p. 159

18 Words: The Most Important Words You Will Ever Know

Written by J. I. Packer

Bookstall Price \$14



“Keys open doors; keywords open minds, and through minds hearts.” Those are the opening words of J. I. Packer’s *18 Words*, and in many ways that sentence summarizes the “what” and the “why” of the book. In seventeen relatively brief chapters (8-14 pages each), Packer seeks to define and unpack the meaning of the most important keywords in the Bible. His goal in doing so is to lead readers “to love and adore the Christ of the Scriptures, and to amend our lives by their light.” After spending the last year and a half reading through *18 Words* in preparation to teach the

material to MVBC’s youth at our monthly Game & A Good Word, I can say with certainty that Packer accomplishes his purpose.

Packer is incredibly gifted at taking complex theological ideas and breaking them down into bite-sized pieces that are easy to understand. That is exactly what he does in *18 Words* as he writes about biblical concepts like revelation, reconciliation, justification, regeneration, election, and more. The book serves as an excellent introduction to biblical doctrine, which is why I chose to use it to as a guide for teaching MVBC’s youth. But *18 Words* isn’t just for young believers. Any believer, whether young or old, will find benefit from reading the book. Packer’s thoroughly biblical “sketches,” as he calls them, of the Bible’s keywords will guide readers not only into a deeper understanding of the words themselves, but will also lead them to marvel at and more firmly put their faith in the glorious God of the Bible whose ways and works are on display in every chapter.

– RECOMMENDED BY DUSTIN BUTTS

Excerpts from the Book

1

“Apart from the first two chapters of Genesis, which set the stage, the real subject of every chapter of the Bible is what God does about our sins. Lose sight of this theme, and you lose your way in the Bible at once.”

–Sin, p. 69

2

“Rightly understood, this one word ‘grace’ contains within itself the whole of New Testament theology. The New Testament message is just the announce that grace has come to men in and through Jesus Christ, plus a summons from God to receive this grace (Rom 5:17; 2 Cor 6:1), and to know it (Col 1:6), and not to frustrate it (Gal 2:21), but to continue in it (Acts 13:43), since ‘the word of his grace...is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.’ (Acts 20:32). Grace is the sum and substance of New Testament faith.”

–Grace, p. 91-92

3

“The sinner’s first problem...is to get right with God’s law, for until he is right with the law he cannot be right with the God whose law it is. As long as the law condemns him, true worship and fellowship with God are impossible for him. The gospel of justification, however, solves this problem by showing him how, through faith in Christ, the condemning voice of the law against him may be silenced for ever. Now he may draw near, unafraid, to worship his Maker.”

–Justification, p. 142



But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

— Ephesians 2:4-5

There may be no greater transition and sudden interruption in all of Scripture than Ephesians 2:4—“But God.” Another is Romans 3:21—“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.” I’m sure others come to your mind. But for me, Ephesians 2:4 is one of the sweetest ones. There is not a week that goes by where I don’t have a moment where I pause and say, “But God.”

In those two little words we are introduced to the sovereign grace of our merciful heavenly Father as he applies the salvation he predestined us to before the foundation of the world. This is sovereign grace that makes dead sinners “alive together with Christ.”

Christian, what discouragement and burden do you carry today? What thought or anxiety weighs heavily on your mind? What temptation seeks to overcome you? What schemes of Satan seem to be overpowering? Consider this: “But God...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved”. That is sovereign grace. God has solved your greatest problem. Period! You, who were

dead in your trespasses, are now alive. Thus, his grace is sufficient now and forever!

Local churches, Mount Vernon included, always in need a dose of humbling grace. In other words, we always need the humility to remember that we have done nothing that would make God particularly pleased with us. How do we receive such humility? By God’s grace. It is grace that causes us to remember that there was absolutely nothing about us that warranted or constrained God to save us. God was under no obligation to set his favor upon us. As Jonathan Edwards famously said, “God was under no more obligation to us than the sun is to shine its light on us to give us provision and warmth.” What have we, individually or collectively as a church, done that would constrain God to save us? Is there any part of our human nature that would oblige the Maker of heaven and earth to show us the smallest ounce of favor? Nothing! It is solely “because of the great love with which he loved us.”

Why did God choose to save you by his grace in Christ? Because he loved you. Why did he love you? Because he chose to. That is grace!

— BRAD THAYER

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Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH